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Waking Nightmares: Visits from My Sleep Paralysis Demons

Nightmares are easy to escape; you just wake up. So, what if you are already awake and they still refuse to leave? What if the demons and monsters cross over into our reality? How do you escape?

Day 1 – Bad Decisions October 25th 2017

I glance over at my alarm clock, beside my computer monitor. 10:47 PM. *You've got to be kidding me.* Once again, I was playing video games long after I should have gone to sleep. With an exasperated sigh, I finally turn off my computer, preparing for bed. I had a 40-minute drive to my morning class, after all. "I'll go to bed on time tomorrow, I promise," I grumble; just as I told myself the night before now, the night before that, and the week before that. Already I am showing signs of sleep deprivation: periodic laughter, throbbing pain behind the eyes, and minor visual hallucinations. Still, it could be worse.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, got to prepare for class, got to get to bed (my ADHD often meant I had to repeat phrases in my head to focus). I chuck a couple clonidine tablets into my mouth, then two melatonin tablets, chasing it all down with water from my travel mug. My ADHD medication interfered with my sleep and had done so for years. In response, my doctor prescribed me these medications to help; I took them every night to go to sleep. In fact, I had

taken them two hours prior, back when I still intended to sleep on time. They had already worn off.

I shut my bedroom door, as my family tended to wake up at night and wander the house, waking me up as well. Not sure why I bother, though; it is a small house with poorly insulated walls. A sneeze on one end would travel quite audibly to the other, though that did mean any intruder would have zero luck in remaining undetected. That had always provided me a strange sense of comfort: if anything happened to me, I could effortlessly call for help. I was never alone.

With the door shut (quietly, of course), I begin groggily shambling towards my bed, slipping in under the covers. Closing my eyes, my intended goal of sleeping is interrupted by the unrelenting cold of the night. *Better wrap up.* Shivering, and slightly peeved, I burrow myself under the blankets, and began to drift. As usual, my racing thoughts fight me at first, refusing to leave me in peace. *What about this story? I wonder what we'll do tomorrow... Hey, do you remember this joke...* Eventually, though, they begin to slow, stop, then slowly dissipate. Unconsciousness claims me.

Aside – What is Sleep Paralysis?

According to research done by Aneesa Das at Ohio State University, sleep paralysis is a sleep disorder that occurs while starting or exiting sleep. It is the result of the body being in REM sleep while the mind is awake.

The problem, according to Das, is that REM sleep involves two functions. First, it immobilizes the body to prevent movement during dreams. Second, it causes sensory hallucinations, which result in the dreams people experience during sleep. What sleep paralysis

does, according to the American Sleeping Association, is add a third characteristic:

hypervigilance, forcing the victim to interpret everything as a threat.

Therefore, during sleep paralysis, the body is unable to move, the mind is experiencing hallucinations while awake, and the brain is perceiving threats all around.

According to Dan Denis' article from *The Conversation*, the hallucinations experienced during sleep paralysis have been well studied. The most famous type is the **Incubus Hallucination** – named after the medieval European demon that violated victims in their sleep. The victim suffers sensations of suffocation and pressure on their chest, often caused by an entity on top of them, crushing them.

There are, however, two other types of hallucinations. The first, and most common, type of hallucination is the **Intruder Hallucination**. The victim, unable to move, senses or perceives an intruder nearby. Said intruder can be a variety of entities – humans, animals, demons, or vaguely defined monstrosities. The only consistency is that the entity is always malevolent, intending to harm, kill, or violate the victim, and the victim always senses these motivations. Its as if evil itself has come to pay a visit.

The second type is less common than the other two. It is referred to as the **Vestibular Motor Hallucination**, and it involves feelings of motion, such as floating. Other times, though, the motions feel more threatening, such as being dragged away or thrown. It can even feel like you are falling, down a long tunnel, awaiting the inevitable end.

Night 1 – The Intruder
October 25th 2017

I open my eyes. *Something's... not right. I feel... strange.* Is the smothering heat of the blanket affecting me? In response, I go to pull the blanket down. In response, my arms refuse me. *What?* I find my hands, head, legs, and feet equally unwilling to obey me. *I-I can't move. Am I having a stroke?* Worried, I try to call for help, but nothing came out. Again and again, I struggle to speak, hoping to utter a sound, any sound at all.

Nothing. I am alone.

As I continue my desperate yet unfruitful attempts to command my muscles, my sixth sense kicks in: I am not alone. *My closet. Someone's there?* Though my head is underneath my blanket, I hear the closet door open. *Huh?* Something begins slowly creeping its way into my room. *No.* It continues, stepping around the corner to my bed, breathing wetly before stopping right in front of me. *No!* Slowly, it climbs on top of me, whispering. It says nothing I can recognize as language, yet I know the meaning behind it. "It's over. It's over. It's over. It's over." It means to end me. *Someone! Please!*

Its mouth slowly descends closer to my head, repeating its mantra again and again, as I redouble my struggle to move. With its face mere inches from my blanket, my limbs spring to action. Flinging the blanket off me, aiming to entangle my foe, I prepare to flee out my door. Yet, the blanket crumples flat onto my bed, catching only dust.

Nothing. I am alone.

Day 2 – Lessons Unlearned
March 15th 2020

I glance at my alarm clock, beside me on my desk. 12:02 AM. *I got class in the morning. What the hell is wrong with me?* My computing advisor had warned me that taking Assembly and Algorithms would be tough, that it would take up much of my time. So, naturally, the activity I cut out of my schedule was sleep.

“I’ll just have to do better tomorrow...” I grumble, closing my laptop lid. I get out of my chair, turn around, then almost fall backwards in fear. The coat on the wall had frightened me. The sleep deprivation is getting to me.

My mind flashes back to my experience of sleep paralysis three years ago. After the incident, my mothered was concerned it might be reoccurring, asking me to see a doctor. I assured her that there was nothing to worry about. It was probably a one-off occurrence.

As I predicted, the rest of the Fall 2017 semester went on without any more occurrences. Spring 2018 would come and go, then Fall 2018, then Spring 2019, then Fall 2019. Each semester passed without incident, and I promised to always sleep long enough hours so it would never happen again. Skip forward to now (Spring 2020), and it seems I have not been diligent. *Well, there went that promise*, I thought. Still, though, no repeat incident so far. Hopefully, it stays that way.

Putting my pajamas on, I close my door (again, so the rest of my family does not disturb me), turn off the lights, then slip under the covers. Time for some sleep. I close my eyes, drifting.

Night 2 – The Phantoms
March 15th 2020

I open my eyes, not two seconds later. I cannot move. Worse, I am in danger. I can feel it. *Run! I need to run!* As I desperately try to move any muscle at all, my mind alerts me to a malevolence entering the room, invisible, yet surely there. *What? No! No no no no no no.* I fix my eyes on my closet door, knowing evil was about to emerge. Continuing my struggles, I hear a heartbeat, quiet at first, but quickly becoming deafening. My closet opens.

Suddenly, my muscles decide to obey me again, and I shoot up straight, gasping, sweating, and locking eyes on my closet. It is closed. A minute passes, then another, then five minutes.

Nothing. I am alone.

The fears in my mind dissipate, my breathing slows, and I calm myself. *Just-just go back to sleep.* I lie back under the covers, closing my eyes. I try my best to get some rest.

A few seconds later, it happened again, and again. It will happen the next night, and thrice the night after that. My body would always fall sleep before my mind, and I would experience terror again and again, night after night.

Day 3 – Safety in Numbers
March 18th 2020

“**W**ould you feel better sleeping in the living room?” my mother offers. It is 2:00 PM the next day, and by this point I had given up getting any sleep; my mother, stubbornly, had not. I think for a second: *Perhaps having someone nearby would help? Worth a shot. Safety in numbers, and all that.* “Sure, let me get the mats.” She smiles, relieved. Optimistic (and very

tired), I fetch the yoga-mat from under my bed, unrolling it onto the living room floor beside the couch. *Maybe this will work?*

At 9:00 PM, my mother calls my name. I am ready. As I enter the living room, I notice my mother on the couch watching TV, her blankets and pillows spread on the couch. One minor problem, though: like me, my mother needs noises to sleep. I solved this problem with a white-noise machine on my desk; she solved it by turning on the living room TV.

Normally, that was fine. Now, though, the light is bothering me, as brightness interferes

*“THERE IS
NO RELIEF,
NO SANCTUARY,
NO ESCAPE.”*

with my sleep. Annoyed, I move farther away from the couch, turning my mat away from the TV. As I reposition, a tiny spark of fear enters my mind: it is dark beyond the TV’s light, nearly pitch black. Still, however, she is in the room, so that is enough. Shaking the thoughts out of my head, I lie down, annoyed that the mat does little to protect me from the hard floor. Again, it is

cold, so, again, I bundle myself up under the blanket, shielding myself from the heat and the darkness.

Enveloped by my blanket cocoon, my thoughts begin drifting to a video game I had been playing – *Darkest Dungeon*. It is an interesting game where you take four heroes into various dungeons to clear your estate of evil. Uniquely, it themes vampires around mosquitos instead of bats. Images of interesting human/mosquito-hybrids flash through my mind. Finally, though, I recall a certain attack they can do, where they inject their spawn directly into your heroes. The spawn will then violently hatch from the poor victim’s body, grievously injuring and horrifying them. *I don’t blame them! I’d also be horrified as Hell if I was turned into an impromptu mosquito incubator! Man, could you imagine... could you... could...*

Night 3 – The Hive
March 18th 2020

I open my eyes. I cannot move, and I hear a strange sound. *Buzzing?* Something tiny lands on my back, then tiptoes along my spine, its spindly legs almost tickling me. *A fly? No, a mosquito.* These legs are soon joined by hundreds more, each landing somewhere on my back before meeting up on my spine. The buzzing grows louder. My previous thoughts replay in my mind: *Incubation.*

“MY SPINE
BEGINS TO CRACK
AND TEAR...”

Suddenly, the insects begin fanning out, congregating along the length of my spine. Then, they start digging inward, through the skin, through the muscle, through the bone. They start laying something inside. *What!?* *No, no, no no no no no no!* *Get out!* I need to act but can't. *Someone else? Please! Wait, Mom! She's here?* I look down at my feet to see my mother sitting on the couch, watching TV. *Yes! MOM!* No response. *I-is she ignoring me? Why won't she help?* The buzzing is so loud.

Then, a vibration travels throughout my body. My spine is shaking. *They want to hatch.* I struggle, willing my arms to move, urging my voice to appear. *I feel them hatching.* My arms refuse, but I feel more success in my throat, the muscles slowly obeying my command to enunciate. My spine begins to crack and tear, the bone shards digging into the surrounding muscles. A bubble slowly works its way up to my throat, a desperate plea gradually making its escape. *They're climbing out.* A strained hum forms in my mouth, gradually increasing in volume as my lips slowly part. The spawn begin crawling their way out through the holes that pitted my body. The rest of my muscles take the hint, slowly obeying me again. The buzzing is

deafening. Suddenly, the hum turns into a yelp, and I shoot upright. My mother looks at me in surprise as I feel my back with my hand, searching for the infestation, for the bugs, for the holes.

Nothing. It's over.

Day 4 – Resignation

March 19th 2020

“Time to go to bed,” I grumble, pulling on my pajama pants. I am back to sleeping in my room, it clearly not mattering if I am alone or not. At least this way I will not wake anyone

“IT PULLS ME OFF THE
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FALLING.”

else up. By this point, I have resigned myself to the terrors. *It takes me about two or three incidents per night before I can sleep for real. No use procrastinating.* I make sure to open my bedroom door; I cannot even close my own door, as the fear of another incident kept pounding in my head until the door was opened. Sighing,

I slip under my covers, lie my head on top of my pillow, close my eyes, and await my nightly visitors. *Just get it over with.*

Night 4 – The Assailant

March 19th 2020

I cannot open my eyes. *Something's in my closet.* I sense the entity's presence before I see or hear it. I sense its evil. *But why can't I open my eyes? I've always been able to open them!* My heart begins racing on its own, and fear takes hold of me. My closet opens.

For a few moments, all is quiet. Except, no, I hear something faint. Something sticky, sliding across the floor, like a quick-moving slug, getting closer and closer. *Why can't I open my*

eyes!? Slowly, a slimy appendage begins wrapping itself around my leg. *Open! Why won't they open!?*

Then, it pulls me off the mattress, and, for a moment, I am falling.

I hit the ground, hard, but feel no pain. *Open!* I feel the texture of the fake-wood floor covering as the appendage slowly drags me across the floor. *Open!* It drags me toward the closet, toward itself. *Open!* I want to scream, but I cannot. *Open open open op-yes!* My eyes shoot open. *I need to grab hold onto my closet door! It won't take me! I need-huh?*

I am still in my bed. I look down at the floor, then at the closet. Its closed. A few moments pass, and I begin to cry.

I'm completely insane.

Epilogue

Everyone has nightmares, so why am I so melodramatic? Because sleep paralysis episodes are not nightmares, not as most people conceive nightmares to be.

You can escape nightmares. Nightmares are not here; they exist in the land of dreams, so far away. Wake up, and then you are safe. There is a clear division between dreams and reality. Things do not make sense in dreams, and you can look back on how silly they are.

You cannot escape sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is here; it exists in the real world, so close to home. You cannot wake up, for you are awake. You are a plaything for the terrors from the dark recesses of your mind, and they will not let you go until they are satisfied.

There is no relief, no sanctuary, no escape.

I have often been told to just realize none of it is real. Of course, I knew none of it was real. I knew these were hallucinations. I knew it was sleep paralysis. Every time I experience sleep paralysis, I know it is occurring. I am always aware that my mind is deceiving me. However, as described by the American Sleep Association, the fear is caused by your mind entering a hypervigilant state on its own. If your brain says be afraid, you *will* be afraid. You are not in control of your fear by that point. I have screamed internally that it is not real, that I am safe, that no one can harm me. It does not matter what you tell yourself, because reality is telling you otherwise.

When I try to sleep, I do not fear something will get me. I am not afraid of monsters, demons, or ghosts. I know nothing evil lurks in my closet. I know opening my door solves nothing. I know I am safe. But I am afraid of what my mind will show me. I am afraid of the fear it forces upon me, altering reality to justify the threats it feels are nearby. Although I know it is not real, it feels real. I know I am alone.

I am alone with own mind, and it scares me.

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