

SCRITCH! IT CAME FROM THE MALL!

It was a perfect birthday slumber party. Until it wasn't.

Purple and gold streamers hung from the living room ceiling. Bowls of popcorn, plates of pizza crusts, and a trail of potato chip crumbs littered the floor. A long "Happy 11th Birthday, Avery" sign stretched across the fireplace mantle.

What could be more perfect than sitting on the floor, surrounded by a dozen of my closest friends? Opening presents, that's what.

I'd already opened enough lip gloss to keep my lips smooth for a millennia. I was ready for something different. But Emma and Hailey's joint gift was next, and I was a bit worried about it. I suspected it was a little TOO different. The way they had carried it together, tucking it carefully in a corner. The hints they dropped about how surprised I'd be. The strange sound I heard coming from the package, like a horror movie *scritch*.

OK, maybe I was more than a *bit* worried. Maybe I was a *lot* worried. Just thinking about what could be making the noise made me feel like something was sitting on my chest, cutting off my air. It wasn't too bad yet, though. It only felt like a miniature poodle was sitting there instead of an elephant.

My friends focused on making a lip gloss pyramid and grinding more potato chips into the carpet. They didn't notice me doing my breathing: inhale, hold, slow exhale. There's nothing to worry about, I told myself as I breathed.

The poodle shrunk to the size of a Chihuahua.

I'm not always anxious. Talking to teachers? No problem. Being at home alone? Piece of cake. Public speaking? It's a snap.

But eating food past the expiration date? No way! Raw cookie dough? You must be kidding! Creepy crawly critters? See you later, alligator.

Not even my best friends know that facing those things triggers my anxiety. If I told them, I'd have to admit I'm a chicken — and chickens carry salmonella, you know.

Hailey and Emma held their gift out to me. The wrapping was blue with multi-colored balloons. The bow was pink. A faint *scritch* came from inside. My heart lurched.

Hailey's eyes burned with excitement. "You're going to love it, Avery. Even though it's not good for chapped lips." She laughed, looking at the pile of lip gloss, "But it's unique, just like you."

"It's sooooo cool!" Emma said. "We thought of you the minute we saw it."

The other girls caught Hailey and Emma's excitement. "What is it?" "Hurry, Avery." "We want to see it."

They looked so happy; I couldn't disappoint them. So, I took the package, hoping it wouldn't slip from my sweaty hands. I faked a smile. "Thanks."

Mom kneeled outside the group; her phone raised to commemorate every minute of the party.

I sent her a message with my eyes, "Please rescue me from the horror movie creature that is surely inside this wrapping paper."

The message must have been too long. She just raised an eyebrow, her way of telling me to get on with it. She knows how I am, but she always says, “Don’t let anxiety keep you from living.” And I did try, but...

SCRITCH!

I wanted to drop the gift like a hot potato, but I couldn’t. I was frozen in place. Terror-stricken. A mini monster was inside the package! It would grow and eat New York City — right after it ate me. My breathing was shallow. My heart pounded to the rhythm of the music on my playlist. I couldn’t have an anxiety attack, not in front of my friends. So, sweaty hands shaking, I ripped off the paper like ripping off a bandage; the faster it’s done, the sooner it’s over.

I sucked in my breath which didn’t help the whole breathing situation.

But my friends were overcome with adoration: “OOH!” “AAH!” “Awesome.” “Look, it’s waving its little leg...claw...tentacle, whatever it’s called.”

My besties had given me a hermit crab in a purple plexiglass cage, with a little plastic palm tree inside. My nightmare come true.

Hailey bounced up and down on her knees. “I picked out the shell. It has diamonds.”

“Those are rhinestones, Hailey,” Emma said. “We got him at that place in the mall. Remember, Avery?”

I nodded and tried smiling while secretly doing my breathing exercise at the same time. I remembered that store, the one with the sign written in horror movie font: *It Came from the Mall*. The one with the creepy crawlies. The one I always found an excuse NOT to go into, though apparently, Hailey and Emma never noticed.

A fully grown elephant had settled on my chest. I couldn't catch a breath. I was probably turning blue. Why had no one noticed? They'd probably notice when I passed out, which seemed like it was going to happen soon.

One of the girls asked, "What are you going to name it?"

"How about Crabcake? He's so cute," Hailey cooed.

Cute? Hailey had lost her mind.

The hermit crab reached out its leg. It rubbed it against the side of the cage. I closed my eyes.

Scritch!

"Scritch," I shouted, my voice tight and high-pitched.

"Scritch? That's a great name," said Emma. Everyone agreed as they chattered excitedly about my new, horrifying, pet.

"Emma. Hailey. Why don't you take Scritch to Avery's bedroom and find a home for him on her desk?" Mom's voice was calm. It warmed me like hot chocolate. All the girls left the room, taking the crab with them. I collapsed on the floor, forcing myself to take deep breaths that made my stomach round out. The elephant on my chest stood up.

"At least it's not lip gloss." Mom brushed back my hair. "You'll be fine, Avery. Don't let a tiny crustacean ruin your party — and don't forget to thank your friends. Though I'm surprised they gave you a crab. Didn't they know it could trigger your anxiety?"

I sat up and shrugged. How would they know? I'd never told them. And I'm good at pretending and escaping to the bathroom or nurse's office so they never see my fear. But before I could tell Mom that, the girls came back into the room.

"We found the perfect spot for Scritch," said Emma.

How could I tell her that the perfect spot for her gift was back at the mall?

The rest of the party was great, though, because we slept in the living room. Other than one terrifying dream of Scritch scuttling through Times Square eating tourists, I almost forgot about the hermit crab scratching away in my bedroom.

But the next morning, a Sunday, after the girls went home, I was forced to confront the monster. There was a school project due the next day and all my materials were on my desk — where the crab lurked.

I stood at my door, heart racing, watching Scritch scuttle through his little crab swimming pool. My laptop and display board were there beside him, but I couldn't convince my feet to move. Which was worse, potential exposure to crab bacteria or failing English?

“Good grief, Avery,” I said to myself. “He’s tiny. He’s in a cage. You can’t fail English.” I darted to my desk and grabbed my supplies.

SCRITCH!! He stroked the plastic cage.

I ran from the room.

Mom was in the kitchen drinking coffee when I dumped my supplies on the counter. She squinted at me and my stuff. I was, undoubtedly, interrupting her morning calm.

“Why are you working in here? It’s not the crab, is it? You managed your issues so well at the party. I’m proud of you.”

“It’s anxiety, Mom. Not ‘issues.’” I flipped open my laptop. I knew she wanted to talk about it, evaluate the techniques I used, and discuss strategies for the future. But I was tired because, let’s face it, nobody sleeps at a sleepover. Plus, I needed to finish my project.

Mom got the hint and took a sip of her coffee.

Before I began my homework, I searched for information about hermit crabs. I wanted to see what diseases they carry and how quickly Scritch would outgrow his cage and eat me in the middle of the night.

The results were surprising. Hermit crabs didn't grow as quickly as I imagined. It turns out they only molt and change shells about once a year. And as to catching salmonella from him — which I know many reptiles carry — turns out, it's not a cause for concern. For one thing, a hermit crab is not a reptile, even though they look just as creepy. And for another thing, they're amazingly hygienic. I breathed easier.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to keep him. It was thoughtful of Emma and Hailey to give me such an unusual present, and I didn't want to hurt their feelings. But then I imagined Scritch scurrying, imagined the sounds he made. I laid my head on the counter.

"Are you sick, Avery?" mom asked.

"No. It's just...the crab. I don't like the way it moves. I don't like the way it sounds. It's freaking me out, Mom."

"I'm glad you're being honest about your feelings. I wonder why your friends didn't realize creatures that creep, and crawl trigger your anxiety?" I suspected she knew the answer but wanted me to say it.

"Because I've never told them. I don't want them to think I'm weird."

"They won't think your weird."

"They think Brandon Jones is weird just because he wears the same band t-shirt three days a week. They'll definitely think I'm weird.

"I think you'll be surprised. You're not the only one who struggles. And if you're open, it encourages others to be open as well. Remember, don't let anxiety—"

“—keep me from living. I know. But what am I going to do about Scritch?”

“Put on your thinking cap. What can you do to take charge of the situation?”

Good grief. My counselor says being proactive is a good way to combat anxiety — and my mom believes her. I closed my eyes to think. Flushing Scritch down the toilet seemed cruel. Taking him back to the store was an option, but *It Came from the Mall* had nothing I wanted in exchange.

“Wait! I’ve got it.” My eyes popped open. “Cody!”

“The boy across the street?”

“Yes. He’s seven and he’s always playing with bugs. He’d be thrilled to get a free crab.”

“It’s not a bad idea. Why don’t you go ask him? And his parents, too, please.”

So, I did. Cody was beyond excited. His parents were less than thrilled, but they said yes. Within an hour, Scritch was living in a home where he’d be pampered as every hermit crab should be. Cody even liked the name, so Scritch wouldn’t have to get used to a new one.

But I still needed to tell Hailey and Emma. My chest tightened at the thought, but I did my breathing to center myself and got that elephant to hop off. If I could carry a crab in a cage across the street, I could talk to my friends. And from then on, I’d be honest with them. I called them on video chat.

“How’s Scritch doing?” Emma asked.

“Well, that’s why I’m calling. You see, Scritch has gone to a better place.”

Hailey gasped, then whispered, “He died?”

“No!” I couldn’t help laughing. “He’s safe and happy across the street, with a little boy who loves crabs. And the reason why is that...well, I have something more to tell you...”