

Dreaming Darkly

“Do you remember your very first dream?”

“You can actually think back that far?” Asks my housemate in an almost disgusted tone. As if the ability to recall the haphazard mess of images and frayed thought from that far back was something I should have thrown away long ago.

He furrows his brow and throws up his hands. He has listened to my ramblings for long enough now that he’s perfected the art of tuning me out. He knows I’ll recount my story whether he is an avid listener or not.

“I don’t dream, and if I do, I forget about it as soon as I wake up,” he says in hopes that his own lack of nighttime visuals can stave off whatever nonsense I’ll spout.

“Well, I *do* dream. And I can remember my first.”

My housemate sighs and pulls out the bar stool that faces the kitchen counter. He reaches over the counter for a glass and a bottle of whiskey. He pours himself the desired amount that would get him through whatever came out of my mouth next.

“I was three—”

“God, I can barely recall last night,” he mutters as he takes a pull from his drink.

“I was three,” I repeated, “And I was sleeping in my cradle. My childhood home was all on one level, kind of fashioned like a giant turn-about. Livingroom—turn. My room—turn. Bathroom—turn. Parent’s room—turn. Kitchen—exit.”

“Ever get dizzy?”

“No, but I always wondered what was in the middle of the house. Was it a column? Empty space? Maybe it could have been used as a secret room. You know, there was a large, old mirror that covered the wall between my room and my parents’.”

“Probably just insulation.” My housemate raised his glass to dismiss my fantasy.

“Anyway, I was in my cradle but I had managed to crawl out. I walked out of my room and into the living room. Everything was dark except for the faint lights flashing from between the blinds every time a car passed by our house. You know, we were right by the street.”

I pull out a stool and sit next to my housemate. He offers me some of the whiskey but I hold up my hand. He shrugs and sets his glass down. I’m not sure if he even cares about my dream, but something in me always wants to tell him pieces about myself whether he understands what I am presenting to him or not.

“Well, I’m toddling down the living room and heading to the kitchen to get a snack. I know that I want spaghetti and that I can get that spaghetti in the pantry. We had one of those built-in can openers in the pantry with the little arms that reach out and open the metal tops. At that point, you know I was just three, so I couldn’t have opened the can anyway.”

“Is this story getting anywhere,” he moans into his glass. He’s always been impatient.

I sigh and wonder why I want to tell him this story.

My parents know it. I told it to them the moment I woke up all those years ago. They consoled me, but it wasn’t consolation that I wanted.

I told my wife and her sister the story. They loved the little flourishes I gave, but I didn’t want them to enjoy what I recounted.

I told so many people this story. My bosses. My staff members. Anyone I could get alone. No one could give me what I wanted or fill that deep spot in my chest with a comfort I still do not know the name of.

“Hush.” I swat my housemate on the shoulder. “Well, I was in the pantry and I knew that there was no way I could open the can of food. The can opener was too high up.”

I begin to tap my painted nails on the granite countertop. The temperature is too cold and I should have brought my blanket. My housemate was probably born in the arctic, dead set on keeping the thermostat at 68 degrees. Why he actually let his husband move him and their four pets down to Florida was a story I would like to listen to. But not now.

“In my dream, I could suddenly hear my dad screaming at me to go back to sleep. That I should know better and that I have disappointed him. I felt so scared because my dad never yelled like that. Like he was ready to beat me into a giant bruise. So of course, I dashed back to my room and vaulted right back into my crib.”

At this my housemate snorts his drink and hisses when the whiskey burns the inside of his nose. He frantically waves his hands and it takes a minute or so for him to calm down.

“I can actually see toddler you flying into a cradle and the imagery is hilarious!” He pours more drink and I can see that it has relaxed him. He seems interested now, even with his slightly glazed expression.

“This is where it gets weird.”

“The fact that you can tell me a dream from when you were three isn’t weird enough?”

“Not all of us can just forget on command,” I shoot. I think of how easily he can let go of memories, of mementos. He could just pick up and leave at any moment without any cares where I leak roots and am afraid I’d snap if I moved carelessly. “Well, just before I cover myself with my blanket, I see that there’s something on my bed. Oh, I had a bed on the side of my room that I would eventually get to use after the cradle. It always had this weird felt blanket on top with red, yellow, and blue printed dinosaurs.”

“Mmmhm,” he replies. He’s getting bored again.

“Right on top of my bed was a creature. A monster.” I lick my lips and start to run the tips of my fingernails along the pads of my fingers, a nervous habit I picked up back in high school. “It was the size of a human man, but it definitely wasn’t human.

It was naked. Its thin, emaciated legs were crossed one over the other. There were two thick toes on each foot that were tipped with yellow, pointed talons. The monster’s skin was stretched against its muscles and bones like a frog’s skin pinned back during dissection.”

“Gross. Did you *have* to put it like that?”

I ignore him and continue.

“The skin itself was smooth and glossy, but at the same time, if I had touched it, I knew it would have been as dry as leather. Light taupe with yellowish patches everywhere.”

It is getting colder and for some reason I can feel warmth gathering around my eyes. Tears? I quickly squeeze them shut and open them again.

“The monster’s head was shaped like a football and was as long as its torso. I don’t know how its neck held its head up. It had two enormous earflaps formed like batwings. The loose skin between connective tissue fluttered, but the monster wasn’t under a vent.”

I divert my attention from my housemate’s wide eyes and open mouth and look beyond him. I see that night has finally claimed our col de sac. Street lights slowly flicker and flash blinding beams into the kitchen and it takes a few seconds for my vision to adjust.

“I could see two, giant, bulbous eyes the color of cracked amber, and they were both narrowed like a cat’s pupils. The thing had two jagged slits for nose holes, and its mouth stretched from one bat ear to the other.

And here I am, in my cradle, trying to think about when I has first left my room to get that spaghetti snack. Was that monster there all this time? It could have simply reached out and snatched me like a trap door spider. And if it had followed through, would it have teeth perfect to tear and slice into my soft child flesh?

I watched it, framed by the bars of the cradle, and it watched me with unblinking eyes. It's aura, I think that's the best way to describe it, was thick. Abrasive and sticky. I always knew what the saying, as thick as pea soup, meant because I had felt that exact feeling in this very dream."

"Wait up," my housemate says. He shudders and pours a generous amount of gold liquid into his glass. "I'm going to need this. Go on."

"I tried calling out to my mom and dad, but my words were stuck. I could not say anything. I was locked into a staring match with this creature. It smelled of cinnamon. Too much cinnamon that burned my face and stung my nose. But then something happened—I knew what to do.

I took a deep, painful breath and said,

'Hello, Mr. Daemon.'"

"Wait, are you saying that it was some sort of demon?"

"Well, that's what I kind of instinctively knew to say. It seemed proper. It seemed right. And it *must* have been right because slowly, very very slowly, the Daemon nodded his head."

"No. Nope. That's crazy. Are you sure that you didn't just see a scary movie that night?"

"My mom would have never let me see scary movies. Heck, she didn't allow scary movies until I left for college when she had no choice but to let me go. I had to sneak them in if I wanted a Michael Meyers fix after drama club. And before you even suggest it, my dad hated religion. Absolutely hated it. He called all religion cults. I wouldn't have known *what* a demon even was at that age."

"I keep forgetting that you were an only child," he ponders out loud.

"But here's this Daemon, nodding slowly at me, its every movement creaking like tree branches in a breeze, and then I get this feeling." I get a chill like millions of ants marching down my back and arms, their tiny legs brushing the soft hairs of my skin. "A feeling that all my future, all of the experiences I would have, the people I would hate, the time I would spend both loving and distrusting myself—that all of it wasn't and would never be mine.

But, you know, I was three. How could a three-year-old hold all of that together and make any sense of it? So I just...waved at the Daemon and covered my head with my blanket. And that's it. That was my very first dream."

And as my housemate laughs and tells me I'm full of it, I think again of the Daemon. I don't know why this was the time to talk about a dream from such a long time ago. A dream that, by all rights, I should have forgotten the moment I woke up in my crib with the taste of freshly burnt ashes in my mouth.

But I try to forget now. I cast away the thoughts of bulging, golden eyes and dagger sharp pupils. Of stretched, scraggly skin and the scent of moldering rain. I push those phantoms away as my wife gently sets her head on my shoulder while all four of us watch a horror film in the dim light of our living room. I smell her calming aroma of vanilla and cream, the same mixture since I've known her at seven-years-old. I try to replace the choking, lingering taste of burnt meat in my mouth with slow, measured sips of peanut butter whiskey and cranberry juice and lose myself to the flashing pictures of an incoherent timeline presented in the film that produced more questions than answers.

My housemate—his feet reclined on the leather sofa he recently purchased dressed in a loose, light shirt and soft shorts, absently stroking his jet black cat glued to his right thigh. His husband—tapping practiced thumbs across the blue light of his phone screen, searching to answer questions raised by the flickering film. My wife—maneuvering the pixelated dragons on her phone to merge and make larger pixelated dragons all while smiling faintly, like she had a secret that was only for her. Me—memorizing this scene and loving these people until my love hurt more than it

healed. My throat closing and my chest constricting, feeling like I miss them terribly even when they are right there before me.

The film finishes and all four of us are too exhausted for proper nighttime sentiments.

I go to bed with my wife and she immediately falls asleep, leaving me with myself and my thoughts. One of our three cats sticks her butt into the crook of my left arm and I am sufficiently pinned down by both cat and wife. All I can do is stare at the ceiling, so far up above me. Our blinds barely do anything to block the passing headlights drifting up and down the highway near our house. Back and forth. Back and forth the pale blue-yellow hues stripe and cut through the darkness of the ceiling's gloom.

Electronic lights eat away at the gathering dark of our room. The lazy blue gleam from our phones charging. The *Switch* gaming console that never fully turned off from our last game play. The dehumidifier's abrasive green lasers. An *Ecobee's* constant measurements of the environment's temperature and humidity's readings. Everything is quiet save for the faint pitter patter of cat claws on the wooden floor as one of the cat girls jumps onto our sofa and curls into an impressive imitation of a rice ball. My heart beats as does my wife's and my cat's and the little lizard I saved almost a year ago sleeping in her terrarium.

I did not tell my housemate of the dreams that came after that first, brief encounter with my Daemon when I was three, but I had them all the same. And I think of those very dreams now. Over and over until I don't quite know if what is going on is my brain slyly slipping me into sleep or if my eyes, wide open and dry, were seeds sown in reality. All I know for certain is that my trembling hands fumble to pry off the slumbering feline suction cupped to my side. The cat huffs and scuttles over to occupy the space behind my wife. I briefly notice the cat's disapproving, glowing glare above my wife's shoulder before I gently remove the arm wrapped around my waist and place it along my wife's side.

The wooden floor is freezing against my naked feet and each foot step is searing my skin, but I continue. Pass the queen sized bed. Alongside the plush brown sofa my wife and I were once proud of but now inwardly cringe when we think of how many times our housemates' cat urinated on it. I do not look at our open wardrobes and I ignore the trickling of the water fountain cat bowl our oldest cat child insisted upon. I am propelled to the top of the stairs that lead down to the garage. The darkness that clings to the walls like some viscous phlegm is almost enough to suffocate me. There's a thundering ringing charging on in the back of my skull and I taste the copper spoilage of blood at the back of my throat.

The door situated at the bottom of the stairs should be closed. It would take a clever house invader to get through a garage door and the door to our courtyard, protected by a lock that detects our fingerprints.

The door is open.

I squint to make out a figure outlined by the glow of our canary camera. Glowing, glowing, glowing eyes. Cinnamon. Rot. My body seizes with a cavalry of gooseflesh with the hairs on the back of my neck standing up so straight that they almost shoot off of me like missiles. I no longer have the saliva needed to wet my lips because everything inside of me is bare and dried because I know. I know and I have known down to the memories sunken deep into my bones that my whole life, that everything I was and may have done here on this earth, was borrowed.

I move and descend into the chilled abyss that is black as pitch, and yet the figure is always there in my sight. I want to piss myself. I want to bite down onto my tongue and saw it in half with my teeth. I want to do something for myself one last time even though that last act would have belonged to the monster, too.

And I am here, watching the creature of my dream who also watches me.

I breathe, the airflow rattling around my lungs, and exhale.
“Hello, Mr. Daemon.”