



NAIL-BITER

A Short Horror Story by Giuseppe Gillespie



“Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the Earth hide thee!

Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;

Thou hast no speculation in those eyes

Which thou dost glare with!” – Macbeth 3:4

— Perchance to Dream —

Over the past week I keep having this reoccurring dream, or rather I should say *nightmare*. It’s always the same. I find myself in a very old abandoned building at night. As I explore, some sort of script written in what appears to be blood is scrawled upon the walls:

“তামা স্বাদ”

I find these symbols repeated throughout the building. Anyways, it isn’t long before I come across this massive chained door, covered in some kind of sickly, blood-coloured rust. It seems to *call out* to me, drawing me closer against my better judgement. As I come within arm’s reach of it, I’m suddenly interrupted by a demonic, bone-shattering growl. Even thinking of it now sends chills down my spine. After that I turn to run, to get away, the growling growing ever more intense as I go. At this moment I know something is after me, I hear a staggered footfall after my own, like that of a mare, accompanied by a hoarse, savage breathing.

Filled with the excitement of sudden panic, I run through pitch-black corridors trying to find any means of escape. Looking back to catch a glimpse of my pursuer, I stumble down a long flight of stairs, down into a deep, dark pit, shattering both my ankles in the process (*ouch*). I scream in agony from the pain as I crash into the floor. With all my strength I try to rise up and continue on, but it's no use. I sit there and a certain dread washes over me as I realise the hopelessness of my situation.

A figure appears at the head of the staircase and stares down at me with a remorseless gaze; two feral *crimson-coloured* eyes burning like cinders in the cold, cold darkness. It's too dark to make it out clearly, but I can sense it knows I'm helpless and trapped. The shadow slowly descends, its stomping feet fracturing the brittle concrete steps. As it gets closer and closer my vision becomes clouded, almost as if shrouded by a veil of darkness. Desperate and overcome with fear, I stretch out my hands to shield myself as it claws at me. That's the moment I wake up.

— An Unsettling Case —

An awkward silence envelopes the Doctor's office. At length he clears his throat and says, "I see Mr. Crowe, and what's wrong with your hand?" He asks motioning towards my right hand which I quickly bandaged this morning (I didn't do a very good job as every so often I feel drops of blood *seeping* out through it).

"Well, it's the strangest thing, after this dream I awake to a searing pain in my *hands*. It seems to be more so around my fingertips than anything, but, well... this morning, -" I remove the bandage and reveal the fingernail on my right index finger completely torn off, the skin split, bloodstained, and purple from the trauma.

The doctor leans in for closer inspection when a small spurt of blood gushes out of my wound splattering his overcoat as he flinches back.

"I'm terribly sorry!" I exclaim.

"That's... alright." He says indifferently. "Hmm, it seems the nail has been completely torn from the nail bed, and the lunula (the white semi-circle at the base of your nail) has been *severed*. It's difficult to say for sure, but it's highly unlikely that the fingernail will regrow. My guess is you could have caught it on something while asleep, but the wound itself appears to have... *bite marks*," he remarks uneasily while scribbling in his notepad. His handwriting is sloppy and I can barely make out the words: "*Psy... tive*" and "*Del... sions.*"

"What!? How could that be?" I say panicking, my skin growing cold, suddenly realising the severity of my injury.

“I’m not... sure.” Again, his tone is indifferent. “Anyways, keep it clean and covered, I’ll prescribe something for the pain. Make an appointment for next week and we’ll see how it... progresses.” He hands me a hastily written prescription and motions me to the door.

“Ok, thank you doctor,” I say, slightly annoyed as I grab my coat and leave.

— The Crimson Feast —

After getting my prescription from the nearest pharmacy I figure I'd grab something to eat. A pleasant savoury aroma entices me into a fancy-looking restaurant by the name of "*Reverie*," written in a stylish, cursive font, not too far from my apartment. Strange I think, *I've never noticed this place here before.*

Inside I'm seated at a corner table and a waitress approaches me with booklet in hand. Quickly reviewing the menu, I order the pan-seared salmon with coconut oil sauce and a side of spinach salad. The waitress takes all this down, her eyes fixated on the bandage on my hand, which although replaced some minutes ago, has already slightly reddened due to the constant bleeding.

About halfway through the meal I drop my fork to the ground due to a sudden sharp pain that shoots across my hand. This causes almost everyone in the restaurant to turn and glare at me. The waitress spotting this hesitantly draws near and asks, "Sir are you ok?" I manage a shrill "Excuse me," trying not to scream out from the pain as I stumble to the bathroom, heavy droplets of blood oozing out of the bandage, leaving a trail behind me.

Locking the door behind me, I'm in front of a mirror, my hand pulsing and drenched. Arching over the sink I remove the blood-soaked bandage, shaking, and a chunk of my nail comes off with it, the rest cracked and jutting out at an oblique angle. Barely remaining conscious, I'm compelled by a sudden urge to slowly peel off the rest of my fingernail; stringy flesh gives way to an ocean of crimson which immediately stains the white porcelain sink blood-red. I grab a wad of tissues and desperately try and staunch the flow. Everything fades to black...

— A Narrow Escape —

Sometime later I come to my senses, the bathroom looks like a gruesome murder scene with the amount of blood splattered about; walls, floor, even ceiling, nowhere is untouched by the congealed mess. I think to myself *this can't be happening; this doesn't make any sense*. I take a moment to breathe deep and re-wrap my still aching hand with a mass of tissue, the blood has subsided for now. A knocking comes to the door, the waitress from before no doubt, "Sir, is everything alright in there?" There is something unsettling in the voice behind the door, something *unnatural* in its quality.

"I'm ok! I'll be out in a minute!" I reply cautiously.

"Sir, *just... open... the door...*," the voice calls while the door handle starts shaking violently.

With a certain level of nervousness, I exclaim "Don't come in here! Everything is *fine*."

"*Let... me... in!!!*" the voice snarls, deepening and taking on an inhuman, almost monster-like quality.

Suddenly a vehement thumping makes me jump, *it's trying to get in*, the bathroom door begins shaking and warping from heavy impacts. Frantically *I look around for any means of escape* before noticing a small window leading to an alley outside. I pry open the stuffy window, (it seems to be covered in this *sickly, blood-coloured rust*) and squeeze myself through, barely escaping before the door bursts open. I waste no time in rushing down the alley out onto the street.

— In Hot Pursuit —

Breathing heavily, I'm running towards my apartment. There's no people or cars anywhere, the streets are completely abandoned and desolate. Day has turned to the blackest of night and I'm afraid; afraid for my life, afraid for my sanity. A deafening, blood-curdling roar behind me almost knocks me off balance before I manage to duck into a narrow alleyway; my legs and feet burning from exertion. Still I run, knocking over junk and debris as I clumsily stumble through the *pitch-black* passageway.

Something that sounds like a maniacal, demented hyena laugh (which seems amplified due to the reverberation of the alleyway) compels me to glance behind into the dim moonlight. Much to my horror, I see a dark figure giving pursuit, hunched over as if on all-fours, accompanied by the same glowing *crimson-coloured* eyes I saw in my dreams. In a crude state of panic and disbelief I repeat to myself: *this can't be happening; this can't be happening*. Sprinting between buildings, a jet of boiling steam from a burst water pipe gushes out behind me, missing my face by mere inches as I whisk past it; a sonorous, painful screaming is heard immediately afterwards, my pursuer is stunned allowing me to gain some distance from it.

Coming to a deviation in the route I swerve around a corner, reaching out to a bare brick wall to prevent my momentum from crashing into it. As I do this the crude, blood-soaked binding of wadded tissues covering my ripped and torn fingernails makes a soggy clap as it encounters the ground. I writhe my hand in agony as splotches of red-hot blood pour from my fingertips with every palpitating heartbeat, streaming a chartered artery leading right to me. My concerns are postponed when I spot a glimmer of hope in the distance; my home is now in sight.

— Home Sweet Home —

I run up the long, winding stairs leading to my apartment, almost losing my footing and tumbling back down once or twice. With key in hand I desperately reach for the keyhole, carving several rough scratches on the metal covering that surrounds it before wrenching the door open and just as quickly locking it back up. I haven't seen that *thing* since the alleyways.

Inside my apartment I'm in a profuse sweat, my heart feels like it's going to burst in my chest, and I'm gasping for air. I grab a long, serrated steak-knife from my kitchen before positioning myself with my back against the wall, a few meters opposite from the front door. Slumping down, I hit the floor with a resounding thud; my legs feel like jelly, an after effect of the chase and the resulting surge of adrenaline.

I grip the knife tightly, staining the wooden handle red as the applied tension gives way to a resurgence of a dull, thumping pain throughout my hand. For what seems like an eternity I stare at the door, waiting for any signs of movement, anticipating it flying open and the outcome of the ensuing struggle. I'm poised and ready to strike; maybe, just maybe I can get the jump on it. Surely it knows where I am (There's a fairly obvious blood trail leading to me.) *It's only a matter of time.*

My eyes fixated on the front door; I'm listening intensely for any disturbance outside in the still of the night. *Nothing.* A certain nameless dread engulfs me as I remain completely motionless; my breathing has lightened somewhat and my nerves have calmed considerably by this point. A small puddle of blood has formed beneath my hand, which doesn't seem to hurt as much as it did previously; that or I have come to accept the pain, I no longer *appreciate* it.

My eyes quickly scan the room as I just now realise, *I'm sitting in the dark*. As I reach for the light switch I let out an uneasy chuckle of relief. Before I can reach the switch however, I'm completely overcome by a fit of abrupt uncontrollable laughter, tears of solace streaming down my cheeks.

With my bloodied hand I wipe away the tears, which have grown ice-cold and stagnant, saturating my face and eyes with a cascade of sanguine blood. When I recover from the temporary blindness caused by this I'm standing in front of my bathroom mirror; my own two *feral, crimson-coloured eyes burning like cinders in the cold, cold darkness* staring back at me as my expression contorts into a frightful scowl. I let out a single lingering esoteric sigh; all I can think about right now is that *I have the most horrible taste of copper in my mouth*.