

## It's Not Actually There

by Sofia Dominguez

You've had it happen again. It first really happened when you were young, around eight years old<sup>1</sup>. You were tucked in bed, you always are, mind half-glazed. you hear the light taps of your bed frame. When it happens it doesn't even have to be fully dark: you could have the starry glow of your entire window at your disposal<sup>2</sup>, BUT IT ONLY TAKES ONE CORNER OF DENSE VOIDAL MASS FOR IT TO HAPPEN AND NOW ITS THERE ITS EVERYWHERE

Disgusting amalgamations black mass onto black mass  
seared white scribble eyes expanding and leaking and consuming  
It laughs at you, it's this one gorgeously hideous entity, it's the walls and the desk and the leaves and the moon, the stars, the ocean miles away from you  
your eyes are stretched wide open under your eyelids<sup>3</sup>. you want to break free but your stupid arms and legs have stopped existing, it's only you and your dismembered bleeding head

The bed frame shakes again, and the taps elongate into waves, into *his* voice, into *his* groans of pain (even though he didn't groan that day, he physically could not), you feel that *he is walking behind you*, just on the flip side of that flaky porous wall, you feel that he is in so much pain he has no choice but to keep falling asleep even as he stumbles into the kitchen, you know he's there dismembered, you know he is right behind you and you know he is sick, you know his mind is dying just inches away from your door

your hand shudders onto the switch and the light is on again. you'll go back to sleep two hours later, after convincing yourself that it's all gone

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this night horror happened years before this incident, yet you cannot separate them: you've convinced yourself they are from the same seed, that all your childhood sufferings were caused by this hole in your adolescent years. The flower of grief explodes even though it's not supposed to be there.

<sup>2</sup> "Night or darkness, which intensifies the feeling of fear?" <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25957698/>  
This is actually not unusual: being alone in a bright room during nighttime feels uncanny, more than a dark room during daytime. But what happens when you concurrently live in two worlds both night and day, when the line between "what is" and "what could be" dies?

<sup>3</sup> During REM sleep cycle, a dreamer is wide awake. There is the sympathetic tone (nervous system), as opposed to the parasympathetic tone-as to why they are called tones, you have no clue and are scared of trying to investigate-, that, so far as you have understood, freezes your muscles while your "middle brain"-the brain area that is attached to your spinal cord, interestingly enough- keeps you alert and easily vulnerable to wakefulness. It seems that where some things are too awake and others too asleep is where sleep disorders set up camp. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4506454/>  
<https://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain/brain-anatomy/midbrain>.

and that you can deal with the darkness. ■

## Works Cited

Li, Yadan, et al. "Night or Darkness, Which Intensifies the Feeling of Fear?"

International Journal of Psychophysiology : Official Journal of the International Organization of Psychophysiology, 7 May 2015, [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25957698/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25957698/)

This publication is an abstract of a study that examined the differences between fear of the "dark" and fear of the "night". Participants were given tasks with "fearful" or "neutral" stimuli, and researchers measured fear responses in the physiological (heart rate) and psychological (self-reports) realms. The results are not described in particular detail, but overall fear responses increased at night rather than the day. The study connects day-night cycles and the natural perceivment of time with the processing of fear.

I interpret this information as the idea that you can't run from your fears, which extends my metaphor of night terrors and sleep paralysis on trauma. Sometimes even when you try to protect yourself as best you can, "night" will fall upon you and you will be exposed to your terrors, and the only thing you can do is carry on until you reach the next light.

Popat, Shreeya, and William Winslade. "While You Were Sleepwalking: Science and Neurobiology of Sleep Disorders & the Enigma of Legal Responsibility of Violence during Parasomnia." *Neuroethics*, 24 Apr. 2015,

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4506454/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4506454/)

This article explains the different stages of sleep and how sleep disorders like sonnambulism arise within them, and details a few extreme cases in which there could be legal issues.

When I began with my lyrical essay, I began by thinking about my experiences with sleepwalking when I was young. Although my focused shifted more towards night terrors, Nyctophobia, PTSD, and Night Paralysis, this article is still relevant because it prompted me to research a bit more on REM sleep, which was a repeated subject on several of the sources I read about sleep paralysis.

Farooq M, Anjum F. Sleep Paralysis. [Updated 2022 Sep 5]. In: StatPearls [Internet].

Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2023 Jan-. Available from:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK562322/> Accessed 28 May 2023.

This is a description of Sleep Paralysis on several aspects: etiology (the causes of a condition), epidemiology (circumstances and potential control over a condition), pathophysiology (the physiological-bodily- reactions to a disease), etc. It paints a mysterious idea of sleep paralysis and uniquely contradicts the popular cultural association of sleep paralysis to “evil” and danger, as it often describes it as a “benign” condition. It connects the condition mostly to outside factors, “These include anxiety disorders, poor sleep quality, consumption of alcohol, exposure to traumatic events, and a family history of sleep paralysis”.

My essay may not detail an exact example of sleep paralysis because it lacks the characteristic “heavy-weight-on-chest” or “levitation” feelings, but it does connect to how anxiety and exposure to traumatic events interacts with fears of the night.

“The Midbrain.” Queensland Brain Institute - University of Queensland, 16 Mar. 2021, [qbi.uq.edu.au/brain/brain-anatomy/midbrain](http://qbi.uq.edu.au/brain/brain-anatomy/midbrain)

This article gives an overview of the midbrain anatomy and functions. The way I briefly summarized it in the essay gives more context on the conflicting state of wakefulness and helplessness I describe.

Tindle, Jacob, and Prasanna Tadi. “Neuroanatomy, Parasympathetic Nervous System - Statpearls - NCBI Bookshelf.” National Library of Medicine, 2022, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK553141/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK553141/)

A skim through this article about parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems & their functions & their differences gave me more explanations of the in-between state of REM sleep. These two terms are introduced in Maheen Farooq and Fatima Anjum’s Sleep Paralysis article above.