

Night Terrors

The sleep paralysis started a couple of months ago, right after your move to the city. Since then it's happened once a week, sometimes twice. The first couple of times, you tried to convince yourself that you were just dreaming, that the whole ordeal was a recurring nightmare – but no nightmare ever produced such a visceral reaction in you, or permeated your waking hours the way the thing does. Lying there, you're always acutely aware of the feeling of your skin against the sheets, the scrape of branches against the side of the building, the hum of the heater when it kicks on. The couple of times you've been able to open your eyes (the only movement you've managed to achieve), you can clearly see the outline of the closet, the light from the streetlamp shining through the blinds, even the unique pattern of the paint texture on the ceiling.

Eventually, you work up the courage to make an appointment. Probably stress-induced, the psychologist tells you, looking bored. Have you been exercising? Eating healthy? Maybe you should try meditating. He gives you some pamphlets on stress management, recommends that you stop drinking caffeine in the afternoons and try to cultivate a consistent bedtime routine. You refrain from telling him that this will be difficult, what with working two jobs and night shifts at least three or four days a week. You kick the fallen yellow and red leaves on the ground on the way out of his office and drop the pamphlet on the floorboard of your car, among the receipts and chapsticks and all the other debris of your day-to-day life.

The paralysis itself is an immobility so complete that you can't even open your mouth to scream – you've tried. You have never felt so helpless and exposed as you do lying in bed, heart hammering, straining every nerve, begging your muscles to obey. Trapped in a half-conscious limbo in your own body, and you are the bait. Inevitably, you wake up drenched in cold sweat, gasping and shaking. It feels like the release of tension when a taut string is cut –

all of sudden your body unclenches and the feeling of pressure, of something weighing you down, is gone, leaving only the clammy damp echo of fear.

You've never actually been able to get a look at the thing, whatever it is that haunts your room during these episodes. It's always in your closet, a presence that you perceive rather than see amongst the shadows and hanging clothes. There's a concentrated malice about it that emanates out from the pocket of darkness that it lurks in, a threatening coldness and heaviness that seeps through the comforter and weighs you down. Your terror is instinctive and primal, a physical reaction that you can't reason yourself out of no matter how hard you try.

Once, you tried shutting the closet door, only to find it open again when you woke in the middle of the night with the thing there.

You tell yourself that maybe you didn't really shut it after all. You don't try again.

Later that week you start Googling "sleep paralysis." You learn that it's most commonly known amongst Western European cultures as Old Hag Syndrome, and is experienced as a locked-in state between sleeping and waking. Usually, it's characterized by the sensation of a witch or demon sitting on top of one's chest. It's been documented in nearly every culture, each of which has a different name and identity for the being that haunts the sleep of its victims. *Pisadeira* in Brazil, *phi am* in Thailand, *Pesanta* in Catalonia, *dukak* in Ethiopia, *jinn* in Egypt. In spite of their differences, all of them are perceived as demonic or preternaturally malicious in some way.

As you click through articles and paranormal blogs, one picture catches your eye. The artist, a Reddit user by the name of `_drk_100`, posted the drawing with a caption explaining that he had seen the figure in his room during one of his own sleep paralysis episodes. It depicts a dark, tall figure, vaguely human in form but more angular, with long slender limbs. Its outline is blurry, almost vaporous. Its hands end in claw-like fingers, long and curved like scythes. Its

facial features are indistinct with the exception of two bright red circles for eyes. Its head is topped by spiralling, curved horns. You shiver and snap the laptop shut.

That night, the thing comes out of the closet. You're lying on your stomach, face pressed into the pillow, but you feel the eddy of menace, like a draft of cold air, as it emerges. You shake and quiver, trying desperately to scream or flail. You can sense the thing leering at you from just beyond the foot of your bed. You imagine claws raking, bones being crushed, but somehow these thoughts pale in comparison to what it might do to the parts of you that can't be touched.

Your co-workers have started to give you strange looks. One day, at your job as a barista, you scald your hand badly as you froth milk for someone's latte. You only closed your eyes for a second, and the next thing you knew the metal container had clattered to the floor and hot milk was everywhere. You stammer apologies, say you didn't sleep very well last night. Your manager, exasperated, yanks the towel out of your hand and tells you to leave, to get your burns checked out and then go home and get some rest. You push through the door, cradling your injured hand and fighting tears of frustration and desperation.

The doctor who sees you at the walk-in clinic is kind. He examines your hand and then looks long and hard at your face. *Is there something else going on?* he asks. You inhale to respond with the intention of saying no, thanks, and then find that you are crying and telling him everything: that you're afraid to sleep, that even leaving the lights on doesn't help, that the thing has begun to press down on you from across the room somehow until you feel like you're being suffocated. The doctor listens patiently, and when you leave the clinic, you carry two prescriptions in your unbandaged hand: one for burn cream and another for sleeping pills.

You wake from a drenched sleep the next morning, your mental fog seemingly lifted. You make coffee and listen to music, thinking giddily of the infinite number of dreamless, drug-

induced sleeps in your future. The fall sunshine spilling through the kitchen window sweetens your mood even more.

You falter when you approach the closet door – was it closed last night? You can't remember. You shake your head and dismiss the thought, determined to ride this wave of happiness for as long as possible.

In the shower, you notice a long thin scratch on the sole of one foot, as though a claw had been dragged across the skin. You do not take the sleeping pills again.

According to Google, the recommended method for arresting a sleep paralysis episode is to focus on your breath, and then on the tiniest possible movement you can manage. Rather than attempting to leap out of bed, try concentrating on wiggling the tip of a pinky. The next time the thing appears, two nights later, it's so close to the edge of the bed that you imagine – or do you? – that you can feel something pressing down on the mattress by your feet. Your heart hammers, and this time you are too scared to even try to scream. Your pinky does not move.

You are saved when your phone rings – a drunk dial from your ex. You have never been so grateful for anyone's incoherent ramblings.

You send a message to `_drk_100`, asking about their experience with sleep paralysis and how they worked through it. Only after you click send do you notice that their account has been inactive for nearly a year now. The last post shown on the activity feed was the picture of the dark horned figure.

You learn, also, that sleep paralysis occurs when your body and brain fall asleep or wake up at different rates. During REM sleep cycles, the subconscious brain immobilizes your muscles to keep your body from acting out your dreams. If your conscious brain wakes up before the body has been unfrozen, or if your subconscious brain freezes your body before your

conscious brain is fully asleep, you experience this as a locked-in state. No one is quite sure where the paranoia and feeling of impending death come from.

You put fresh sheets on the bed and determine to be more rational. That night, you repeat these facts to yourself as you lie frozen, eyes screwed shut, while something presses down on the mattress near your feet. It's hard to breathe. After what seems like hours, you give up reciting *somatic paralysis as a result of interrupted REM cycle* and switch to *Our Father, who art in Heaven...* Over and over and over, until the tired sun begins to lighten the room and you fall back asleep.

As you get out of bed the next morning, you imagine that the freshly made blankets at the end of the bed look ruffled.

On your way home from work, you wander into a church for the first time since you were a child. Does holy ground still grant protection to people who don't know if they believe in it? You hope so.

The dimly lit cathedral is empty but for a couple of bowed figures praying silently. The air smells of dust and old books and sweat, a curiously not unpleasant combination. Unsure of what to do, knowing only that you don't want to go home, you sit in a pew near the back and stare at the figure of Jesus hanging on his cross over the altar. It's warm. You close your eyes, feeling the tiredness that has seeped down into your bones and sinews, into your very soul.

You are awoken a few hours later by the kindly pastor shaking your shoulder. He asks if you need a place to sleep, to which you shake your head. You consider telling him about the thing, but you already feel foolish and so you gather your things and step outside into the dusk, head clouded and feet heavy. The fall breeze is bracing and chilly. At home, you don't even bother taking your clothes off before falling into bed, exhaustion closing in over your head in dark waves.

You awake, clear-headed, to the familiar feeling of being watched. The glowing figures of the alarm clock next to your bed inform you that it's just after 3:00AM – the witching hour, you heard once.

Something is pressing on the foot of the bed, but you can't move your head to turn and see what it is. Panic claws at your insides, turning your veins to ice. The ghost of a snarl hangs in the air, and you can't rid your mind of the image of red eyes, curved horns. Every synapse in your body is screaming, attempting to order your body to move, but your muscles remain mute and dumb. The terror is unbelievable, unbearable, making your heart hammer faster than it ever has.

The weight at the foot of the bed shifts, as if something were leaning toward you. You think, strangely, of the shape of Jesus, slumped on the cross, abandoned by God and man alike, so tired.

Your resistance, worn thread-thin by weeks and months of fear, snaps.

You turn your attention to the waiting thing at the foot of the bed. *All right then*, you think at it. *Come on*.

The weight shifts again, spreading and settling next to you, against your back, as though someone else were lying down in bed beside you. A shiver slides down your spine. Your muscles, taut to the point of breaking, loosen; your heart rate slows.

As you sink into sleep again, you can hear the steady sound of rain drumming against the side of the building, ushering in the changing season.