

Parasomnia

A Short Story by Kate Kelsen

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Thomas could sense something evil in the room as he stirred awake. He tried to move; he was paralyzed, fully aware of what was happening to him. He could see the entity, could hear it shuffling as it moved across the room. He tried to scream; it was now at the foot of the bed, and he could feel it as it climbed onto his chest, smelling its breath as it stared down into his eyes.

Rachel looked bleary-eyed over at Thomas, who lay completely rigid next to her, his eyes open and staring at the ceiling. He appeared to be trying to scream, and she could hear him moaning through gritted teeth. She leaned over and grabbed his arm, and he woke up, still visibly terrified.

“Did you see him?” Thomas asked. “Did you see him? Did you see him?”

Thomas was heavy on his feet as he entered the kitchen first thing in the morning. He took the bread from the refrigerator and turned to the bench, finding two cold slices already in the toaster. Rachel appeared, her skin washed out, her eyes puffy.

“I think you should go back to the doctor, Tom,” she muttered. “I don’t know how more of this I can take.”

“It’s not my fault,” Thomas defended.

“I know it’s not, but I need sleep. I’m going to have to start sleeping in the spare bedroom if this keeps up.”

Thomas sat in the chair next to the desk as the Velcro blood pressure cuff tightened around his upper arm.

“Occasional sleep terrors aren’t usually a cause for concern,” said Doctor Wellington.

“They are becoming more frequent,” Thomas insisted.

“Are you concerned for safety or injury?”

“Rachel says I kick and thrash around sometimes.”

“Do you feel excessively sleepy during the day or have problems functioning?”

“Yes. It’s disrupting our sleep, both Rachel and I.”

“Incontinence? Thoughts of suicide?”

“Huh?”

Doctor Wellington removed the cuff from Thomas’ arm.

“I’d like to do a blood test to check for thyroid problems, or other conditions that could be contributing to your poor sleep.” He paused thoughtfully. “Sleep conditions can be brought on by stress and exhaustion. I can refer you to speak to someone if you like?”

“A psychologist?” Rachel placed the dinner plates down on the table. “I would have thought a sleep specialist would have been the next logical step. But he’s the doctor, I guess.”

“He did say I could go and do an overnight sleep study, too.”

Rachel placed her hand on Thomas’ arm.

“Whatever you need to do, babe.”

“Thanks.”

The sun was peeking over the horizon when Thomas wandered sluggishly down the hall toward the kitchen. In the doorway, he stopped, tensing his brows. Pieces of bread were spread out on the kitchen table, as if someone had started making a sandwich. He picked the slices up and put them back into the packet in the refrigerator.

Unlike the waiting room at Doctor Wellington's office, Thomas sat alone. The receptionist was overly chipper, in an effort to make the reality of the place potentially less uncomfortable for waiting patients. A woman stepped into the waiting room from the hallway.

"You must be Thomas," she greeted, smiling. "I'm Emma."

Thomas stood to meet her and shook her hand, following her into the hall. Her office was light and airy, and they sat down in two armchairs in the corner.

"So, Thomas, what brings you in today?"

"Well, I've been having night terrors for the past few years, and they're starting to become more frequent. My doctor recommended I come and speak to someone about it."

"Do you remember anything from the night terrors when you wake up?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to share?"

Thomas sighed, shifting in his seat.

"They always start out the same. I'm paralyzed, and an entity climbs onto my chest and suffocates me. I...I can't even explain the fear I feel when it's happening."

Emma nodded.

"This 'entity', is it recognizable to you in any way?"

"No. All I can really see of it are these green eyes. Brilliant green, but not attractive. And I just feel this sense of darkness and dread, like my soul is being sucked out of my body. It's absolutely terrifying; I can't even think of the words to describe it, to give a sense of just how terrifying it is. More terrifying than anything I've experienced in real life."

Emma scribbled on her notepad as Thomas talked.

"Thomas, what was happening in your life when these night terrors started?"

Thomas paused in thought for a few moments.

"It wasn't long after a visit from my Uncle Kyle. He'd just been released from jail."

"And where is your uncle now?"

"He's dead. He deliberately ended his life by not taking his diabetes medication. He didn't even leave a note."

The kettle sat full of water over the gas burner on the stove. Adrienne unscrewed the lid of the coffee jar, spooning granules into each cup. Rachel sat slumped at the kitchen table, her head in her hands.

"Are you doing alright?" Adrienne inquired.

"I'm not sleeping much. Thomas' night terrors are pretty bad at the moment. I'm pretty used to them by now, but it's still awful to wake up to. There is something so...horrifying...about it."

"I can only imagine. Is he getting help?"

"He was referred to a psychologist. He's there now, actually."

"A psychologist?"

"He did a sleep test already. It didn't tell us much more that we already knew."

The kettle began to whistle, and Adrienne filled the cups, stirring in milk and sugar and carrying them to the table.

"I watched this documentary about night terrors once," she said as she sat down. "The

guy who made it had them himself. He did all this investigation, interviewed a bunch of experts. He was talking about how this ‘entity’ is known in cultures all around the world.”

“Entity?”

“People think it’s a ghost, some kind of evil force. Some people thought it was a demonic shapeshifter that used to come out at night and attack people in their sleep. Crushing them and feeding on their souls. People thought it was witchcraft, and women were executed during the Salem Witch Trials if they were believed to be responsible for summoning the demon.”

“Sounds like something out of a horror movie.”

“Well, it’s one of the oldest unexplained mysteries of the human mind. Scientists say it’s a hallucination that happens during sleep paralysis, but this guy thinks it goes *beyond* sleep paralysis. That it is an encounter of some kind.”

“It sounds like a hallucination,” Rachel scoffed.

“But how could the same hallucination be experienced by so many people? Different belief systems describing the same experience?” Adrienne sipped her coffee. “There must be some explanation that is beyond science. It’s not just something that exists in human consciousness.”

Rachel woke up feeling cold to the bone, her body rigid where she lay. Her bladder was bursting; she sat up on the edge of the bed, finding that Thomas was not next to her. She slipped out into the hall to the bathroom, switching on the light and closing the door after her. Sitting on the toilet, she watched the needle on the wall thermometer drop back from the 70s into the 50s. She jumped when a shadow passed under the door. She flushed the toilet and opened the door, looking out into the hall.

In the kitchen, she found Thomas was standing at the refrigerator, eating jam straight from the jar.

“Thomas? What are you doing?”

“What are you going to do about it?” James muttered.

“You don’t need to get defensive.”

“Then stop telling me what to do.”

“Okay, well, I’m going back to bed. I have to work tomorrow, so please keep the noise down.”

Thomas watched Emma inquisitively as she scribbled notes on her paper.

“What was the most recent visit with your uncle like, Thomas?”

Thomas scoffed.

“We argued constantly. He had an opinion about every facet of my life. He had no respect for me and the fact I’m an adult, and insisted I do as he believed I should do.”

“The presence of sleep disorders is directly related to stress,” said Emma. “In many cases, that stress is related to a loss of bodily autonomy through chronic abuse. Usually, it is triggered by childhood stressors.”

Emma paused.

“You began having night terrors again because your inner child has started running the show while you sleep. It is an early expression of post-traumatic stress disorder coming back into your experience.”

“Can I make the nightmares go away? Is it possible?”

“With proper diagnosis, quite possibly.”

The night terror started out the same as it always did. Thomas woke up paralyzed, while the entity climbed onto his chest, suffocating him. Every time he tried to get up, it pushed him back down, and he could not move an inch. He could not cry for help as it squeezed his neck. This time, there was a face behind the green eyes.

Thomas woke suddenly as he hit the floor. Light filled the room, and Rachel stood up against the wall.

“Thomas!” she was shouting. “Thomas! Thomas!”

It took him a moment to realize where he was, and why Rachel was there. He sat up on the edge of the bed, panting heavily.

“What is going on, Thomas?”

“I don’t know...I don’t know...”

Rachel shook her head, snatching her handbag up off the chair in the corner.

“I’m sorry, Thomas, but I can’t stay here. That look in your eye, it was like you were seeing something I couldn’t. I just...I can’t sleep in this room, in this house.”

Rachel threw a few pieces of clothing and toiletry items into a duffle bag and left the room. Thomas heard the car start outside. He stayed sitting on the edge of the bed, and after a time the sun began to peak through the curtains, dissolving the threat of danger.

The waitress approached the table and placed the coffees down in front of Thomas and Shane.

“It looks like you could use more than one of these,” Shane commented.

“I haven’t been sleeping all that well,” Thomas responded.

“How is Rachel?”

“She’s okay. She’s staying at her mother’s place at the moment.”

“Why?”

“My sleeping problems. I had a bad episode the other night. Well, worse than the others. She was too spooked to stay at the house afterward”

Daniel sipped his coffee.

“I wanted to ask you about your night terrors.”

“Why? What about them?”

Shane looked down into his coffee, clasping his hands around the mug.

“I had one too.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I woke up, and I could sense something- evil- in the room. I tried to move, but I couldn’t. I could open my eyes and move them, and I could see something- an entity or a spirit- at the foot of the bed. It had these awful green eyes. It raised its arm over me like this, and it felt like my soul was being sucked out of my body.”

“When did that happen?”

“Two nights ago. I’ve been too scared to go to sleep since, to be honest.” Shane paused. “Did you see its face?”

Thomas nodded.

“Two nights ago. That was the first time.”

“Whose face was it?”

Thomas swallowed hard.

“Uncle Kyle’s.”

“Me too.”

“What?”

Shane looked curiously at his brother.

“Same night, same experience.”

Thomas tossed and turned from one side to the other, coming to rest on his back. He kicked the sheets off and sat up on the edge of the bed, rubbing his face with his hands. He stood up and pulled on the jeans and shirt that were discarded on the floor nearby. He picked up his car keys from the nightstand and left the room. Outside, he sat down in the driver's seat of his car, turning the key in the ignition. He pulled the car out of the driveway onto Maple Avenue, speeding off down the street.

Thomas followed the road for twelve miles, turning off into a dark side street, parking in front of the first house on the left. The neighborhood was quiet and still as he crossed the yard. He slipped the key in the door, and once inside he followed the hallway to the master bedroom. He climbed on top of the man sleeping in the bed, and the man struggled beneath him as he squeezing his hands around his throat.

"What are you going to do?" Thomas muttered. "You can't hurt me anymore! I won't let you do it to me anymore! I won't let you do it!"

"Thomas!" the man choked.

The man lunged upward and knocked Thomas to the floor. Thomas looked up, squinting through the darkness. Light flooded the room, and he saw his father standing over him.

"Thomas? What are you doing here?"

"I don't know," Thomas panted. "I don't know..."

"Thomas, do you know who I am?"

"Yes..."

"Do you know where you are?"

Thomas looked around the room.

"What is going on?"

"You tell me!"

Charlie sighed heavily. He knelt down, placing his hand on Thomas' shoulder.

"It's alright, son," he breathed. "It's alright."

Thomas lowered his head, covering his face with his hands.

"I'm sorry," he whimpered. "I'm so sorry!"

"Come on."

Charlie helped Thomas sit up on the edge of the bed.

"Where is Rachel?"

"She is staying at her mother's."

"How did you get here?"

"I don't remember."

Charlie shook his head.

"I knew you sleepwalked, son, but I didn't realize it was this bad." He offered Thomas the glass of water from his nightstand. "When you were a teenager, you used to get out of the house at night. I'd find you sitting on the back steps. I'd ask you what you were doing, and you'd say the strangest things. It never made any sense. I was so worried that one night you'd wander out onto the road. You never remembered a thing about it in the morning..."

"Dad, what happened with Uncle Kyle?"

Charlie's grin slipped quickly off his face.

"What?"

"I started sleepwalking again just after Uncle Kyle came back to visit a few years ago. And having night terrors and sleep paralysis. I saw Uncle Kyle, Dad. In my nightmare. He climbed on top of me and was suffocating me. Shane had the exact same nightmare."

Charlie was no longer looking Thomas in the eye, his gaze dropped to his hands. He went quiet; on a few occasions it seemed as if he was trying to say something, but it took several minutes before he did.

"I'm sorry, son," he whispered. "I'm sorry. For the first few years I worried, but then it seemed like you were alright. That you'd moved on..."

"Moved on? From what?"

"I can't say it, Thomas. I can't..."

Charlie shook his head, covering his face.

"The memory is sickening," he whimpered. "It was a long time ago...I found him in the bedroom with you..."

Charlie leaned over, sobbing deeply.

"Why didn't you tell anyone, Dad? Why didn't you report him to the police?"

"I'm sorry, Thomas. I didn't know what to do. He was my brother, you know?"

Charlie's expression was suddenly charged with fury. "I...I went to his place and bashed him up. I told him to get out of town. He moved away, and I thought that would make it easier for you." Charlie scoffed. "What did I know?"

He looked back up at Thomas, smiling sadly.

"But I thought you'd moved on. You were motivated, you had a career, you got married, I was so relieved..."

Charlie shook his head.

"I don't expect you to forgive me. I will never forgive myself."

Sitting in the chair in Emma's office, Thomas could not bring himself to make eye contact with her.

"I nearly killed my Dad," he stated matter-of-factly. "God knows, I could have killed someone on the way there. I just...I couldn't hold it inside any longer. That's why it happened, because I never let it out. It was trapped inside. I could never talk to anyone about it." Thomas shook his head. "Uncle Kyle wounded me. He damaged me. Some people would probably say I shouldn't play the victim..."

"But you *are* a victim, Thomas. A victim of horrible abuse and pain. Your inner child needed others to hear him. To offer validation and to acknowledge the injustice that was suffered. He still needs that. That little boy fought hard to survive."

Thomas paused thoughtfully.

"People often talk about finding their inner child like it is a fun and freeing thing. But I don't want to find my inner child ever. But I don't get a choice, because that child finds me on a regular basis. He came back in the blink of an eye after that visit with Uncle Kyle, and he hasn't left since."

"Your inner child is terrified, Thomas. Confused. Stressed. Your uncle wounded you in ways that can never be forgotten. And having the perpetrator of abuse in your physical space, telling you what to do, is impossible to ignore. Your sleepwalking combined with nightmares and night terrors are a result of post-traumatic stress. With the right treatment, we can stop you from engaging in or remembering the nightmares."

Emma tilted her head, smiling kindly.

"Speaking the truth is freeing, Thomas. Your voice is a chance to regain the autonomy you lost as a child, and is the only thing that can offer that child peace. Both your past and present selves need to know, feel and trust that there is a path to good. You can walk the path and find the end."