

# THE FIRST AWAKENING

The night was dark and still. The bare faces of the apartment buildings were illuminated only by the occasional streetlamps whose pale beams of light focused on the damp asphalt of the road. Empty, black windows lined the apartments, mimicking the void of darkness in the sky as thick clouds blotted out any shine of the moon or stars. Remnants of the recent downpour slipped down the glass of the windows like the sparkles of diamonds in a deep, dank cave. Though there was a considerable chill in the air, the residents of the apartments were tucked in their warm beds, deep in restful slumber at this late hour. Yet not everyone who lay cuddled up to their loved ones or nestled alone with their pillows were protected from the cold outside.

Despite his being cloaked within the reassuring confines of his blankets, one young man, a teenager, shivered in his bed. His small room was dark, shrouded in shadow. The large oak tree, which stood outside the apartment building, blocked out most of the white light from the streetlamp. Instead of clear, comforting light from the window, the rickety branches of the oak tree cast twisted and gnarled shadows across the boy's wardrobe door. In his younger years, the boy had often looked upon those shadows and his imagination gave life to them. He would cover his head in his blankets, hoping to hide from the ghosts

and monsters he believed might spring from that shadowed wardrobe. Even now, at seventeen years old, he did not feel comfortable sliding the door open without the light of day, or at least his bedside lamp to guide his hand.

Across the floor, which was littered with wrinkled, worn clothes, sat the boy's desk. Where once the books and papers of his homework would have been neatly sorted, the desk had now been in disarray for some time. Scrunched balls of paper sat amongst the ruffled sheets of work. There were half-finished maths assignments, unopened history books, relatively talented anime-styled sketches – particularly of attractive girls – and a thoroughly examined book on demonology. Schoolwork had definitely taken a hit in recent weeks. First, it was the lack of concentration. The staring into space while the teachers' words jumbled into a monotonous garble. Then it was the distractions. The certainty that people were whispering, not only around him but about him. There were the constant excuses, leaving classes halfway through only never to come back until finally, he did not turn up to school at all. There were far more pressing matters on the boy's mind than schoolwork. The bedside table in the dark room was equally as messy as the desk but, instead of papers, books and pens, the little chest of drawers was covered in empty mugs, bottles, cans and packets of tablets. The stench of days old, unfinished coffee and sweet energy drinks lingered in the room like a heavy cloud that once breathed in, would provide the recipient with a dizzying high of caffeine and guarana. The vast majority of the shiny, foil pill packets were blistered open and their valuable contents consumed. The collection of boxes, brandishing multiple different brands of caffeine supplements were scattered about the messy tabletop with some having fallen to the floor.

Try though he evidently might to stay awake, the boy was lying back in his bed, his eyelids fluttering with troubled sleep. A limp hand rested on the open laptop beside him, the battery long since dead. When next it might be powered up, one would find the recent searches of demons and rituals, particularly that of exorcism, on the glowing screen. The boy had not wanted to sleep. He had successfully avoided

it now for nearly five days. But the night had been cold. His body ached and his head swam with dizziness. He just wanted to sit down. To be comfortable in his blankets for a moment. But now he slept, light and troubled though his slumber might be. His name seemed to echo in his ears, repeating over and over in dry, hissing whispers.

*Gary... Gary... Gaaaaaaary...*

He twitched, eliciting a weak moan, instinctively trying to banish the sound away as he slept. *Gary... Gary... Gary...*

The whispers slowed down before finally vanishing into silence. The tormenting voice of his dreams was giving way, allowing him to sleep in peace.

*GARY!!!*

The whispering hiss had suddenly exploded, like waves of water that break through a poorly made dam. The scream was shrill and high with a guttural undercurrent. When the voice suddenly pierced the boy's ears as though it were right next to him, a loud bang simultaneously brought him to wakeful life. It sounded as though the palm of a hand had slammed with tremendous power upon the flat surface of a table. Gary immediately opened his eyes. The darkness pierced his lenses, causing them to ache. An unmistakable torrent of fear washed through Gary's body, enveloping him. He knew his heart was beating relentlessly in his chest. He knew he was panting, breathing hard and shallow, but was he? Gary realised with ever growing terror, he could not feel anything. He was frozen, stuck lying in his bed. Was he even in his bed? Gary had no way to tell. He couldn't feel a thing. He couldn't move. The fear was overwhelming him. He couldn't feel himself breathing. It was as though he were being forced underwater where he could not bring himself to take a breath. He was suffocating. Gary tried with all his might to move. To shoot up and gasp for air. To raise his head. Even just to move a finger. But Gary couldn't move. He couldn't feel anything but the burning sensation, somewhere inside, and he couldn't breathe.

*Oh fuck! Not again, not again. Shit! I can breathe. Calm down, I can breathe.* Gary attempted to control his frantic brain. He tried to calm

his scattered, panic-stricken thoughts and focus on what he knew. He was still breathing. Knowing this could not quell the panic inside though. Gary felt as though he were going to die. That without taking a breath his very being would explode in a final moment of agony. He had experienced this before. Sleep paralysis. He researched it. Studied it. Learned how to deal with it. Or so he thought.

*Oh God, no. Please, no,* he thought. He couldn't control his fear this time. And he knew why. His gaze was focused on the wardrobe. His eyes were the only thing he could control in his paralysis and even then, only through great effort. He could glance this way and that, but his attention was drawn inexplicably to that wardrobe door. The twisted shadows of the oak tree's branches waved up and down as the tree creaked in the wind outside. Gary was in pain. Unable to cry out, unable to move. He feared his heart would burst. But with the pain, along with the fear that he could not breathe, something else caused his blood to run cold. The voice that had woken him. The bang. He had heard them before.

He watched, unsure if he was trembling or not, how the shadows of the tree branches looked like crooked fingers reaching out to him. As the shadows waved here and there, Gary noticed some did not move. A few of those shadowed twigs remained steady, crossing over the edge of the wardrobe door from within. Gary screamed with all his might. He heard the sound of his own feeble, almost silent moan of terror. It was all the sound he could muster though inside he screamed like a newborn child. The shadows that remained immobile... weren't shadows. They were long, pointy and gnarled fingers. Gary couldn't make them out any better than thin spines that were as black as the blackest ink which flows from a frightened squid.

*Fuck, no. Not you. I can breathe. I can move. I CAN BREATHE!* Gary's thoughts ran dizzily around his head. He needed to run. He needed to get away from that thing. But he couldn't move.

'Can you, Gary? Can you really... breeeeathe?' a despicable voice, hissing and pitching like a pained howl echoed from the closed

wardrobe. Gary had heard it before. He never wanted to hear it again. But it was back.

*Fuck off! Please, just fuck off! Leave me alone,* Gary pleaded in his head. There was a low, guttural sound in response. Laughter. The fingers tapped over the wardrobe door. It reminded Gary of the sound of cockroaches falling on the concrete after a rubbish bin was opened.

‘Oh... I’m not leaving you... Gary. I’m never leaving... yooooooooo, hehehe,’ the voice mocked the teenager. Gary fought with all his might to do something. To do anything. The urge to flee was pounding in his head over and over until finally... Gary closed his eyes. He had struggled so much to leave the room and all he could do was close his eyes.

*It’s not real. It’s not real. I can breathe. Just calm down,* Gary started to repeat the mantra he learned a long time ago. All he needed to do was calm down. It was going to pass.

‘HEY!!!’ the voice barked like a crack of thunder in Gary’s head. There was a loud clattering sound in the room as the voice screamed with hoarse rage.

‘Don’t think you can just ignore me, you little fuck! Look at ME!!!’

Gary managed another stifled whimper. He didn’t want to listen. He wanted the voice to just leave him alone. But he couldn’t control himself. It was as though he was compelled to obey. He didn’t want to look at those evil fingers again. But Gary opened his eyes. Another moaned scream escaped his barely parted lips, this time louder than before. The wardrobe door was open. Gary couldn’t make out anything in the dark void within. Was that one of his shirts on its hanger or was it the thing that tormented him?

Rushing, heavy footfalls thumped onto the carpet of his room, getting closer and closer, though Gary saw nothing. He still couldn’t move, but he could feel it. The cold, unrelenting terror told him that the thing was behind him. He couldn’t look at it. Then, Gary finally felt something. The paralysis was finally passing. He felt pressure in his shoulder as he tried to move. It was as though the sudden feeling

snapped him from his nightmare. Suddenly, he felt his shivering skin, the hairs tingling on the back of his neck. A wave of relief washed over him as the cold air rushed into his gasping lungs.

*Oh, thank Christ! Jesus, God, thank you. Oh, God.* Gary wasn't overly religious but he couldn't resist thanking whoever, whatever, might have saved him from his torments. He could feel the cold sweat on his forehead as he instinctively began to pull himself to sit up. He couldn't do it. But he wasn't paralysed anymore. His toes grazed the blanket that covered them. He could bend his fingers. His left shoulder was holding him back somehow. A fresh wave of fear coursed through Gary as he slowly turned his head. His eyes were bulging in their sockets.

The long, shadowy fingers were clasped over his shoulder.

Gary's heart jumped into his throat. He couldn't make a sound. Slowly, he managed to look up, following the dark length of his assailant's arm. He looked to a dark, shadowed thing. Was it human? He couldn't tell. The body was shrouded in a darkness that it seemed to produce itself. But Gary saw the eyes. Bright, luminous eyes that glowed like two small beads of fire. It was as though Hell itself burned within them and those eyes pierced into Gary's soul with sheer hatred and malevolence. Suddenly, what looked to be thin, dark lips peeled back into the featureless face. The lips exposed long, sharp teeth, like needled fangs twisted and wound together like melted prison bars. The teeth bared into a smile that could never be seen as anything other than horrific.

'Let's be together always, Gary,' the voice sneered with evil delight. Gary's voice finally broke free and his scream echoed through the entire apartment building.

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Aiden Wood woke with a start. He blinked his eyes, trying to recall the frightening image in his brain that had woken him so suddenly. The memory was fading fast. He had been in some bedroom he didn't recognise. A messy one, like one that belonged to a kid, maybe. He

could barely even picture it now. His dreams were always quick to vaporise into thin air after he woke up. But Aiden felt uneasy. He remembered darkness. Shadows. And something in them. Something sinister.

At that moment, as the faded memory of a sharp-toothed grin in the darkness crossed his mind, Aiden realised he wasn't breathing. He tried to take a deep breath but found his body didn't obey him. It felt as though something heavy, like a large dog, was sitting on his chest. As he struggled to work out if he was breathing or not, Aiden instinctively sat up. Or at least he tried to. He couldn't bring himself to move. He could feel the warmth of his blankets about him. He felt snug in the comfortable, memory foam mattress and soft pillows. But a feeling of panic grew in Aiden's chest. He felt as though he were going to suffocate and, try though he might, he couldn't even move his fingers.

*Jesus, okay. Okay, calm down. Just relax. This isn't a bad one. It's going to pass...* Aiden composed and reassured himself. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he last had an episode of sleep paralysis but he damn well hated how it could get the jump on him like this. He lay there, focusing on the knowledge that he was breathing no matter what his body tried to tell him, and stared blankly at the ceiling. The dim light of the morning was beaming in through the half-open curtains. The warm, yellow glow was comforting to Aiden but even it couldn't keep his nerves completely under control. If he lost his focus, he knew that he could very quickly devolve into a frightened mess. Sleep paralysis was strange that way. No matter how much he might have gotten used to it in the past, every experience was a test of his will. He wondered what time it was. Could Rebecca still be in bed with him? Aiden knew it was likely. If his alarm hadn't gone off, neither had hers.

'Hey, Bec? Bec!' he said, hoping to get his wife's attention. But as he said it, Aiden heard his own voice. It was little more than the faintest squeak emitted from his frozen lips.

*Goddamn it!* he thought with growing frustration. The emotions began to overtake his sense of reason and, as he still felt like he was struggling to even breathe, the fear began to set in.

‘Bec! Bec! REBECCA!’ Aiden began to scream, to beg for his wife to notice him. His squeak turned to dull moans and then to stifled groans. The need for help was becoming overwhelming.

‘Aiden...’

Aiden paused in his cries. Did he just hear someone whisper his name? It seemed to come from the bathroom that joined their bedroom.

‘Whaaaaat, Aiden?’ the disgruntled moan of Rebecca asked from beside the paralysed man. In the corner of his eye, Aiden could see Bec’s arm stretch upward as she reached up to undoubtedly rub her eyes. He cried out, screaming loudly, though he heard little more than another moan. At least he seemed to have finally gotten his wife’s attention. She appeared to pause and Aiden could feel her looking at him.

‘Aiden? What’s wrong? Honey?’ Her voice was groggy with sleep but there was a sense of concern in her tone now. Aiden felt her hand on his shoulder as she tapped and shook him in an effort to rouse him. It was as though the touch of his wife had broken some fairy tale curse. Suddenly, Aiden gasped in great mouthfuls of air and he shot upright.

‘Holy crap, Aiden, are you alright?’ Bec asked, evidently worried now. She sat in close to her husband, holding his hand with one of her own while her other arm reached around his shoulders.

‘Ugh, God... yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry.’ Aiden finally managed to speak clearly while he rested his forehead in his hand with relief.

‘What the hell was that? You sounded like you were having a stroke or something?’ Bec asked. She watched him keenly for a sign of anything amiss. Aiden looked to his wife and couldn’t resist a smile as he saw the love and worry in her glistening brown eyes.

‘Really, I’m okay, babe. It was just that... sleep paralysis thing, I think,’ he explained in a manner far more casual than he felt. Truly, it had been quite a long time since he had experienced anything like what he had just woken up to and it understandably shook him up a bit.

‘God, is that what it’s like? It sounded horrible,’ Bec said after heaving a sigh of relief that her husband wasn’t apparently dying anytime soon.

‘But you haven’t had that since –’

‘Since I was like sixteen, yeah.’ Aiden finished Bec’s sentence for her.

‘Weird. What do you think brought it on?’ Bec asked, evidently in thought as she absently stroked Aiden’s hand.

‘I dunno, a bad night’s sleep? Seriously, don’t worry, hon,’ Aiden replied, feeling better and better by the minute. As though to reassure her, he leaned in and lovingly kissed Rebecca’s lips.

‘Ugh, morning breath,’ he whined, backing away from his wife and waving his hand.

‘Oh, piss off! It’s nowhere near as bad as yours,’ Bec retorted with a chuckle.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Aiden responded as he got out of bed and walked towards the ensuite.

‘Are you sure you are alright? I suppose it will give you something to talk about with Lauren tomorrow, huh?’ Bec asked again. Aiden could hear her pulling away the sheets as she started to get up as well. Though she spoke with a lighter tone, jokingly mentioning his long-time therapist, Aiden could still pick up a hint of concern in her voice.

‘Yeah, finally. We never have anything to talk about,’ he replied, trying to mimic his wife’s humour of the situation. ‘Really though, I’m fine,’ he added as he reached forward and set his hand on the doorknob before pausing for a moment. A chill ran down his spine before he quickly opened the door. He half expected to find someone hiding in there. He was sure that first whisper came from the bathroom. But it was empty. He must have been wrong.

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‘Only two days until the weekend,’ Bec said as she stepped into the kitchen while putting the second of her small, stud earrings in.

‘Heh, for you maybe,’ Aiden replied as he turned and handed his wife a mug of fresh coffee.

‘Cheers.’ Bec smiled. She didn’t even blow on the coffee before taking a sip.

Aiden knew how to make a good coffee like it was the back of his hand, especially for his wife. Their espresso machine was mid-range, maybe even more on the cheaper side of things, but as a barista for the last nine years, Aiden could make some decent coffee with what he had. He was usually the first in the house to be ready to leave in the morning. As such, it had become something of a second nature to him to give their Labrador, Leena, her breakfast in the backyard and prepare a coffee for Rebecca while he made his own.

‘Hey, at least you don’t have to work the Sunday shift this week. Family day,’ Bec said with a sly smile. She turned to the loaf of bread Aiden had left on the bench, predictably to make herself some toast.

‘Good point. I mean, are Sunday shifts even worth it after the government axed the penalty rates? And speaking of family – Hannah! You better hurry if you want to get some breakfast in before school!’ Aiden called for his daughter as he set his empty plate in the dishwasher.

‘Coming!’ the teenager’s voice echoed down the hallway. The bedrooms were located down the hall which ran the length of the house before joining to the kitchen and living room.

‘Thank God she actually likes school. I don’t know what we would do if she was anything like Anne’s kids,’ Bec said, referring to her sister’s family.

‘Did I tell you she’s taken to turning a spray bottle on Billy when he refuses to get out of bed?’

‘Shit, really? If Hannah were that bad, I’d want us to just send out for a new kid.’ Aiden laughed and Bec smiled.

‘Ugh, please. You guys love me too much to get rid of me,’ a familiar girl’s voice said. Aiden and Rebecca looked to the entry

of the kitchen to find their fifteen-year-old daughter dropping her backpack against the wall.

‘Yeah, but just because you’re so good to us,’ Aiden retorted with a cheeky grin.

‘Honey, she has you wrapped around her little finger and you know it,’ Bec pointed out before taking a bite of her jam toast.

‘Yeah, Dad,’ Hannah agreed matter-of-factly. She opened the pantry and fetched out a box of cereal. Aiden shrugged.

‘I just like to look after my bug,’ he said with a nod. He sipped his coffee and absently watched as Hannah set about making herself some breakfast. Her long, dark hair was tied back into a ponytail and her thinly rimmed glasses were neatly perched on her nose.

*How is she so old already?* Aiden thought, wondering where the time had gone. Hannah looked so much like her mother it was almost scary. Save for the glasses. Rebecca was the only one in the family who wasn’t petrified of contact lenses. Aiden felt lucky to have such a good family and yet, sometimes he couldn’t help but imagine what might have been...

‘Whatch’ya thinking?’ Bec asked, snapping Aiden out of his silent thoughts. He fixed his glasses after feeling them slide slightly down his lean nose.

‘Oh, nothing really. Just where does the time go?’ he said, averting his eyes. He always felt so guilty when he let his mind wander, as though Bec could sense the resentments he kept suppressed deep inside.

‘Who knows? All I know is I’m going to be married to a thirty-four-year-old pretty soon,’ Bec said with apparent dismay. Aiden thought about his upcoming birthday next month before chuckling.

‘Hey, if I’m going to be thirty-four that’s gonna make you...’ he started before Bec shot him a warning glare.

‘Don’t go there,’ she said slowly. Aiden stepped forward and reached down, lightly patting his wife’s backside while she stood facing the bench.

'I wouldn't dare! You're still as pretty as ever, though,' he said softly.

'Um, eww,' Hannah scoffed and she pretended to gag while Bec laughed.

'Sorry, Hannah, too mushy?' Aiden joked and his daughter snorted before returning to her cereal.

'You two always are,' Hannah said dismissively. Bec looked at her watch.

'Come on, enough now. Time we all got moving. You get to school. You get to work,' she said with a sudden authority that only a wife and mother could possess.

'Jawohl, mein Mrs!' Aiden said, clicking his heels and downing the last dregs of his coffee.

'Yeah, you better do as you're told,' Bec said. She slid her hand behind Aiden's head and pulled him in for a kiss.

'Have a good day, honey. Love you,' she said with a smile. Aiden adored her smile so much. No matter what pitiful things he thought, he knew Bec and Hannah were worth it.

'You too. Love you, babe,' he said before turning to take his set of keys from the hook on the wall.

'Have a good day at school, bug. *Love you,*' he said, pointing to Hannah as he opened the front door. He saw that the emphasis he put on his final words had the desired affect when his daughter sucked her cheek with a half-hidden grin.

'Love you too, Dad,' Aiden heard his daughter say as he stepped outside to start a new day.