

The Recluse and the Gray Lady

I wake only to discover I am a prisoner. Not a prisoner of the mind, mind you, but a physical prisoner of the foul presence that crowds me, pinning my arms at my sides, my legs stiffly to the firm mattress, my body as rigid as rigor mortis. I would beg or pray, but my lips refuse to open, my voice a captive in its own right.

She slithers from below the foot of the bed, shapeless. She takes my feet in her vaporous hands and a terrible chill consumes the length of me, setting this rigidity in ice. She is a billow of dark gray smoke, with black gashes where eyes should be, and a gaping mouth emitting a flicking black tongue, dripping with murky, oozing liquid that pours onto my legs; it too is cold.

She continues tracing the length of my body and I begin to tremble. Her form is that of smoke, but to the touch she is absolute zero. My insides shake uncontrollably as her hands reach up to my stomach and then my chest, leaving frosty handprints everywhere she touches. I want, more than anything, to scream, but my voice cannot escape my sealed mouth. It stays within, but I can hear it struggling as my panicked moans escape through pursed lips. The sounds become more frantic as she brings herself to a sitting position upon my chest and leers down at me, the black gashes now glowing with tiny orange lights deep within her skull. I am suffocating. Her weight is unbearable. Her tongue still flicking wildly about her mouth, moist with blackness, her lips upturn in a sardonic grin. She leans down and I can see the cracks in her pale blue lips.

She is so close now I can feel her breath, cold on my face. She exhales and it feels as though I am trapped in a winter gale without shelter. My eyes widen and I fight to scream, and suddenly I can move my arms, just barely. "Muh-muh-aaah!" escapes me, and within seconds I can sit upright with hardly anything in my mind but that awful face and the remnants of the dream of which it was born.

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My standard for sleeping as of late has become riddled with this woman. I always fall asleep on my side, or even on my stomach, but I wake persistently on my back, flat and stiff, cold, on the slab. In the beginning, it only happened once every two weeks or so, but has grown increasingly frequent, now occurring regularly, as many as three nights per week. Perhaps, it would be more tolerable with someone else in the room, another person I mean. Not the gray lady. I try to avoid being alone; but no one can avoid such a thing forever. Loneliness is as much a part of the world as togetherness, I suppose. What few friends I have lead full lives, far from my burden. Therefore, I must bear it alone.

I work at home, writing trash articles for various companies: advertisements, technical instruction manuals, the occasional smutty short story; whatever pays the bills really. I've been doing so for some time. Some may see such employment as a great pleasure, but truthfully it has transformed my home into a dank thing, ridding it of the comfort to which I had grown accustomed. The inability to separate home-life from employment has left my entire world flat and boring, each minute carrying the same possibilities as the last and the next. To me, there is little difference between 2 P.M. and 2 A.M. save for the color of the sky. I pressed through this drab existence for some time; but then she came.

The first time was probably the worst. I thought I was dead, but the chill in the room quickly convinced me otherwise. It's always the same with the gray lady; she is a creature of routine. She ended upon my chest with what would become her usual posture, and squeezed the air from my lungs using the weight of her body and the squeezing motion of her thighs. The first was the worst, of course, because I did not know what to expect. I thought all Hell and Heaven had besieged me, that the creatures of myth and magic, born of imagination, a product of feral fantasy, had suddenly sprung to life and evil was close to victory.

I believe with my entire mind that the gray lady could harm me physically, but gets more satisfaction from my mental anguish. She forces me to endure her presence until I am at the point of tears, and then, like a wisp of smoke, she dissipates into the darkness of the room – gone.

I often find myself in the early hours of morning, long before the rising of the sun, as I am now, writing by lamplight, constantly feeling a mysterious presence about, and looking over my shoulder in search of it. But no terror will prevent me from keeping this journal, for I feel that chronicling this experience may increase my chances of eluding it. If these entries were to suddenly stop, then I would be either completely cured or dead.

I jerk and quiver at the slightest settling of the old house, which I inherited four years ago from an uncle who had died in a mining accident. I search every shadow for something that should not, by this world's right, be there. But she never shows herself to my conscious mind. She creeps in while I sleep, like a filthy vagrant, a stealthy thief in desperate pursuit of the treasures of the mind.

Therefore, I fend off sleep like the coming of the dreaded horsemen.

I have not left my house in nearly four weeks. I should, by all means, but it just seems wrong. I stay with my house, not leaving it alone with her. I plunge into work, and drink coffee with every meal. I submerge my head in cold water; I use needles, fire from the old gas stove, anything to stay awake. But sleep is inevitable; though, I do it as little as I must. Sometimes I wake to my undesired visitor, sometimes I do not. It's just so difficult to accept the transition from a pleasant dream of a woman bathing in a calm lake, each bead of water vibrantly real upon her glistening naked body, to the feeling of hopeless terror that accompanies my waking nightmare. In fact, I can recall this dream with vivid clarity: the nude woman in the lake, her face contorted, subtly at first, but then violently, until she had become the source of my torment.

I keep waiting to see her while fully awake, on my feet, and not having slept in days. Should she just appear casually about the house, I believe I would go mad, for there would be no protection from her presence, not even precious sleep deprivation.

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Lately, I have taken to avoiding mirrors for fear that I will see her lurking just behind me, or perhaps even in my own reflection. I can't bear the thought of mirrors, so in the past few days I have blindly approached each one in this old place, eyes clinched in a painful grimace, to drape a dark cloth over the glass. On more than one occasion I have tripped over random junk that is strewn about the place; but I would rather trip and tumble down into a great ravine hundreds of miles below than to see that wench manifested in my standing, waking world; then I would have no explanation of hybrid dreams holding onto my consciousness for one last

moment after my eyes have already woken; no convincing myself that this is all myth, nothing palpable to it.

I keep lights on all through the day and all curtains closed; only once in a while will I peek beyond the curtains in my study through a window that overlooks the farming communities on the south-side of town, a thriving reminder that the world was not always made of machines. Other than that, the outside world is only a memory. I face the grinning horror instead, the company I keep. But thus far, she only visits when I sleep, and I haven't slept in almost six days. She must be terribly lonely, and that serves her well enough.

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I dare not write this until daybreak. Once the sun is up and shining its saving light onto my page, my hand cannot help but jitter across the paper in nervous jerks. Yes, my curtains are fully open, for things have changed. Partially, my terror has lifted! And I truly believe that leaving this house may be the right thing to do. I'm just not sure I can do it.

Oh yes! The events of the previous evening and early morning hours: Last night I heard a grotesque gurgling noise as I sat awake at my desk. It sounded as though it was coming from the walls of my study. I stood to approach the source of the noise, but could not locate it. It seemed to be coming from all four walls, like the room itself was choking on some thick, vile fluid. I came to the eastern wall and pressed my ear against the smooth surface. I could smell the last coat of paint, and the gurgling noise became more profound, almost as if it were inside my brain, the thickness slowly seeping out my ears.

I searched the room for a while, but found nothing to quell my curiosity as to the source of that awful noise. Decidedly, as a solution to the problem, I left the room in large deliberant

strides, warding off fear with a stern set face and determined annoyance; but to my astonishment, the noise did not cease! It did not even change in volume! It stayed the same, echoing through wooden walls, like the knots in the lumber would eventually break, discharging some gangrenous gel into the floor, until it filled the floors of my house and left me to drown.

I knew she was responsible for the nauseating noise.

Desperate to be rid of it, I fell to my knees and pressed my hands to my ears as hard as I could; so hard that for a moment I thought I heard my skull giving way beneath the pressure, the once sturdy bone caving in at my own hand. Yet still, the nagging sound persisted. I crawled, crying like a punished child, towards the front door, having not been outside in ages, but not second guessing the decision; the monotonous gagging sound had to stop! I fought with the door knob, while covering my ears with my right hand and left shoulder, until the rusty thing finally gave and let me out into the cool night, a pleasant feeling I had almost forgotten.

I fell onto the front lawn, lying in knee-deep grass, damp with dew. The noise had stopped, and for the first time in days, my eyes closed and without effort I slept.

I slept until morning and woke to a pin-prick in the crook of my right arm. I looked down to see a tiny chocolate-brown spider with a tiny graphic on its back that resembled the shape of a violin. I swatted it from my arm and lurched to my feet, swiping at my clothes in a state of panic. It was then that I felt the sun on my face and arms and realized that I had slept the entire night through and did not wake to my familiar terror.

I rushed inside to write this down! I believe it is truly a breakthrough in my episodes of apparent dementia. True, I never noticed before that my vision had been skewed, or that the night-time apparitions had to be born of thought – or so I hope. I set myself a new goal as of

this glorious day: to search for answers alluding to my fall into madness, for the path to recovery shall be long indeed.

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I believe that searching for variables I may have missed is a decent place to begin. I have thought back with diligent effort to the first incident involving the gray lady, though it pains me terribly to do so. I have searched for variables in that night. For instance: was there a different smell about the room? Perhaps, the window had been open, allowing all smells and sounds of the night into my bedroom. However, I don't recall such a thing. To the best of my recollection, nothing smelled out of the ordinary, and I am almost certain that the window was closed and the curtains drawn.

But what was I dreaming? Just before I woke to that terrible visage, I was dreaming something vivid and unusual.

The first time, I believe the dream had been neutral, not bad, not good, just a series of events playing in my head like a film on a screen. I was searching for something, or was it someone?

I was in a vast house that I recognized, though only vaguely, for dreams have a tendency to make the familiar things unfamiliar by twisting the minute details just slightly. I was searching the house, which I recall as a dream version of my Aunt Megan's house from when I was a child. It smelled the same, though some rooms were in the wrong place, some carpets were beige instead of red, and her heavy black mantelpiece was in the wrong room. It was in Aunt Megan's bedroom instead of the sitting area where it had been all my life.

I opened a heavy wooden door the color of faded mahogany at the end of the upstairs hallway. I had opened that door a thousand times as a child, it being a perfect hiding place for a game of hide-and-seek; it is simply a coat closet. But in my dream, I opened the door onto a long, slender corridor which led into darkness.

I cast nervous glances behind me and stepped inside. No more than ten strides into the corridor, my eyes were useless. Nothing lay ahead, and only the white triangular doorway stood behind me; the light shining through was blinding in the ubiquitous dark. I walked on, another five strides, and then ten, and then I stopped counting. I walked for what seemed like hours, but time passes differently in dreams, or so I've heard. I kept my hands out before me, so that when I finally reached the end I would not smash into the wall or door or whatever it was I would find. A few times, my fingertips brushed something, but it felt soft, very much unlike a door or wall.

When I lunged forward, anxious to reach the end, there was never anything there.

My footfalls started to splatter, first lightly, as though shallow puddles were underneath; but it gradually grew louder and thicker, each step crashing down into whatever it was that coated the floor, and I could feel the cold substance slip over the top of my shoes and run inside. Soon, I was sloshing through the deep liquid, like the corridor had become a sinking ship and I was heading for the damaged bow. The water was at my knees by the time I finally reached a smooth, flat wall. I fumbled for a doorknob, but did not find one. In a state of panic, I began to push on the wall and pound it with the heels of my closed fists until finally it gave way and opened with a gentle creak.

The door that had opened was nothing like the surface I had just accosted. It was made of rough old wood, just like the door I had opened to get into the corridor, and it had a worn brown knob that wiggled on its bolts if you turned it. And before me was my own bedroom.

I stepped through the doorway and onto a bone-dry floor. It was illogical that the water didn't pour through when the door had opened, but there isn't much logic in the world of dreams. I took several clunking steps to arrive at my bedside and I climbed in, still wearing my clothes and shoes, paying no mind that my shoes and the bottoms of my pants were soaked. The last thing I remember before waking is noticing the footprints I had made from the unexplained door to the bed. Each step was etched upon the floor in a thick, black substance, which outlined the bottoms of my shoes, I looked beneath the cover to see what the substance was, and worried that I had ruined my sheets.

But when I looked down, I didn't see filthy shoes or soiled sheets. I saw her face for the first time – the gray lady. And that's when I realized I was awake.

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Even now, as I write this, I quiver from the phantom cold brought on by the unexplained feeling that someone or something is watching you. I persistently shift in my chair; the creak it makes is deafening in the silent study, and I peer about the room every few minutes. The house is big and silent and I am nothing in comparison.

I think there is something comparable to a sheer curtain hanging between the real world and that of dreams, and sometimes grotesque things pull the curtain aside and peek through. And maybe, something even creeps out from time to time.

Dreams are too vivid to just be imagination and left-over thought.

It's been four days since my breakthrough and I continued to sleep well for the three following days. But last night, everything changed. I saw her again, but this time was different. I was sitting in my bed just before sleep, and saw her creep past my bedroom door. She didn't stop to look at me, or torment me, but I saw her nonetheless. I know she is here, somewhere in the vast house. I did not sleep last night, but instead sat upright in bed with my back pressed flat against the headboard, never taking my eyes off that door or what lurked just outside it.

After a while, in an attempt to occupy my mind, I tried to recall dreams that occurred just before other visits from the gray lady, but failed. My dreams were either unremarkable enough to simply slip away upon waking, or that of total darkness. I remember waking from nothing to that atrocious face.

However, seeing her while wide awake solidifies one thing: she no longer needs my dreams to find me. She has crept past the veil and now walks the floors of my home, hides in the shadows, and waits for my guard to weaken.

I will ponder this before bed tonight, as I sit hoping that sleep will eventually come. As a matter of fact, I may lie down early. I'm not feeling very well, and perhaps extra rest is the answer. My arm has taken a turn for the worse. The small bump the spider left has quadrupled in size and has begun to turn a soft shade of yellow and blue, and a wide circle of irritation has spread to the surrounding areas. Bending my arm is quite uncomfortable.

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I dreamed a familiar dream last night, but woke to an unfamiliar terror. I was walking down a black corridor, like the same that led me to horror before, but this time I was walking toward a warm, white light with a soft yellow glow about its edges. Around a third of the way

down the passage, I looked up and focused on the light, and in its midst stood a figure casting a dark shadow onto the floor before it. It was a perfect black outline that seemed unaffected by the surrounding light. I wondered what it was guarding, and it seemed, as it can only in dreams, that should I surpass it, only then would I know true, undoubted salvation.

I leaned back against the smooth surface of the corridor and slid to the floor, defeated. The figure never moved, though I felt sure that if it did, it would be upon me in seconds. I sat watching it, then glanced behind me, feeling the hairs prick on the back of my neck, because in that instant I knew that she could see me, but I could not see her.

The trek backwards, away from the gray lady, the guardian of salvation's door, was only darkness. When I turned around to face the light and the black figure, she was gone. I considered running for the door in her absence, but then I heard the familiar flicking of her tongue and I realized she could be anywhere. The sound seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

I ran deeper into the corridor, into the blackness, and as my heart beat faster and my blood surged through my veins, I became aware of a throbbing in the crook of my arm at the same locale as the spider bite. I ran as fast as I could, occasionally casting frantic glances behind me. I never saw anything terrible, only the receding light of salvation.

By the time I reached the familiar, smooth wall, the sound of her breath and constant flicking tongue was deafening. It was as if she were in my head and fighting to break out of my ears with little care as to what would become of my body after she had broken it. I began to search for the door handle, so I could return to the comfort of my bed and the possible terror that waited, but I could not find it. There was a tingling in the tips of my fingers on my right

hand, as though the smooth surface was actually coated with fine, sharp needles that barely protruded from the surface.

Then my left hand found the door and I burst into the familiar room and everything was as I expected it to be. All except one thing: I looked at my hand as the tingling sensation persisted only to find that the hand was gone. The entirety of my forearm from the elbow down was missing and this stirred me to waking.

I sat up in my bed. I was covered in sweat, as were my sheets and blankets. I looked at my arm, relieved that it was still there. However, I was startled back into a state of panic to learn that the spider bite had taken a turn for the worse. The affected area had spread beyond the borders of the white, gauzy bandage. I quickly stripped the bandage from my arm and was truly shocked by what I saw. A piece of my arm came off with the bandage, leaving a circular crater in my flesh, oozing black, yellow and red fluids.

Now, I sit hunched in my study, my wound uncovered for fear of bandages doing further damage. The mirrors throughout the house are still shrouded, but I can only imagine how I must look: stooped, dreary and haggard. The edges of everything feel blurred, like I'm still in a dream. But that isn't the case. In comparison, dreams are glorious. Dreams are salvation personified. It's when you wake up that terror awaits, either at the foot of your bed or in the crook of your arm – though I'm still at odds as to which is worse, my rotting flesh or the gray lady, who waits in my bed, splayed like an eager lover, watching me with those familiar, empty eyes.