

## Title

I am worried about tonight; I know he will visit me again; I am sure of it. Right at 1:33 in the morning. Just for a split second, but that is long enough. I have tried to tell myself it was just a trick of the light, my mind playing tricks on me, filling the intense darkness with images from deep in the wildest recesses of my imagination. Or perhaps it was a dream, a very lifelike dream. I had always had vivid dreams for as long as I could remember.

When I was a child, I was plagued by dreams so close to reality I often had to spend the first few moments of the morning convincing myself whatever I had experienced in the past night had not been real. More often than not, those experiences were less than pleasant. I dreamt of ghosts and goblins. There were dreams of strangers coming into my room and stealing me away in the night. I had visions of other worlds where time flowed differently, and cause and effect happened out of sync, full of incomprehensible terrors and an all-encompassing confusion so deep I might forget how to speak. I would be trapped in an unfamiliar, unnavigable hell unable to even scream for help.

Often there were nights where I would wake up in the early hours of morning, when the night was at its darkest. I would sit there in a puddle of sweat, sheets clinging to my skin as I sought to tear them off and be freed from the prison of my bed. Only the moment I rose to my feet I would notice something was off. The world was off kilter, the walls and floor were wrong, there was something indescribably different. It reminded me of those times when the perfect word is on the tip of your tongue, and you spend a moment thinking, knowing that you

know the word, but unable to rescue it from the depth of your mind. A feeling so universal and innate but beyond the reaches of what is describable. It was in those moments that I would often rush to the light switch, praying that the light would help purge this nightmare, and sometimes it did, sometimes it illuminated the room and set my mind at ease. Those were the worst nights.

That second the lights came on, when the fear went away and the worry slowly dissipated. When the terror of the moments before could be chalked up to a bad dream and slowly forgotten. That was where the true pain lay, because the dream was not over. My gut feeling, that instant of pure intuition when the world had felt beyond the reaches of sanity and consciousness, was correct. It was always correct. The dream had not ended. The brief point of tranquility, the eye of the storm, only made the ensuing horror that much more difficult.

There were nights when this would happen more times than I could count. Every time was slightly different, some miniscule detail that my mind could pick out that would convince me of the dream's reality. My teddy bear might be lying next to me in the spot I always tucked him in at night. The picture that hung above my dresser in the far corner may be accurate to the very last detail, or the clock might have displayed a time that, as far as I knew, could very well be accurate. This small detail, whatever I had subconsciously decided to pick out, would eclipse the plethora of incorrect details. All my foggy, dreamy mind needed was a single irrefutable feature to ignore the miscolored walls, the window that had never been there or the misshapen shadow lurking in the corner. This cycle could go on for what seemed like forever, and the panic would only grow with each waking.

Eventually, as I grew older, I began to recognize the signs of dream earlier on. Then I learned how to wake myself from within a

dream. I had only to close my eyes and concentrate, imagine myself waking and soon enough I would open them and take in a deep breath of the cool night air, and I would be awake. At first, I had to verify for absolute certainty that I was truly awake and not stuck in the interminable dream cycle. I would pinch myself or pick up phone and go to internet to read some article on the internet, find some proof that I was back in the land of the conscious. Over time, I began to trust my intuition more and eventually stopped even checking. I would just roll over and try to go back to sleep quickly. I was more anxious about getting enough sleep for work in the morning than I was about whether or not it was a dream.

That was not the case one night about a year ago. I had never reached for my phone faster. Only that time, instead of rejoicing and taking solace in the understanding that this was not a dream, I only felt more afraid. After scrolling through the news with my flashlight on for over ten minutes, I had no doubt in my mind. I was awake, and I had been awake, when I saw him.

I had first begun to suspect something strange about two years ago, a couple of months after I had moved into my new house. It was in the historic section of downtown. The house was old as far as American houses go. It had originally been built in the early 1800s, but I don't know the exact date, it was around 1815. Most of the interior had been remolded a few years before I had bought it but the bones were all original. It had old bones, bones that had seen the rise and fall and rise again of the neighborhood. Bones that had seen disease and crime tear apart the neighborhood. Bones that had remained standing while other houses fell. It had good bones, or so I had thought. I don't know if I believe that anymore, I think they might be evil.

It was a small house compared to some of the others in the neighborhood, only two stories and a basement. The layout of the house was also strange, the master bedroom was in the back on the bottom floor, and the kitchen and dining room were up the stairs on the second story. I loved the unusual layout, I spent most of my time in the kitchen anyway, so I liked the privacy and view the second floor afforded. The couple who had remodeled the house had done a fantastic job. All the appliances were brand new and great care had been taken to preserve as much of the original house as possible. There was exposed brick from the original walls and many of the door and window frames had been salvaged. What they couldn't find or restore they recreated adhering to the style of what was. The walls were painted muted colors of blue and grey and the floors were a beautiful dark hardwood. The ceilings were high and trimmed with white in the style of the time. Each room had large windows on the two sides of the house not pressed against another building; the whole house was easily illuminated with natural light. As far as I was concerned, the house was perfect.

I moved in as quickly as possible and loved every minute. The location was unbeatable, and the house suited my every need. I slept soundly every night. Until one night, no more than two months after I had moved in. I had been out with a friend eating and drinking at one of the local bars. Despite it only being a Tuesday, we lost track of time and I didn't make it home until around 1 am. Exhausted and eager to sleep I kicked off my shoes and just fell onto my bed still fully dressed in jeans and a polo. I imagined I would fall asleep instantly, as one usually does after a late night on the town, but that night, I didn't. Perhaps it was because I was dreading my early morning, or perhaps the night had energized me more than I thought. Or maybe, maybe it was because of him. Maybe I sensed somewhere in the recesses of my unconscious mind that something might happen that night. In that place where unsalvageable words go, and dreams reside, I knew.

That night I heard no more than a creak in the floorboards, I had been facing the windows. Facing away from him. That creak had startled me enough to roll over and try and glimpse what had made that sound, but I saw only my room. I saw my bookshelf, where I had alternating shelves of books and trinkets. I saw the framed pictures hanging on the wall opposite the windows. I saw the recess of the door in the far corner where the bathroom was, and I saw the floor and the walls and the ceiling, just as they had always been. I saw that the clock read 1:31, then, I slept.

By morning I was so focused on rushing to work that I completely forgot about the mysterious noise that emanated from nowhere. It wasn't until a few weeks later that I remembered that sound and my suspicion grew. My sleep quality had begun to deteriorate. I found myself waking up more and more in the middle night, sometimes right around 1:30 sometimes hours before. I began to think that I might be suffering from insomnia, or I was getting too stressed about work. I would lie awake, often for hours, consumed by my own thoughts, and obsessing over lost sleep. There was something else too, every night I had awoken, I had heard that same creaking sound. Then there was that one night, the first night I happened to be looking at the pictures on the wall when the clock struck 1:31. The first night I saw him.

It was only a flash, no longer than the time it takes to blink but it was clear enough. I saw a figure; I saw the silhouette of a man. The instant I began to make out any details, it was gone. He was gone. The creak of the floor lasted longer than the image of him. While it had been a shock, I really hadn't thought much of it at the time. I was sleep deprived and was convinced that I was seeing things. The mind was particularly adept at making something out of nothing, filling in details that weren't there, turning shadows into something more. That's all it was, or so I told myself. I fell asleep almost immediately after.

The next time I saw him was a few weeks later. Despite his flash lasting no longer the last, I had seen more this time. I had seen the way his right leg was extended outward as though he was taking a step forward. I could see the way his head was cocked in my direction, and I could see the way his arms stretched out and his hands formed claws. It was as though he was reaching for something, reaching for me. Then in the same instant he was gone, and I was left staring once more at the pictures on the wall.

The more times I saw him the more I noticed. He was dressed in what I could only assume was formal wear, although clearly not modern. His shoes were black and leather, they stopped well before the ankle and reminded me of modern tap shoes. He wore long white stockings that rose to the knee, where they met a pair of black slacks that clung tightly to his thighs. He had a black coat with two rows of buttons extending down the middle. The coat ended at his waist in the front but extended beyond his knees in the back. He sported a tall black hat that was reminiscent of the monopoly man. He seemed to be a man of wealth or status. Or at some point was.

Now, he looked more like a zombie than anything. His clothes were all tattered and worn. There were holes in every article exposing his skin underneath, or what had once been skin. It was loose and a vile grey color. There were as many holes in his skin as there were in his clothes, and it hung on his bones like a wet rag on a clothesline. Through the holes in his skin, you could see spots of brown flesh and patches of yellowed bone. It amazed me that he appeared to be standing at all. I was certain that if he was real at all he would be in a pile on the floor, the rot and decay was so far gone.

His face was the worst part, I couldn't bear to even look at it. The one time I had been unfortunate enough to see it, it had scared me. Like a flaming cattle prod it had burned an image so detailed and vivid on the surface of my mind, I have never forgotten it. His flesh seemed to barely cling to his skull, it looked like a wax figurine, enterally melting as it sagged from his cheek bones. His mouth was agape as though he was screaming. His cheeks had holes that exposed the teeth all the way to the back of his mouth, each remaining one more rotten than the last. And his eyes, his eyes. The eyes seemed to surface to the top of my mind every time I closed my own. They were little more than empty spaces now but there was something about those dark spaces. When I picture them in my mind, I feel more than just fear, I feel pain, longing and sadness.

All this time I had managed to convince myself that it was nothing more than a dream. A strange remnant of my childhood, a brief resurfacing of the terrible nightmares that had plagued my youth. It wasn't until I began to notice the time. Every time he appeared to me, it was a little after 1:31. Without fail. Each night I saw him I would check the clock immediately. That's when I started to notice the pattern. One night after about a year, was the first night I had decided to stay awake uninterrupted by even a moment of sleep, until 1:31 to try and see him. Sure, enough he was there. Only that night I felt there was something different about him. I felt that I had seen him better than I ever had before, there was more detail. I could see the stitching in coat and the pores of his remaining skin. I began to wonder if all this time he had been moving closer.

The next night I paid more attention, and noticed it was now his left leg that was raised and forward. I couldn't believe that I hadn't noticed it before or maybe I had just chosen to forget. Even after I noticed I didn't want to think about what it meant but I couldn't stop my imagination.

That was a year ago now. Every night since then I have had a glimpse of him. At first I had tried to sleep through it, tried to adhere to my normal schedule, but I couldn't. On the rare occasion I fell asleep before 1:30 I would wake up just in time to turn my head. Eventually I stopped trying to sleep all together. I began to pay close attention to the position of his body and the where was he was. Sure enough, each night he draws closer. I began to think it was the house, and maybe it was in the beginning, but once he had his eyes set on me, there was no escaping his pursuit. I tried spending the night at a friend's house, but he followed. At 1:31 he was there. I tried going farther, I went across the country, I spent nights camping deep in the woods, I spent the night on a boat, I spent the night on a plane, but it was futile. He was always there, always a few steps away, always for less than a second, always at 1:31. Until one night when was closer than ever, it became 1:32, and from then on it was 1:32.

I began to wonder if there had ever been a time where he was there. I tried as hard as I could to rememeber the nightmares from my childhood I had spent years trying to forget. I thought I could rememeber him. I thought I could picture him waiting in the shadows, his eyes always locked onto mine. I wondered if he had been the reason for those nightmares, I wondered if he had be the one who trapped me in those unending cycles of dreams.

Last night he didn't appear until 1:33. Last night he was close. Last night I could smell his putrid, hot breathe. Last night I could almost feel his hands. Last night there was no more than a millimeter between his grasp and me. Tonight I know he will finally reach me. Tonight the cycle will end. Tonight I will wake up.