

Night Stalkers

Written by Bob Alexander
Wednesday, 16 May 2018 16:11

This is how Mrs. Dudley, the caretaker's wife in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, warns the new tenants that they'll be on their own in if anything goes awry at Hill House.

"So there won't be anyone around if you need help. We couldn't even hear you, in the night. No one could. No one lives any nearer than the town. No one else will come any nearer than that. In the night. In the dark,"

And that's when nightmares come for us. When we're asleep and defenseless and alone - in the night - in the dark, or as Stephen King wrote, *"When the moon is down and the hour is none ."*

I know a lot about nightmares. I suppose we all do, but rarely do we talk about them. They're just *dreams* after all. They're not *real*. They're not the stuff of small talk among friends over beers at a bar or sipping lattes at a Starbucks. If you tell anyone a dream you've had that ends with, *"a nd when I looked back ... its eyes were full of blood,"* the conversation will stop *dead*.

G
u
aranteed.

No ... nightmares are what you tell your shrink or the person who was sleeping next to you before you woke them up because you were thrashing, moaning, or screaming in the night.

And when your partner asks, *"What was it?"* You just can't dismiss it as if it had been nothing ... just a *dream* ... not with your heart pounding and body slick with sweat ... it was definitely *something*. For as long as it lasted, it was *real*

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. As the grave-digger in King's
Salem's Lot
said, "
I didn't see nothin' and I never want to see it again.
"

We describe looking objectively at people or events in "the cold harsh light of reality."
The Daytime, where things neatly add up. Laws apply. There is order. But no matter how
deeply we cleave to logic during the day, when we close our eyes to sleep ... **Everything is**
True
i
n The Dark
.

Everything.

What we can easily dismiss at noon will return to haunt us at night.

Stephen King knows this: "*At night, when I go to bed I am at pains to be sure that my
legs are under the blankets after the lights go out. I'm not a child anymore but ... I don't
like to sleep with one leg sticking out. Because if a cool hand ever reached out from
under the bed and grasped my ankle, I might scream. Yes, I might scream to wake the
dead. That sort of thing doesn't happen, of course ... The thing under my bed waiting to
grab my ankle isn't real. I know that, and I also know that if I'm careful to keep my foot
under the covers, it will never be able to grab my ankle.*"

Morning comes and nightmares fade in the sun like old color snapshots. Details blur and
recede until it becomes just another a half-remembered dream dissolving in the light.
Like a deep terrible pain, fear is something we can remember having, but we don't
experience it again in the remembering. We can describe what the pain or the fear
was like in words, but we don't feel again the agony of it. I think it's a defense mechanism
our minds use to keep us sane.

Dreams may lose their power at dawn but inevitably the sun sets. Yeah, I know a lot

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about nightmares.

Recur

ring

nightmares. They're like tenants in a run-down rooming house in the shitty part of town. They each have their own room where they remain behind locked doors during the day because they all work the night shift.

To quote Stephen King again, "... *there's something creepy about any repeating dream ... about knowing your subconscious is digging obsessively at some object that won't be dislodged*."

If that's even remotely true, then I've been digging in the nightmare pit for decades without unearthing a single stone. It's like I've only been uncovering the outline of something unimaginably huge buried in the rock.

I've had recurring nightmares for years. The robed figures lifting back their hoods revealing they have no faces - I've had that one since I was 5. The dimly lit parlor where I'm to sit quietly on an overstuffed couch reading my Topper comic book until something comes for me. It enters the room, but I cannot look up into its eyes. I stare fixedly at the base of the lamp on the end table because I know I should not look directly into its eyes. A claw-like hand reaches out and pulls the lamp's chain. Lights Out. Those dreams are the oldest tenants in my decrepit rooming house of nightmares.

I've learned two things from my dreamscapes: Everything Is True In The Dark and ... Once the screaming starts ... it's already too late. Whatever bad thing has happened ... the scream is just an exclamation point at the end of the sentence.

A million years ago back in the 70's, I briefly went to a therapist who was supposed to "help" me with my nightmares. He, along with everybody else in the "I'm OK - You're OK" era, held the new Age-y position that "FEAR" stood for **F**ace **E**verything **A**nd **R**ecover. I dismissed that concept the moment he finished saying it. Like most of the gibberish floating around that silly decade, it had never been tested, but that didn't stop the touchy-feely crowd from embracing it fully.

It

sounded

good, so it

must

be

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true.

But

I believed then, as now, that our hominid ancestors were able to pass their DNA down through the millennia because for them FEAR was the acronym for

F

uck

E

verything

A

nd

R

un.

The shrink gave me some tricks to try out that I thought were stupid, but I did them anyway. The same way a desperate insomniac will try any and all home remedies on the chance they might lead to a good night's sleep. They didn't help (of course not) but it wasn't for lack of trying. But that was a million years ago. Over time I've become accustomed to my nightmares. The style of the dreams has become more sophisticated. The terror is still there, but the delivery system is more ... *refined*.

Imagine your living room. The couch, the chairs, the TV, the bookshelves, the windows and curtains. Your room. All of your things where they're supposed to be and seemingly ... safe.

But ...

To the right of the fireplace's mantle is a small discoloration on the wall. You move closer to inspect it. The paint has slightly bubbled up and you pick at it, uncovering a hole in the wall about an inch in diameter. You look through it and see a vast cosmic abyss lit by something completely different from mere stars. These shifting points of light are somehow *aware*

and

know

they are being observed ... and it is somehow understood that is not allowed. You begin to feel the coldness of terror when one by one, they align in one direction to gaze back at you.

Even if you remembered

Friedrich Nietzsche's warning, you thought it was just a hole in your living room wall.

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How were you to know what lay beyond?

These days my dreams start out completely prosaic until I discover one little thing slightly amiss ... and with that discovery everything unravels into another time and place where chaos rules the land and sky and everything above and below.

Stephen King, Shirley Jackson, and other Authors of Unease, like the best Twilight Zone episodes, start by establishing a reality we can readily accept.

And then Something Happens and unknowingly we take our first steps ... sideways. We still might think we're in our reality – it's still close enough from where we embarked – but with another step and then another, we are somewhere in between light and shadow.

Jack Finney, author of *The Body Snatchers*, wrote a story where everything changed because of a coin. This is my version:

Imagine you've just come home from work. You go into your bedroom and dump the contents of your pockets onto your dresser. Perhaps you put the change you've accumulated throughout the day into a small bowl. Your attention is drawn to a dime mingled among the quarters and nickels. Instead of FDR's profile on the coin you see Woodrow Wilson's. You take it into the TV room and show it to your wife and son who have just finished watching the local news. You don't know anything about numismatics, the coin might not be worth anything, but you think it's interesting nonetheless. Until your son pulls a dime from his pocket. "What's the big deal?" he asks showing you his Woodrow Wilson dime. Your wife gives you a slightly odd look as she tells you and the boy to wash up for dinner.

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As you walk down the hall to the bathroom you think about what this might mean ... and what's at stake. You *know* that Wilson's profile had *never* been on a dime. Ever. But your wife and son don't see anything amiss. As you wash your hands and face, you begin to see the borders of your problem more clearly. The people in this house are not your wife and son. This is not your house. The borders expand exponentially until you realize this is not even your universe. You began the day in one world and somehow, without realizing it, you are now in another. And you have no clear idea how you got here or how to get back. The borders stretch to infinity.

And that's why I say ... once the screaming starts ... it's already too late. As the woman and the boy realize cringing behind the locked bathroom door, as you yourself realize when you just can't stop the screaming. Whatever has happened ... already happened. The screams are just the exclamation points at the end of the sentence.

But those are just books, stories and dreams. They're not *real*.

Except ...

Each day there are more and more anomalies eating holes in our reality. Things that shouldn't be ... suddenly ... *are*. And we are supposed to unquestioningly accept this altered reality. And tomorrow and the next day and the next, the reality of "What Is" is altered again and then again, and we're supposed to glide into the new version because that's what we are supposed to do. No one on the Nightly News on any of the networks is going to hold up a dime with Woodrow Wilson's likeness on it and proclaim, "

This is not what it

i

s supposed to be ... Things are not what they appear to be ...

"

The logic of our nightmares has shambled into the daylight and defeated it. What was unthinkable is now commonplace. But we are not trapped in the Middle Ground Between Light and Shadow. We are still capable of choosing between the two. But for some reason we have yet to make the decision. But we must hurry – someday there might not be any relief in waking. The alarm clock will go off, you'll fumble to stop the buzzing, swing your legs over the side of the bed, and before you can slide into your slippers a cold leathery hand grabs your right ankle. And pulls ... *hard*.

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