

Night Terrors

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Have you ever been so tired that you can't fall asleep? It's not that uncommon. You feel more tired than you've ever felt before, you can barely keep your eyes open, and all you want in the entire world is to fall asleep. But, instead, your limbs feel too heavy, your eyes burn, and your mind races. Sleep doesn't come, and you fear it never will. Well, tonight seems to be a lot like that for me. It's not really surprising; it seems like lying awake next to my wife has become an almost nightly tradition. I can't even really say that I'm disappointed about another night spent without good rest.

Lately, my nights are spent either in silent envy of my lightly-snoring wife or plagued by terrible, unnerving nightmares. So, what reason would I have to be upset? Instead of living through my own personal hell every night, I get to stare blankly at my ceiling. It's not ideal, but at least it's not the intense fear and desperation my mind forces me into when sleep does come.

I'm not really afraid of these recurring dreams; I know they're not real. But, still... They haunt me, even when I'm awake. Staring up at my ceiling, the darkness consumes me, and I am once again trapped in the depths of my own psyche.

I wake up, but the room is even darker than before. It is silent, and all I can hear is the sound of my own breath as it rises from my chest and out of my gasping mouth. I blink repeatedly, but my eyes cannot adjust to the darkness. It is pitch black, and no light pours in through the window as it usually does.

A sudden feeling of unease washes over me, and I realize that I cannot hear the soft murmurs of my wife as she dreams peacefully beside me. I reach out for her with my arm, but it is stopped short by a cold, hard surface. I feel along the edge of it, questioning its material, its existence. I reach to my other side, to the edge of the bed where I might find the switch to my lamp, but the other arm is stopped short as well, only inches from where it had lay by my side.

I try to sit up, to find out what these strange objects are once and for all, but I am constrained, held down by an unseen force. Something strong, coarse, and cold, so cold, blocks my path. A sudden panic swells within me, and I suck in a shaky breath as I bring up my hands to touch whatever is above me. Wood. Wood surrounds me completely, and as I begin to push against it, it only seems to swallow me more.

My breaths become shakier and more rapid, and the air that escapes me evaporates, the heat on my face telling me that with every breath, I waste precious air. This thought gives me no relief nor reassurance, and my intake of air only quickens as I realize more and more that my fate is grim. Something takes hold inside of me, and my fingers start scratching at the surface, doing, trying anything that could set me free. As the scratches deepen, I can feel my muscles lending more pressure to my hands as they scratch, scratch, scratch, at the same deepening grooves. I'm making



progress, and as hope rises within me, my fingers start digging more furiously and ferociously at my prison. I claw my way through the wood, barely noticing as it splinters and imbeds itself in my skin. I hardly realize that the force I exert onto the wood causes my fingernails to split and tear from their beds. I can barely comprehend the sensation of warm blood hitting my face and the smell of copper entering my nose. I would rip every nail and limb from my body if only to be free from this wretched box. I will not die here.

After what feels like hours, I feel an end to my digging, and what is left of the nerves in my fingertips brush pieces of the naked earth. I grasp the pieces of fractured wood and pull violently in an attempt to sever it enough so that I may crawl through. With every piece I pull away, more mud and dirt fall into my space, causing me to gag and gasp for my last breaths as all air is lost to the grave.

I struggle to pull myself out, and it takes so long, I fear I may suffocate under the avalanche of fallen grime and filth. However, my determination is far stronger than I realized, and I reach toward the surface. Crawling, crawling, I dig through six feet of solid earth. A hand pierces the surface, and although blood, dirt, and sweat pool in my mouth and around my face, all I can taste is victory.

However, the sweet gasp of air and sigh of relief never comes, and I awake, lying in my bed. I look at the clock. Unforgiving, red numbers tell me that it is nearly four, and that I have been asleep for only a little more than an hour. It is still dark outside, but as the moonlight fills in through the drapes and my wife turns over next to me, I feel at least moderate comfort knowing that I am not alone in the darkness. My heart beats rapidly in my chest, and I know, I am alive, something I have to keep reminding myself over and over. Something I never even had to tell myself, well, at least regularly, until fairly recently.

About eight months ago, I collapsed at my job, and when I woke up a few hours later at the hospital, I was unable to account for anything that had happened. A few scans later, and we found out I had a brain tumor. Luckily, we caught it in time, and it was still operable, so the next day, I went into surgery.

However, I am told, there were severe complications, and the operation went very badly. When I finally woke up again, nearly two weeks later, I was told that while I was on the operating table, my heart stopped not once, but twice. After that, I was put into a medically-induced coma. The doctors feared the worst, but when I woke up, coherent and tumorless, they said it was a miracle.

Maybe the news of dying and coming back to life may not seem that bad to you. I mean, I get it. I'm alive, so what do I have to complain about? Some people don't wake up at all. But that's just it: If there is one thing I fear in this world, more than any mythological monster, disease, or natural disaster combined, it was death itself. I know it is inevitable, but that doesn't help me come to terms.

Ever since I can remember, I have feared death. Specifically, I feared what came after. What if we could see, hear, feel, remember everything? What if our spirits didn't



leave our bodies? What if we were buried, but we were never really dead? I used to lie awake at night worrying about what would happen. The idea of my body, decomposing in a box in the ground, rotting, flesh mingling with festering entrails and maggots... It was the most terrible thing I could imagine.

After my near-death experience, or, rather, the time I died, I asked my wife to please cremate me instead. At least if I were to feel anything after death, I would only feel intense burning for a few moments instead of an eternity in solitude. My therapist believes that this excessive insomnia was brought on by my experience months ago, that it reawakened my fears as a child. And perhaps it has. Though sometimes I question if this fear isn't an entirely new being, something raging, metastasizing, in the back of my mind and the bottom of my stomach all hours of the day and night.

And while it is over now, and I am once again safe, at home with my family and with little other care in the world, I still wonder; I wonder what the chances are of experiencing something like this again. I wonder how long I have left on this planet. I wonder when these nightmares will end and even if they will at all. I wonder what truly comes after death, and I wonder if anything I do now holds any meaning, or if I am now trapped in a different box, one that I created myself. Most of all, however, I wonder what would have happened if I had remained dead, never waking up scared and confused as I do every night now.

I've become quite irritable, and I think my wife has begun to notice. I haven't slept more than a few hours in weeks, and it seems like every waking minute is spent in contemplation of my own mortality. I can barely eat, and now these nightmares are beginning to affect even the most basic aspects of my life. I feel like there is no escape from these torments, and all I want to do is close my eyes without feeling the chills of the frigid, stale air inside my own coffin.

I just want to sleep...

I do not even notice when the sun rises, and the night gives way to a bright, new day. Eventually, my thoughts release me back into reality, and I sigh. It is almost seven o'clock, and my wife will need to wake up soon to get ready for work. A part of me feels guilty for disturbing her sleep, as if her rest is the most precious thing on the planet. I stare at her another moment before deciding to welcome her into the world I have already been a part of for several hours.

With one hand, I reach over to touch her arm, but something stops me. I shift my weight to my other side, attempting to turn the light on next to my bed and shed as much light on the scene as possible. I bring my hand closer to my face as my eyes focus on a singular detail. My wife wakes beside me, terrified, as I begin frantically screaming.

She begs me to calm down, but her words cannot be heard. I sit, holding up my hand and staring through horrified eyes at the dirt beneath my fingernails.

