

exactly 666 words

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## **Hexakosioihexekontahehexaphobia**

by Erin Spofford

“\$6.66,” said the cashier, as she finalized the purchase total of my items.

An eruption of terror threatened to consume me. I reached to my chest and touched the crucifix hanging from my silver necklace. My other hand trembled as I grabbed a random pack of gum and placed it on the counter. “Oh, and this gum,” I croaked.

The cashier tried to control her involuntary<sup>66</sup> smirk but failed, which only added to my anxiousness.

As I left the store, I complimented myself. Better than I did last week, when I ran wild-eyed screaming from the movie theater. They decided to have a “Halloween Special.” A ticket, a popcorn, and a pop for...

For that *number*.

The advertising for it was slathered across every inch of available surface. If I hadn't run, well, who knows what would have happened. Nothing good. That's what.

I sat in my car while I waited for my Cebocap #2 pills to prove their efficacy once again. My wondrous little green capsules. Worked faster than any prescribed medicine I've ever ingested. My Shrink says they were made with holy water from a church that specializes in protective medicines. Only one pharmacy in town carries these verdant beauties. They're my very own miracle pills.

I arrived back at the Halloween party my new roommate was throwing. I'd only had this new one for a few weeks. As far as I was aware, she hadn't learned of my phobia. Some people can be awfully cruel about it once they find out.

I placed the lime, salt, and small bottle of grenadine on the counter. I heard laughter coming from the hallway leading to the bedrooms. As I started making myself a cocktail, Melissa, the new roommate, entered the kitchen and put her arm around my neck. Her boyfriend, Danny, and the two guy friends he brought with him, filled the kitchen entrance. All four were sharing the cruel grin of an inside joke that only they were privy to. A grin I was dishearteningly familiar with.

Melissa lifted up my Cebocap #2 prescription bottle and rattled the pills inside. My stomach twisted. "What are these for, Lilly?" she asked with mean-spirited sarcasm.

"There for my anxiety," I replied, nervous. "Now give them to me," I demanded as assertive as I could manage.

Melissa dropped them in my waiting hand and said, “You know those are placebos, right?”

“No, they aren’t. They’re—”

“Placebos,” finished Danny. “I know. I’m working on my Pharm-D,” he said.

Placebos? They couldn’t be. They worked so well.

Too well.

I felt dizzy. I needed to sit down. The laughter from the four of them told me they knew.

Guy Friend #1 blurted out, “What’s up with you being afraid of six, six, six?”

“Shut up! Don’t say it!” I pleaded as I covered my ears. Melissa pushed me into the three boys. They subdued me, holding me as Melissa stepped toward me waving a black permanent marker. Someone gripped my hair tight as Melissa wrote on my forehead. When she’d finished, they released me. Their heartless laughter chasing me into the bathroom.

I looked into the mirror and my worst fear was confirmed. There, huge on my forehead, was the *number*. I opened the prescription bottle and downed a double dose.

My green miracles. My... placebos.

I began to scrub.

The eggy smell of sulfur filled my nostrils. Heat prickled my neck and shoulders. The pills weren’t working. I scrubbed harder, until blood mingled with my sweat. My heart pounded a ferocious rhythm. I just wanted the goddamned *number* off my face!

In the mirror, my pupils were yellow slits. Sharp protrusions appeared on my head, like a crown of thorns. Boils formed, swelled, and ruptured across my body, revealing a demonic carapace beneath. A barbed tail, followed by cloven hooves, shredded my remaining skin. I howled.

Laughter erupted from outside the bathroom door.

I tore it open.

There they all stood. No miracle to save them now<sup>666</sup>.