

INAUDIBLE

by

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First Place

The girl abruptly awoke to an uncomfortable feeling, as if she was being watched. Her eyes scanned the room, but nothing was discernable in the darkness. As she tried to sit up and couldn't, a realization quickly set in: she couldn't see anything because her eyes were closed. When she tried to open them and failed, dread flooded her system. She'd tried to get help for her condition and had seen several doctors, all of whom had been incredibly cavalier and dismissive about her concerns.

“Adolescent girl presenting with sleep paralysis and occasional delusions. The obvious diagnosis is narcolepsy.”

Sure, she was tired often and could sleep anywhere she lay her head. But she dozed just fine on the couch after school, or in morning study hall, or even in the car headed back from a softball game. But nighttime in her bedroom? That had become a nightmare in itself. She was too old to believe in monsters in her closet, or the boogeyman under her bed. Despite the fact that the girl had lived there her entire life, she had an uneasy feeling every time she stepped across her bedroom's threshold. Her parents assured her multiple times that the house was not haunted, nor was it built on an Indian burial ground. They tried convincing her over and over again that she'd built it up in her head. Not the episodes themselves, as they had witnessed those firsthand, but

rather the sense of impending doom that accompanied them. After the third doctor they drew a line in the sand, now certain that multiple specialists agreeing was the clear answer. She winced when she thought of the last doctor's advice:

“When you become aware that the paralysis is happening, submit to it. The more you fight against it, the worse it will become and the more mentally traumatic and taxing it will be. If you relax, you will fall back to sleep and get back into your REM cycle.”

Were he and the boogeyman in cahoots? Don't fight it? Had he ever experienced mental awareness during physical paralysis? Did he understand how terrifying it is to be awake inside your body but desperately struggle to even wiggle a pinky? Doubtful. So here she was again, in the thick of it, anxiety quickly accelerating into a frenzy. She tried to deep breathe, but was unable to control her breath work. The doctor's irritating advice echoed through her mind, and she tried to talk herself into trying it. 'Just let go,' she thought. 'You are safe.'

CLUNK.

She heard a loud noise just feet from her bed. Not being able to reach for her lamp, open her eyes or even scream for help, she started to become frantic. When she was 9 she'd had an experience where she was able to talk but couldn't move her limbs or open her eyes. Her parents' room was just down the hall; if she could make a loud enough sound they would hear her. The feeling started in her throat: a low, guttural, almost primal noise. She worked harder as she started to question the source of the loud intrusive noise and what had caused it. Her gurgle graduated to a growl just as she felt her head twitch. It was working! She was regaining control.

CLUNK.

The sound was back and much closer. She dug deep within herself to summon her maximum willpower, as if her life depended on it. She knew this sounded insane; she'd watched her parents' dubious faces for years as she'd described her experiences in the past... and that's why she hadn't told them *everything*. There had been nights where she'd seen things, casually referred to as "hypnogogic hallucinations" by the neurologists. The problem was, some felt incredibly real. She'd had instances where she'd seen shapes and shadows in the darkness, and when she turned on her lamp they disappeared. There had been others, however, that didn't shy away from the light or her consciousness. They would stay as they were and watch her, seemingly staring right into her soul. The soul that was fighting to wake up at this very moment. There was one in particular that had red eyes...

She felt her fingers wiggle. YES! Momentum! Keep it up, she told herself. She continued to work herself awake, slowly rolling her head from side to side grunting as loud as she could manage. Suddenly there was a light, and she heard someone walk in.

"Honey, it's ok," her mom said breathlessly pulling her daughter to her. "I'm here." She rubbed her daughter's back vigorously and tapped with her fingers as she went, trying to gently (but quickly) wake her. The girl felt a calm come over her, being wrapped in her mother's love and warmth. Slowly her eyes opened and squinted, adjusting to the hallway light. Its brilliance danced upon the softball trophies, spelling bee medals and band posters adorning her walls. She sighed deeply several times, trying to infuse her brain with oxygen to fully awaken.

"Thanks mom," she whispered, tears filling her now open eyes. "That was a rough one."

"You are safe," her mom cooed back.

“I know.” The girl sniffed and wiped her cheek. She started to pull away from her mother, who continued to hold her tightly.

“You are safe,” her mom repeated again in a toneless, robotic manner. A chill shot up the girl’s spine, overpowering the warmth she’d felt just moments ago. Suddenly she felt dizzy and nauseous.

“Mom,” she said weakly, “I don’t feel good.”

“You are safe,” her mom whispered deeply, releasing her hold and laying the girl back onto the bed.

The room was spinning and she could only make out a blurry outline of her mother standing over her. The girl’s blinks became slower and heavier, her vision dimming with each one. Just as she felt herself passing out she saw them: the red eyes.

CLUNK.

A searing scream sliced the silence.

Then, nothing.

THE END