

Scaredy Cats

It occurs to me to ask you whether or not you've met Rose and Suki – two sisters who live just down the street from you and who also, as you might have noticed, happen to be cats. Perhaps you've been to their charming but unusual home and noticed the broken light fixtures, the flock of parrots, and the sterile sleeping sphere in which they have been known to bunk down for the night. You might have wondered why they have gymnastic rings hanging from the basement ceiling and a large collection of books on the subject of how to appease an angry firefighter. You might even have been at their fortress-like home a while back, having catnip tea and biscuits in the parlour, when Rose suddenly bolted upright, her teacup smashing to the floor as she dashed madly out the door and into the safety of her sterile sphere. Or perhaps it was Suki who, just as you were about to say, "The colour of your scratching post is divine – I must get the name of your decorator," suddenly screeched like a banshee and fainted into your arms. If you know Rose and Suki, you know that this sort of behaviour is absolutely normal because both Rose and Suki are, I'm very sorry to say, phobic.

Phobic is a word with which you are undoubtedly well acquainted, but just in case your school teacher doesn't teach you vocabulary because she is terrified of words (logophobia), let me tell you what it means. To be phobic means to be so afraid of something that you bolt upright and

smash your teacup and dash madly from the room into your sterile sphere, rather than face the thing of which you are afraid. Even *thinking* of the thing of which you are phobic might cause you to suddenly screech like a banshee and faint into the arms of your guest. The term “phobic” is often used as a suffix (an attachment to the end of a word, and I really must have a chat with your teacher) and is often tacked onto the end of the Latin term describing the offending horror. So, for example, the term phasmaphobia means to be afraid of ghosts – from the Latin “phasma” (meaning ghost), and “phobia” (meaning to sweep up broken pieces of teacup). I’m afraid there are a great many phobias because there are a great many things to be afraid of. And I hardly exaggerate when I tell you that if a thing exists, either in reality or in the imagination, then there exists a person who is afraid of it. The person may only be mildly phobic or wildly so, but regardless of the intensity, phobias are always a source of misery for the phobic individual. They create panic, anxiety, and deep despair, and are a boon only to the teacup industry.

Before I tell you about Rose and Suki’s particular phobias, let us talk a little more about phobias in general. Or even in generals, because even the bravest military officer is not immune to irrational fears. He might be afflicted with Bolshephobia or even, heaven forbid, Walloonophobia. (If you don’t know what Walloons or Bolsheviks are, I shouldn’t bother to look them up, lest you discover that you too are mortally afraid of such creatures. As your teacher has

undoubtedly told you, there's no sense inviting trouble by looking up strange words in a dictionary.) Of course, some phobias are only natural. For example, I once knew a vampire who was heliophobic (afraid of the sun), alliumphobic (afraid of garlic), and catoptrophobic (afraid of mirrors), and nobody thought the worse of him. His wife, however – herself a vampiress – was terrified of blood (hemophobic) and was consequently considered something of a wingnut. Still, some phobias simply cannot be helped. Who among us is not nucleomitophobic (afraid of nuclear weapons) or thanatophobic (afraid of dying), or, worse yet, philemaphobic (afraid of kissing)? Weapons, death, and kissing are all things that strike terror into the heart of any sane person, and there is no shame in being afraid of them.

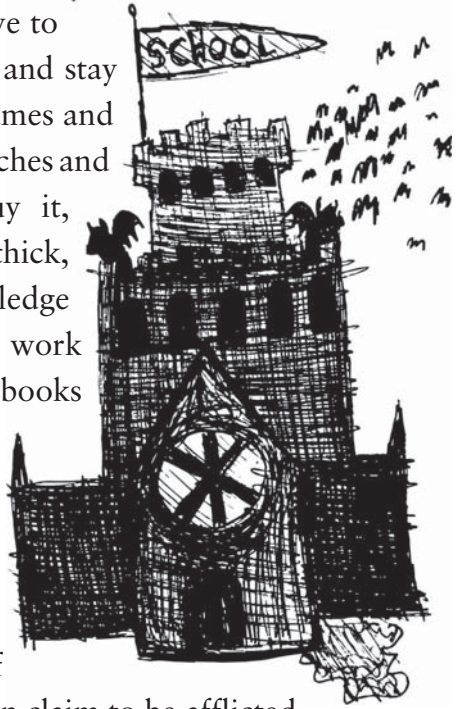
There are, however, things that are not inherently terrifying and yet are still feared more than fear itself. Oh, and this would be a good time to add that the famous person who once said, "You have nothing to fear but fear itself," was a phobophobe (a person with a fear of phobias), and my guess is that he was probably speaking into a mirror. The rest of us have plenty to fear, especially if we happen to be skittish and cowardly. Of course, some fears are just plain silly – even the most lily-livered among us needn't have a fear of string, for example (linonophobia), or of otters (lutraphobia), or of chopsticks (consecotaleophobia). But other phobias are not silly at all; they are extremely serious and debilitating and can lead only to a life of dejection and

misery. For example, it's a terrible thing if a person is afraid of gravity (barophobia) and can only truly be happy floating about in a pod in deep space. But even more pitiful than this is the unfortunate soul who is not only barophobic but spacephobic as well, and who therefore cannot be happy on planet Earth, nor in the spacepods so many barophobes call home.

Some phobias are cruelly named. For instance, a person who is afflicted with a fear of stuttering has to explain to his speech therapist that he is psellismophobic, a word that would take the average stutterer about a week to negotiate, at which point he would find that the speech therapist had given up and gone home days before, and who could blame her? And what of those who suffer from hippopotomonstrosesquipedaliophobia (a fear of long words)? Who but a sadist would embed the phobia in the very name of the phobia itself? And what kind of child would leave a scrap of paper with this word lying around on his or her logophobic teacher's desk? (Maybe now would be a good time to sit in the corner and think about what you've done.)

Admittedly, some phobias can be extremely useful. If you want to get out of having your bath, for example, you might explain to your mother that you are ablutophobic (afraid of bathing) and hope that your mother doesn't have an equally strong phobia of dirty children. Similarly, if you want to get out of going to school, it might be worth a try explaining to your parents that you are scolionophobic (afraid of school),

and so, regrettably, you will have to cease your schooling forthwith and stay at home with your computer games and your TV programs and your matches and so forth. They just might buy it, especially if you lay it on extra thick, invoking a fear of knowledge (epistemophobia), a fear of work (ergophobia), and a fear of books (bibliophobia). To be on the safe side, I recommend that you also throw in geniophobia (a fear of chins), since many teachers, though by no means all, are known to have them. (Of



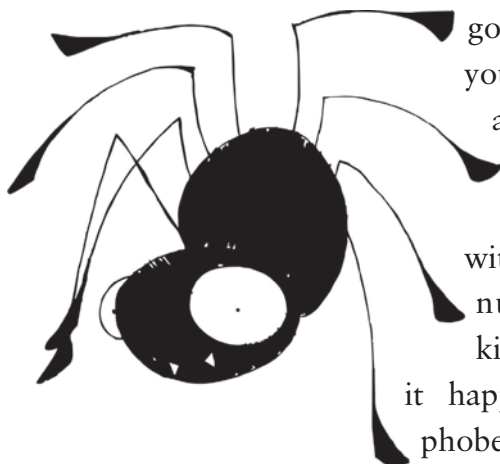
course, teachers themselves often claim to be afflicted with pedophobia – a dread of children – if *they* want a day at home with their mouldy old books and their eraser collections.) If you are lucky enough to have been born to parents who are naive and incredulous and believe everything you tell them, you will probably get to miss as much school as you wish, and you will be one of those free and happy children, forever having adventures with talking badgers in upturned flying umbrellas and so forth, that you sometimes read about in books. If, however, you were born to garden variety parents with a nose for laziness and indolence – parents like mine – and if you claim to be scolionophobic in

order to get out of going to school – as I once did – then you should know that things can turn ugly, and your parents may insist that you have a scolionoscopy – as mine did – in order to see what the trouble is. I shan't say anymore about this procedure, except that it was very embarrassing and involved a flashlight. Consider yourself warned. In short, even though it can sometimes be useful to claim to be phobic in order to avoid unpleasant situations and people (aunts who pinch your cheeks and call you by your sister's name, dental hygienists, your parole officer), sometimes it's just easier to soak your jammy toast in your orange juice and then pretend to vomit it all over the bathroom floor.

To return to Suki and Rose, it need be said that their phobias were of the more intense variety, but sadly their intensity was the most interesting thing about them. Their fears were among the most banal of all fears, which is a

shame, because if you're going to be scared out of your mind, it's nice to have a worthy object of terror – something extremely large and noisy, perhaps, with whirring blades and nuclear weapons and kissable lips. Ugh! Rose, as

it happens, was an arachnophobe, meaning that she was



terrified of arachnids – especially spiders. And Suki, as it happens, was a musophobe, meaning that she was terrified of *Mus musculus* – meaning mice. If you yourself are arachnophobic or musophobic, then you have my deepest apologies as you have very likely just scalded



yourself with hot tea, but if you are not afraid of such creatures, then it might be very difficult indeed for you to empathize with people who are. Why would anyone be terrified of spiders, you might well ask, given that spiders are about 1/10,000th our weight, are usually completely harmless, and are extremely helpful in that they trap and dispatch annoying insects? Are these scary things? It's true that spiders have eight eyes and eight legs, but that is only to say they are not like us. A fluffy little kitten isn't like us either, with its fur-covered body, its snakelike tail, and its fishing line whiskers protruding wildly from cheeks and forehead, but it isn't often you see anyone waving their arms and screaming in terror if there happens to be a kitten in the cellar. Likewise, a little mouse is one of the most adorable animals imaginable, as is evidenced by the fact that they star so prominently in literature and film. What of Mickey, Minnie, Mighty, and Maisy? Fievel, Jerry, Ralph, Stuart,

Benjy, Frankie, and Algernon? Thomasina Tittlemouse, Savoir Faire, Speedy Gonzales, and Topo Gigio? Only a hardcore, industrial-strength musophobe could be afraid of sweet little creatures such as these – but afraid poor little Suki most certainly was.

Strangely enough, Suki felt nothing but admiration for the creatures that Rose most feared, so that if she found a spider in the cellar, or in the bathtub, or on the head of a guest such as yourself, she thought nothing of asking it to stay for dinner – which meant that poor Rose had to endure the sight of a spider sucking the internal juices out of one fly carcass after another. And Rose was positively charmed by that which Suki most feared, and thought nothing of inviting the local mice in for tea, knitting them little hats, and letting them decide which shows to watch on television. However, if Rose found herself in the same room as a spider, she would run screaming from the building, call 911, and demand that the fire department come immediately and remove the offending arachnid. And if Suki should spy a mouse skittering across the floor, she would leap for the nearest chair, then table, then light fixture, and dangle from the ceiling, sometimes for hours, rather than risk being proximate to a rodent. This resulted in many irritated firemen and many broken light fixtures.

One very bad day indeed – a day that involved a spectacular number of light fixtures (seven) and an alarming number of firefighters (thirteen) – Rose and Suki finally

decided that something had to be done about their terrible phobias. Deciding that something has to be done, however, and knowing what to do are two very different things, and our two friends spent much of the afternoon scratching their heads and sucking on their upper lips until finally, just before tea time, they came up with a grand plan at exactly the same moment. They didn't tell each other what their individual plans were – they simply agreed to meet at dusk, in the back garden, between the rose bushes, under the drain spout.

If you yourself have a sister (or a brother), you will know how often the two of you find yourselves thinking exactly the same thing at the same time. You think to yourself, “That’s mine,” or “I deserve the last of the ice cream,” or “I think I’ll set her hair on fire,” and you find that your sibling is thinking exactly the same thing. This often happened to Suki and Rose, who had lived together from the day they had come into this world and continued to do so because, on the whole, they found the arrangement to be highly agreeable. It can be a great pleasure and comfort to live with someone whose thoughts and feelings mirror your own since it eliminates many boring arguments about politics and religion and what flavour of kibble is preferable. The downside is predictability, since similar thoughts produce similar actions, especially when you are both cats and your range of behaviour is already restricted to bathing with your tongue, ambushing sparrows, using a litter box, drinking tea, dialling 911, reading books on firefighters, dangling from

chandeliers, and a very few other activities. What often happened to Rose and Suki happened this time too: they thought up exactly the same plan at exactly the same time.

Rose imagined that the best way to tackle a fear is head-on; thus she arranged to have Suki standing under the drainpipe at exactly the same moment that about a hundred of her mouse friends would scamper down its length and rain down onto Suki's head. Suki also imagined that the best way to tackle a fear is head-on; thus she arranged to have Rose standing under the drainpipe at exactly the same moment that about a thousand of her spider friends would skitter down its length and rain down onto Rose's head. You might well wonder how Rose and Suki, respectively, could have imagined that a sprinkle of spiders and a rain of rodents was a good idea, considering that each of them would never have submitted to the horror of unseasonal showers such as these, with or without an umbrella. You must remember, however, that Suki and Rose are both cats, and although cats are magnificent animals in almost all respects, they are not known for their strict adherence to the Golden Rule, unless the Golden Rule is defined as "Every cat for itself." Human beings such as ourselves are supposed to do unto others as we would have others do unto us. Cats, on the other hand, do unto others as they please, and hope that when others do unto them, they can outrun the others or perhaps shred the others with their claws. Also, as each of them later confessed, it was one of those things that just seemed like a good idea at

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Rose and Suki!