

The Scream

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Like a gunshot, a devastated wail echoed through the silent apartment and struck my eardrum with force. My tired eyelids snapped open, and my feet were on the ground moving before my brain had fully awakened. The screeching continued as I ran down the hallway and flung open Luke's bedroom door, where I found him sitting straight up in his bed. Still wrapped in his soft blue blankets, he was wailing and crying with tears streaming down his flushed cheeks. I quickly walked over and sat down beside him, scooping his small body up in my arms. I knew he couldn't feel me there with him although his eyes were wide open, but it was the only thing I knew to do. Rocking back and forth, I attempted to penetrate the veil of his sleep with my desperate voice. My whispers fell on deaf ears, and he was still crying, now shouting from the depths of his dreams.

"Mommy, don't leave me! Mommy, they're taking me away! WAIT MOMMY!" he yelled out with a hoarse throat, trying to talk to the imagined version of myself. I held him closer, and I could feel him trembling from the nightmare. Slowly, his volume decreased and his body went slack, and eventually he woke up. I breathed a sigh of relief when he looked up with his green eyes and asked, "Mommy, what are you doing in here?"

"Sorry, baby, but you had another bad dream. Do you remember this one?" Luke blinked, and slowly shook his head.

"Can I have a glass of water?" he asked innocently.

"Of course, I'll be right back. You get all snuggly and I'll come read until you fall asleep."

Well at least this episode wasn't very long, I thought to myself as I walked to the kitchen and grabbed Luke's favorite dog-printed cup. As I filled it and felt the coldness travel through the side into my hand, my eye caught the jumble of papers by the telephone. When would these supposed "experts" be able to help us? Probably when I start going into debt trying to find some answers. Fat lot of help these doctors had been so far. I scoffed and walked back to Luke's room, where he was already peacefully asleep again. I placed the water on his nightstand and brushed some of his soft dark hair off his sweaty forehead. Looking around at his toys, his Hot Wheels cars and plastic dinosaurs, made me both happy and sad. He was such an amazing kid, always happy, smiling, giving me drawings of us together in one of his toy cars. He made friends easily, and could "run faster than anybody else in the class!" or so he claimed. I wish I could climb into his head and find out what poison had taken root there, what had started this whole ordeal.

It began when Luke was five, so about two years ago now. I had taken him to a museum to get out and move around, or perhaps it was so that I could. The death of Luke's father, my husband Avery, had taken a heavy toll on me emotionally. Even after he suddenly died in a car accident right after Luke was born, I was still able to care for Luke thanks to a supportive family who came at a moment's notice. Regardless, my broken heart just wasn't in it, or up to the task. My life had become a mimicry of what other new mothers were experiencing; when others were at the park pushing their child on the swings, I sat vacantly by the sandbox watching Luke play alone. I'd put him to bed at night, but wouldn't read to him or kiss him. The museum was to be just another outing for Luke and my empty shell of a body. He toddled along on clumsy child legs beside me, holding my hand while I slowly padded through the rooms. His babbling questions went in one ear and out the other, as I was lost inside my own head. I was sure that there would be nothing to crack my mental wall, built up by grief and devastation. Looking down at Luke's beautiful dark hair reminded me of Avery, and so it was difficult to look at my own child.

We entered a large, white square room filled with both people and paintings, and I sat us down on a bench to drink some water. Being in the crowds of people, in such an enclosed space, was testing my patience. Luke played with the contents of my purse, finding receipts to fold and pennies to stack. I suppose my face must have looked strange, because at least two people asked if I was alright. How I should answer that, I did not know. Staring straight ahead, my eyes finally focused on what was before us hanging on the wall. It was portraying a man standing on a bridge, but in no way did it appear as a normal scene. Instead, the shapes in the painting were made up of slithering lines of color, seeming to be in

constant motion, and it was positively psychedelic. The sky looked like a wavy orange ocean, and the blue and green water below swam in my eyes like a whirlpool. The brown bridge, streaked with white, pink, and grey, led straight to the forefront of the painting. The brushstrokes implied movement, and so my eyes flicked across the canvas. What struck me, and has struck many others, was the man standing in front of the viewer's eyes. Dressed in black, his hands held up to his cheeks, the face looked anguished, screaming as his body seemed to melt into the bottom of the painting. His eyes stared straight into yours, burrowing into your soul. Two bodies stood in the background, unfeeling, as they look on to such a display of emotion. It shocked me out of my stupor, to feel that I could relate to such an image despite my numbness. I burst into tears, startling Luke into crying too, sending a wail over the crowd. The both of us were a sight, sitting there on that museum bench surrounded by staring strangers.

My mind went over that crucial moment as I sat in my computer chair, still awake from Luke's screams. It was like a veil had been lifted from my mind, shocking me into the mother I was always meant to be, how I was supposed to be. Always after getting up to comfort him, I couldn't sleep. This is when I did my research. After all, no matter how many appointments and blood drawings I subjected Luke to, those doctors couldn't suggest anything useful. I didn't want to give a seven-year-old pills, and every other suggestion was rather vague since the general suggestion is to 'wait it out'. Well I'm not doing that. Luke was the happiest, cutest baby that I'd ever seen, and I'm not just saying that because I'm his mom. My mother would say the same thing as I would say. It simply was not in his nature to be unhappy, and to such a degree as to wake him up screaming at intervals for years now. I sipped on my hot cocoa and awoke my computer, which hummed as its screen turned blue. Searching through the net during the previous late nights had unearthed some theories about Luke's nightmares that I found outlandish, but also intriguing.

Evidently, the technical term for these extreme nightmares is "night terrors." At least Luke doesn't go so far as sleepwalking, which is a hallmark of these terrors. I'd die of anxiety if I woke up and found him wandering the dark apartment. Luke, on the other hand, was impossible to awaken, and that was frightening. Looking into his open eyes, wide with terror, and realizing he's not even seeing me was the most difficult to accept. It unnerved me so much that I was able to at least stomach some of the idea surrounding night terrors. Apparently there are some who believe that these episodes are brought on by demons, but the defense of such an idea originates from the medieval times, making me skeptical. Many websites that had this information were religious, which I was wary of. At the same time, modern medicine was failing me in being able to comfort my only child, and what remained of my husband. The one thing that pushed me towards this kind of solution was when I tried to videotape an episode (according to a doctor's orders). Although the recorder and tape were brand new, somehow they had become damaged during filming, almost looking like they had melted.

I logged onto the forum that I had integrated myself into these past few months. Called 'Demondopes', it consisted of people who were absolutely obsessive about studying and analyzing demons. They were odd, that was for certain, but they were never unkind and always seemed like sympathetic listeners. One user in particular I had grown close with, named 'LucyLover666'. I assumed the 'Lucy' stood for Lucifer, or something of that nature. Tonight, I just needed someone to talk to in these early morning hours.

CoolMom007 (myself):	Another bad episode tonight...this time he actually said what was happening.
LucyLover666:	Really? What did he see in his dream?
CoolMom007:	He said something about me leaving him, and how "they" were taking him away.
LucyLover666:	Y'know, children used to be kidnapped by fairies (or beings) back in ancient times. People would

	disappear all the time.
CoolMom007:	I'd protect Luke with my life. There's no way they'd get to him without me being there. I'm with him always.
LucyLover666:	They appear out of thin air though...I'm just saying, that's why he could be dreaming this way. Children sense things we don't.

I logged off, feeling more unsettled by this conversation than reassured. Every time I tried to find a solution, it seemed that more possibilities about Luke's condition popped up. The mind can be a mysterious thing. Turning off my laptop, I laid down in my bed and turned on the small television on the wall. The local news was monotonously blaring, and so I could stay within my personal thoughts. Stretching my limbs, I felt how big this bed really was without Avery's wide shoulders taking up half of it. Still, I laid on my designated side. It felt wrong to claim his space. Somehow, this was my way of retaining some fragment of his presence. Even now, I washed the same pillowcase he used last and replaced it every week onto his lumpy pillow. I tried to throw it out a hundred times, but he said it was the last thing he had from his parents' house. Now I treasure it like it were a lock of his dark hair. Grabbing the pillow, I hugged it to my chest and inhaled. The scent of his hair still remained deep in the stuffing, and I fell asleep with my husband close by once again.

I was walking, and it almost seemed like I was on a pier somewhere. I was close to the water, with the salty sea air blustering in my face and tossing my hair. The water looked strange, though. It looked like it was made of a million green and blue slithering ropes, writhing and tangling over each other for eternity. I looked down at my hands and my skin looked the same, almost like pale noodles constantly shifting but maintaining the same shape. Everything in this dream world looked the same as that, always in motion. The wooden bridge under my feet seemed to be flowing in one direction, and it almost compelled me that way. I walked, watching the seagulls and the sand undulating, feeling the pulse of the environment. Finally I saw a figure in the distance, a nice reprieve from the solitude.

As I walked closer, I noticed that the figure appeared smaller and smaller. Strange, I thought, as I approached. In my ears I began to hear a low moan, anguished and piercing. Finally I came within some designated distance, because the figure whipped around to look at me. What I saw made my mouth gape open in shock. The figure was Luke, posed like my favorite painting, "The Scream." His howl echoed through the dream and vibrated in my ears, causing adrenaline to rush through my gut. He stared into my eyes, screaming the entire time. Behind him, the dark figures from the painting were looming, moving closer and closer. They were close enough that I could see their faces, which held a wide grin and starkly white eyes. They grabbed Luke's arms and their hands merged with his body, making their grip impossible to break. Luke screamed again, but a scared child's cry this time, igniting every maternal instinct I had inside me. I tried to yell out, but my throat had been struck mute. My legs tried to run, but my feet only sank into the suddenly-soft ground, unable to find a grip. I helplessly watched as the two figures took my love, who now had morphed into Avery, then back to Luke, and then they were so far away I couldn't see them anymore.

I woke up, but this time it wasn't in my mom's arms. The glow of my soccer ball night light made it so I could see around my entire room. The light should keep the monsters away too, even though they found a way to get into my dreams. I laid in bed, awake for a minute, until I realized that the apartment was mine to have. Mom was asleep, and I knew exactly where the cookies were in the cabinet. I hopped out of bed and slipped on my race car slippers, being careful not to giggle out loud or step on the squeaky floorboard by my dresser. I slowly opened my door, causing it to squeak

louder than anything I've heard before. I ducked my head back in and waited a minute. Mom was a light sleeper, and she heard everything. This time, no loud steps came down the hallway, so I was safe.

I slipped out of my room and tiptoed down the hall and into the kitchen. The light from the window let me see perfectly, and so I made my way over to the counter, hoisted myself up, and opened the cabinet. Reaching into the top shelf, my fingers brushed the plastic blue sleeve of the chocolate chip cookies. Jackpot! I grabbed at the sleeve and it fell down to the floor, making a loud 'SMACK' as it landed. I gasped and froze, waiting for the inevitable yell. But it never came. I was having such good luck tonight! I got down, grabbed the cookies, and turned to make my way back to my room.

A figure stood in the doorway to the hall, dark and motionless. I stared, widening my eyes and looking so hard they hurt.

"Mom?" I asked, getting scared. The figure stepped forward, and I saw the light blonde of my mom's hair catching the dim light. Oh man, I was in trouble now.

"I'm sorry, Mom, I just woke up and I was really hungry and..." My voice trailed off as she began to grow, taller and taller until she was crouching in the room, her head bowed forward. I could see now that it wasn't my mom. It had her hair, but the face was skinny and black like the rest of it. It grinned, revealing a wide row of small human teeth below completely white eyes. It was a monster. I threw the cookies at it and began to scream as I ran the other way, towards the living room. I could feel its claws brushing my shirt, its hot breath on my neck as it chased me. I ran through the apartment, circling and circling, never escaping but never being caught, either. When will it end? I dashed into my room and slammed the door, feeling the monster's body crash into the other side. I didn't have much time, where will I go? I saw the window and decided to do it. It's a dream, right? I can just fly away from the monster, and it can't eat me! I walked over and opened the window, shoving the screen out so I can just fit through...

Luke's screams came later than usual tonight, at about three in the morning. For some reason, I had a hard time getting up, almost like I was trying to emerge from wet sand. I finally extracted myself from my bed and quickly walked down the hallway, leaning on the wall as I went. Passing the kitchen, I noticed one cabinet door was hanging open. My God...no! I ran down to his room and shoved his door open, making it bounce off the wall behind it. Luke's bed was empty, and I saw his body poised in the window frame, about to leap from our third floor apartment to the concrete below.

"Luke, NO!" I dashed forward and grabbed his shirt collar, yanking him back into safety. Landing on top of me, he woke up confused and disoriented.

"Mom, what happened? I was running from the monster and trying to get some cookies even though I know I should be asleep..." He began to cry, and I held him close.

"It's okay, baby, it was just a dream, just a dream..." I rubbed his back and felt scratches on his skin. I turned him around and lifted up his shirt. Angry red raised lines ran from his neck down his spine. A chill rushed through my body, and I stood up, still holding Luke's small body in my arms. I walked to the doorway and stared down the hall. Silence, silence so deep it pressed on your eardrums. Then, the soft sound of the cabinet door closing. A picture frame fell down from the wall, making me jump.

"Luke, stay in this room and do not move. Don't even make a peep." He nodded his head, looking terrified. I walked slowly out into the darkness and picked up the picture. It was a picture of the three of us together, Avery, Luke, and me. We were all smiling, Luke swaddled in my arms and Avery looking down at his son proudly. The glass had shattered, but that wasn't what made my blood run cold. The picture was severely damaged. Avery's face had been scratched out, a deep gash removing his face from the photo. Baby Luke had all but been entirely ripped out of the paper. I was intact, staring straight into the camera, into my own shocked eyes.

I felt a shaking sensation, and then suddenly my eyes popped open.

“Mom, I’m hungry! I want pancakes today, can I please? I promise I won’t put too much syrup on them, and I’ll even drink my orange juice!”

I sat up groggily, and the sun streaming in the windows stung my eyes. I blinked and looked at the clock—10:13. What happened to my alarm? I swung my legs off my bed and stood up, following Luke to the kitchen. I assured him that pancakes were on the way. I reached into the cabinet to grab the mix, and decided that a cookie first thing wouldn’t be so bad. Grabbing for the blue plastic container, I realized that they were missing. Gone. How strange.

“Luke, did you move the cookies? They aren’t in here.”

“No Mom, I...I took them. But that was when I was dreaming, I think... right?”

I paused for a moment, and then replied. “Right.”