She - Haunted by Nightmares

20080612 : The Rend. Early versions of this opening involved flashbacks to a traumatic event, when the girl was in a dressing room surrounded by mirrors that exploded. She had a string of near death encounters in surgery. After a long hospital recovery from reconstructive surgery, she went to the mountains to recuperate. In later versions, she was accompanied by her cat.

Adapting this to the working concept, this could be set in the spring of her tenth year of initiation and thus feature a late freeze. It is also possible for the opening nightmare to be a glimpse of a splinter realm. That and the displacement of the glass manifest her affinity with the rift. This draft also already features references to her relationship with her compliment, when they were intimates in their ninth year.

pages ∙ words

The long night was coming to an end. The path had become easier to follow as the light gradually improved. It seemed like an eternity had passed since she woke up, hours before dawn, alone in the woods. In her dreams, she had been chased by something too horrible to envision, some midnight amplification of whatever must have scared her off the road and into the forest as evening fell.

Or so she told herself, struggling to remember how she had gotten lost in the first place. Morgan cautiously picked her way out into the open, tensing at the smell of danger. The strange and unfamiliar scent charged the air like the promise of a storm. She raised her head in alarm, eyes wide, ears alert, taking in the sights and sounds.

A long, tense moment passed. Unable to identify the threat, and finding no other signs of danger, she crept forward again.

As she made her way down to the edge of the lake, her nimble, quiet steps became audible, the pebbled beach crunching softly under her boots. Under that sound was the low groan of stressed ice coming from the unseasonably frozen lake. A darker reflection of the world was locked under the thick sheet of ice. Across the lake was the house where she was supposed to be staying. She sighed with relief, as that landmark proved she was no longer lost in the woods. All she had to do was cross the frozen lake.

A few paces out onto the ice, her feet suddenly shot out from beneath her. Twisting in the air, she managed to come down front first, arms extended to cushion her fall. She cursed under her breath, sprawled with her face close to the chill surface. Her warm breath rose from the ice as a cloud of mist, tainted with the disturbing alien scent.

As she pushed herself up, going from hands and knees to bracing one foot carefully in preparation to stand, her attention suddenly focused on the center of the lake. The ice was reacting to her weight with a faint snap and pop. The creaking and crackling of the ice rose in pitch. With an explosive report, the ice cracked, sending a thrill of terror deep into her guts. Abandoning her attempt to stand, she scrambled on hands and knees, unable to cross the short distance back to the shore fast enough. With her heart pounding in desperation, she fought for traction on the slippery surface. The bottom dropped out of her stomach as the ice beneath her shattered, like the thunder of war in the wake of a single gunshot.

Across the lake, in the house set on its edge, Morgan jerked awake in alarm, roused by the deafening upheaval. In some distant corner of her mind, she remembered that nightmares and bone-rattling cold had driven her out of bed to light a fire in the oversized hearth of the great room. Unable to sleep, she had curled up on the couch with her feet tucked under her and wrote in her journal.

As the echoing rumble died out, she realized that it was early morning and the noise was coming from outside. She stood and wandered over to the wall of double-paned glass that looked out over the lake. Her eyes widened as they took in the shattered sheet of ice. She tried to assure herself that her nightmare was influenced by reality—and not the other way around. At the same time, the ice itself came as a surprise. It had not been there when she arrived the night before, without incident.

“I can’t believe it got *that* cold so quickly,” she muttered to herself, impressed. Glancing over her shoulder at the hearth, she saw that the last few embers were drowning in a pile of ashes. If she wanted to rebuild the fire, she would have to brave the cold outside to fetch more wood. Shifting her gaze out the window to the depleted woodpile, she shivered in unpleasant anticipation. “If it’s going to be *this* cold, I’ve *got* to get the furnace fixed,” she noted, continuing to talk aloud just to hear a human voice.

She went to the hearth and banked the coals before throwing on a coat and rushing outside to the remains of the winter woodpile. She estimated that she had enough for three more decent fires, grabbed five split logs and staggered back inside. After coaxing the fire back to life, she returned to the couch and picked up her journal. She had been recording her dreams, her nightmares in particular, hoping they would shed some light on the past.

The entry she had made last night had been pretty detailed, but she had no idea what kind of truth was hidden in the surreal and distorted imagery. Usually it was hard to capture her dreams in words. Last night she had barely been able to keep up; the details had come back to her faster than she could write. Flipping back to the page where she had started, she curled up once more on the couch to read through it again.

{the nightmare revisited}

She paused as she noticed the ragged edge that remained from a page being torn from the notebook and remembered wadding it into a ball and throwing it into the fire. She allowed herself a wry smile and shook her head; she could barely remember what had been written on the mangled, and now burned, page. The key feature in the nightmare simply could not be captured in words, so she gave up on it before the rest of the dream escaped her.

The description of the dream was followed by a partial interpretation. It was probably a good thing that she had fallen asleep. If she had continued writing in the vein she had been going, she would have gone screaming mad. It was bad enough that these nightmares had her questioning her sanity. She did not need one of them driving her to the brink of suicide.

She flexed a hand that was still cramped and sore from writing, then stretched muscles and joints she had abused by falling asleep in a knot on the couch. Twisting, bending and arching back amid a chorus of cracks and pops, she wrinkled her nose and decided that a shower was in order.

The rumblings of hunger rose in protest and drove her into the kitchen in search of breakfast before she could act on that impulse. She paused at the pantry and refrigerator to gather ingredients and utensils. Sitting down at the table with a plate of sliced fruit and a bowl of cereal, her thoughts turned back to her nightmare.

{the nightmare imagery relived}

Standing up too fast, she became lightheaded and almost blacked out, the echoes of the dream rushing in to engulf her. Reeling on her feet as the terror surged, she flung her arm out to catch the chair as it fell backward, and she stumbled clear. She cried out in pain as something bit into her foot. The injured appendage jerked up by reflex, forcing her to fight harder to maintain her equilibrium. Her heart pounded and blood surged to her brain restoring her senses.

As the wave of blind dizziness passed, she saw that she was bleeding.

Resting a hand on the back of her chair, she twisted her foot up to see the damage. With her free hand, she picked a blood-covered shard of glass from her instep. Her gaze moved from the cause of her injury to the floor and then around the kitchen in general. The table and floor around where she had been sitting were littered with silvered shards of glass. It looked as though someone had broken a mirror over her head—when, of course, nothing of the sort had actually happened.

“This is impossible,” she breathed in shock. True, she had been very distracted when she prepared her meal, but not enough to overlook this. If she had blindly walked over this much broken glass her feet would have been sliced to ribbons. To get out of the center of it, to fetch a broom and dustpan to clean the mess up, she had to make a bridge using three of the four chairs she could reach from her place at the table.

She was no closer to figuring out where the mirror shards had come from when she was done cleaning the kitchen. She dumped the last pile of broken and pulverized glass into the recycling bucket, which she found next to the dustpan under the sink. Putting away the broom and dustpan, she retrieved the mop and it’s bucket from the utility room and gave the kitchen floor a quick mop for good measure.

She set the recycling bucket on the counter to get it out of her way, and when she was done mopping and putting everything else away, she returned to look at the bucket full of broken glass.

“Okay,” she took a deep breath, and worked through the problem aloud, “I did sort of black out. I know that. Except, I was on my feet and it only lasted a couple heartbeats. That’s not enough time for someone to come in, hit me over the head and get away, and it doesn’t explain me not noticing another person.” She rested her hands on the rim of the bucket and frowned. “No. I don’t *remember* anything like that happening, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t *happen*. It wouldn’t be the first time,” she admitted to herself unhappily.

Most of the time she just had nightmares and struggled to remember them. Occasionally, she had flashbacks that hit fast and furious and she would lose time. Usually, it was just an instant, but once in a blue moon it would be much longer and only feel like an instant. She could never remember what happened while she was out of it, but she was not her normal self. If she was honest with herself, she had most likely broken the mirror herself, even if she did not remember doing it.

“So, *why* would I do this?” she wondered desperately.

She did not think she would understand the answer to that question until she found an answer to cause of her nightmares. Since that was the answer she had come to this place to pursue, she would have to put the question aside for the moment. Leaving the bucket of glass on the counter, she headed for the bathroom, pausing on the way to collect some towels and a bathrobe from the linen closet.

She shut the door behind her as she entered the bathroom. Crossing to the tub, she pushed the shower curtain aside and turned the knobs on, adjusting them until the water was hot enough to combat the chill lingering in the back of the house, where the bedrooms and bathrooms were located. Unlike the central heating, the water heater was working perfectly. She set the towels on the counter, flinging one over the shower rod. Her robe went on a hook mounted on the back of the bathroom door.

She fished a lighter out of one of the drawers to light a scented candle, and then looked into the mirror above the sink. She always looked at her eyes first because they were as changeable as the ocean. Normally, her reflection gazed back at her with mist grey eyes, but at this moment they were emerald, in sharp contrast to her red hair. She looked like a madwoman with her intense green glare and wild mane. The thought brought a smile to her pale and pleasantly proportioned face. The smile faded and her pallor grew as she looked at her flawless complexion.

She leaned closer to the mirror, studying her skin intently. There were no nicks or scratches to suggest that she had broken a mirror over her head. There was nowhere else she could have hit herself; the broken shards had been scattered all around her, not off to one side or in front or behind. “Did I whack myself with the back side?” she pondered, imagining a mirror with some kind of frame and backing; but if that had been the case she should have found the frame. She could not have gotten rid of it without crossing the broken glass in her bare feet.

“I must have just been really lucky,” she concluded, leaning back again and straightening. She smoothed her hair back and dismissed her concern. If she was honest with herself, she would prefer to think that the impossible had happened and the broken glass had appeared out of nowhere, rather than think that she was so crazy during her blackouts that she might be a danger to herself and others.

The bathroom was beginning to steam up, reminding her that hot water was wasting. She hiked up the oversized t-shirt she used as a nightgown and peeled off her underwear, pausing to use the toilet—set behind a partition to the left of the vanity. Once she relieved her bladder, and flushed the toilet, she stripped off the nightshirt, pulled the shower curtain tight, to contain the spray, and pulled up the shower knob on the faucet.

As she turned to pile her two articles of clothing on the counter, she could not help but catch sight of her naked form. Her facial beauty was a product of good genes and proper hygiene, but her body was something she could take real pride in. She loved gymnastics and was very good at it. Unfortunately, she grew too tall to compete so she shifted her emphasis to dance and martial arts. Together, her face and her strong, lean, well-proportioned body gave her the kind of beauty that was both a blessing and a curse.

Even as a child, she knew her appearance caught people’s attention, and it had not always been the right kind of attention. In fact, she suspected that the cause of her nightmares was a childhood trauma. She feared that she had been molested or even raped. There were parts of her childhood she had never been able to remember, but when the nightmares and blackouts started growing in frequency, as she became interested in and experimented with physical intimacy, she had eventually made the connection.

Turning away from her reflection, she stepped into the shower. She let out a soft moan of pleasure as the hot water flowed over her. This was a simple pleasure she could indulge in, at least as long as she did not become aroused. Everything was like that. Sleep was safe unless it brought arousing dreams, because nightmares followed. A date was fine, unless her date kissed and caressed her, because that could set off a flashback or a black out. She could surrender only so far, always knowing that it could happen but not what was going to set it off at a given time.

She had been playing with fire and it was inevitable that she would get burnt. She had not put the whole thing together in time, so she lost her virginity when things got too intense one night. On that night, she had been swimming with a group of friends at a pool party. The last she recalled, she found herself caught in the arms of a popular jock. The next thing she knew, it was the middle of the night and she was naked in bed with her best friend, Logan.

She grabbed the soap and a brush and began to scrub herself furiously. Logan had seen her shock and asked if she could remember what happened. When she said no, he explained what had happened. The boy who had grabbed her in the pool had gotten her turned on, but her behavior had been odd. Her friends had pulled her away from the guy, thinking she had been drugged. They tried to make her sleep it off, but she had latched onto her best friend and would not stay in bed if he left her alone.

In her right mind, she would never have acted on her feelings for him. They had been friends for as long as she could remember, and while it was true that they had once played doctor, and other innocently naughty games together as children, he had always treated her as one of the guys. She was the one he turned to for advice about dating other girls. On that night, however, she had forced her attention on him and the point came when he could no longer say no.

He was the one who walked her through figuring it out. Whenever her curiosity led to something intimate, her mind stepped out and her body took over. Until that night, it had been a small thing, a momentary fugue she snapped out of right away. The revelation added to her state of shock. Things got worse from there.

Her gynecologist informed her guardian that she had become sexually active and he confronted her about it. When he threatened to beat Logan within an inch of his life for sleeping with her, she broke down and confessed, She admitted everything, including the details of her strange episodes. Her guardian, who also played the role of her mentor, gave her the option of consulting a shrink or helping her work out the problem on her own. She did not want to confide in a stranger, so she asked for his help.

In turn, he confided that something had happened to her when she was a child, and that it was connected with what had happened to her parents. They had not died in a car accident, as she had been told. The truth was that she had witnessed her parent’s deaths, and blocked out the memory. Any attempt to probe her memory had left her catatonic for days, and it was eventually decided that the truth of events would never be discovered until she was able to face the memory of that traumatic event.

She rinsed off and started shampooing her hair.

To confront her past, she need to return to the scene of the crime.

As she rinsed her hair, the power went out. The bathroom remained dimly lit by the scented candle.

An inexplicable fear grips her.

She peeks out from behind the shower curtain and her attention is drawn to the shadow of movement in the mirror.

Curious, she steps out of the shower to wipe the mist off the mirror.

The mirror’s depths were darker than the room it reflected.

A shadow played over her reflection, turning her features menacing. The ghost of an image, a memory of her mother’s face turned savage, distorted the image in her mind. The eyes brimming with hatred and violence, the face scarred with millions tiny of cobweb cuts, the figure was a shattered thing pulled back together. The air sang with an inaudible note of malice, felt instead of heard—and the mirror shattered. She stared at the thing in disbelief. It’s form now appeared whole through the broken mirror. The nightmare braced its foot on the rim of the tub and launched itself at her from the other side of the glass.

She cringed, crying out in terror, throwing her arms up and falling back as shards of glass flew at her. Something inside her snapped and it felt like she was turning inside out. For a moment, her senses went haywire, but she fought her way back to consciousness. As she fell back, she tripped over the rim of the bathtub, tearing down the shower curtain and smacking her head on the tiled wall.

Darkness engulfed her as she collapsed into the tub.

The shower continued to rain down on her.

The house was dark when he used his key to let himself in. The lights did not come on when he flipped the switch.

He took off his coat and hung it on the first empty peg of the coat rack.

He had come earlier than Morgan was expecting, so he called out to announce himself.

He closed the door quietly and removed his boots.

He tested the lights as he passed them and made a quick detour to check the circuit breakers in the utility room before heading into the kitchen.

He noticed that the kitchen had been cleaned, and there was a fire going in the great room.

Not finding her in the front of the house, he checked the back.

He could hear the shower going from the end of the hall.

He abandoned his plan to sneak up and surprise her, deciding it would be wiser to announce himself before she came out of the bathroom. If she thought she had the house to herself, she might come out naked for all he knew.

She did not respond when he knocked on the door. He pounded a little harder with no better result and the first faint thrill of alarm tickled through him. He tried the door, finding it unlocked, and eased it open.

The floor was wet from water spraying wildly out of the shower stall.

He found her tangled up with the shower curtain at the bottom of the tub.

He checked to make sure she was breathing and looked for injuries. Apart from the cut on the bottom of her foot and the nasty welt on the back of her head, she seemed fine. He hit plunger to cut off the spray from the showerhead and pulled her out of the tub.

He grabbed a couple of towels from the stack on the counter, using one to pillow her head and the other to cover her.

He was debating whether to move her to a bed when she regained consciousness. He was by her side, supporting her as she sat up in confusion.

He helped her pull herself together, biting his tongue when she brushed off his questions about what happened.

She stopped and stared at the broken mirror as he helped her to her feet. She scanned the bathroom in alarm, fear and disbelief stark on her face.

Again, she would not explain, fleeing from his questions by slipping into her robe and stalking off to her room to get dressed.