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The Knock

The house sits on a side street, fairly tidy among various levels of disrepair. In the night, many shadows move inside, behind drawn curtains, though I live alone.



There was a loud knock on the front door.

I woke instantly and looked around the bedroom. It was pitch dark, and there wasn't a sound from anywhere, even the refrigerator.

I replayed the knock in my head. Whenever a sudden noise wakes me up, I can usually still hear the last second of the sound. The knock had been quite loud and authoritative.

The police? A fire? The house was silent. Fedex? What time is it? A passing car?

I put on my bathrobe and went to the front door and peeked out through the venetian blinds. The street was dark, and there was nothing in sight that moved. A prank? Some kid on his way home from an all-nighter, ringing doorbells and knocking on doors?

It was chilly standing there in my bare feet, so I went back to bed and drifted off to sleep again.

A loud knock woke me. This time, I sprinted to the door and had it unlocked and open within seconds. My little sister stood there, which was pretty much impossible, since she lived a couple thousand miles to the left.

I looked again and noticed that Marcy had an AK-47 almost as big as she is, with a long curved ammo clip. That was just wrong.

"What are you doing with an assault rifle?" I asked.

She stepped back and looked to either side. There were six or eight other little girls just behind her, in the shadows. They all carried automatic weapons, big clips, ammo belts.

“Why are you looking so violent?” I asked.

“Maybe because they gave us all assault rifles, and sent us out here to kill people,” she said scornfully. “You think maybe *that’s* why we’re violent?”

She was right; war is like that. I nodded, feeling a wave of empathy for her and her little sisters in arms. Then I woke up again, only this time there was no replay of anybody knocking. The house was silent, and it was still dark.

I remembered one night, decades ago, when I was just falling asleep and suddenly heard, very distinctly, the voice of my father, furiously shouting my name, just once. If he ever *had* shouted at me like that, it could only have been because I was about to hurt myself and hadn’t heard his first warning. But this mental echo of his voice bounced around in my brain for some time as I sat bolt upright, wondering what the hell was going on.

Back then, I couldn’t think of a plausible explanation, other than losing my mind. I rarely recall people’s voices, even my parents. That kind of sensory memory just isn’t in my brain’s repertoire. But this one shout was so distinctive, so unmistakably my father, that it didn’t seem like a memory at all. The *replay* was a memory, very short-term, just half a second, but what woke me up was a real shout, from nearby, very loud and clear. My name. Abrupt. Angry. Warning.

As a kid, until about nine, I dreamt a lot, and after a few especially colorful nightmares (one involved a pair of ghosts playing ping pong with meatballs on my model railroad table), I decided to do something about it. I soon found myself inside the dreams, aware that I was dreaming. Knowing it was a dream meant that it didn’t matter, and before long I figured out how to control them.

For the next few years, I did whatever I wanted in dreams. I dreamt that the fearsome headmaster of my school was glaring at me as I stood alone in his office for some unknown infraction, so I yelled at him that he was a stinker and a meany and walked out. Through the wall.

Apparently, however, the biological necessity of unmanipulated dreaming must have reclaimed my dream machinery, and I stopped

having them altogether. According to the experts, I suppose, I did still have dreams, but they were forgotten so fast and fully that I was no longer aware of them. Over the course of my life, dreams have come and gone a little, but by and large I don't dream.

In any case, I don't think my father's angry voice ever happened again. But I still don't believe hearing his shout back in 1970 was just a dream, and here I am forty years later still remembering it. I also don't think it was really my father, shouting.

A few years ago, I started dreaming again, but these dreams were all amazingly boring and irrelevant. In fact, just thinking about them in the morning made me feel tired and annoyed. I began to dread going to sleep, because I knew I'd spend thirty or forty dream-hours standing around in large groups of people talking earnestly about nonsense, or walking through some vast over-decorated house filled with artifacts and memorabilia from someone else's life. There wasn't much variety, but it was repeated in endless permutations until sometimes I woke up from the sheer intensity of the irrelevance.

So now, instead of dad shouting my name, I'm still waking up the same way. This last time it was a knock, not a shout, but it felt the same.

A few weeks later, sound asleep, I heard the doorbell. Snapping awake, I replayed the sound, and that's when I realized it was the doorbell from another house, one I had owned decades ago, before I began living alone. I lay back down, very quietly, listening for any faint clue that the doorbell was real. I knew it wasn't, but one hopes.

I must have drifted back to sleep, because I suddenly found myself bolt upright again, replaying the sound of an old telephone ringing, the kind with real metal bells. I haven't heard one of those since I was a teenager and phones had dials.

I listened intently—silence. I may have dozed for a few minutes. Then, the sound of my front storm door opening; the latch has a distinctive scrape. So I crept out of bed, put on my bathrobe, and tiptoed to the front door. I only had to bend a few slats of the venetian blind to see there was nobody there, and the storm door was still latched. I opened the inner door a crack and locked the storm door. Then I returned to bed.

Another few weeks passed without disturbances, and then I awoke suddenly to the sound of a big dog barking *inside the house*. It was one quick

bark, just the size of my replay memory, and it really got my attention. I jumped up, grabbed a large flashlight, and ran out into the living room. As I expected, and sincerely hoped, there was no dog, but I could still faintly hear that deep, peremptory bark. An angry warning bark.



The next day I searched the internet and discovered an article on “Exploding Head Syndrome” which described exactly what I was experiencing. Or almost—people with Exploding Head Syndrome don’t usually have dreams directly related to the loud noise. The clinical name seems unnecessarily ludicrous, but EHS has been defined in the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual* (of Mental Disorders), so it’s official. Now that I have a name for what’s been happening, I should feel better about it, right? It’s a Known Thing, and that’s a start.

Curiously, the word “start” is also a clinical term for that violent full-body twitch one sometimes experiences while falling asleep. The twitch is also called a hypnagogic jerk. But I digress.



I decided I had to do something, at least to check my sanity, so I looked for a shrink who was reputed to know about dreams.

I found Dr. Hälftegehirn in the yellow pages among specialists in a wider variety of psychological disorders than I had ever heard of. His receptionist said he had an opening on Thursday, so I spent the next three days worrying about what he might say. Was I losing my mind? Did I have a brain tumor?

On Thursday, I arrived early at his office in an outlying medical building and sat fidgeting in the waiting room for an hour. The nurse called me in at precisely 3:00 PM.

His office was sparse and bright; Dr. Hälftegehirn was, too.

I took a seat in the proffered easy chair, facing him. “I think I’m suffering from Exploding Head Syndrome.”

“Really? What makes you say that?”

“I looked up my symptoms on the internet. That’s what they call it.”

“Are you putting me on?”

“Of course not! Haven’t you heard of it?”

“Exploding Head Syndrome? Seriously?”

“Well, that’s the name. EHS. I guess it must be rare.”

“Yes, it sounds rare. Perhaps you should tell me about it.”

I knew he didn’t believe it was a real condition. Since I had found it in the *DSM V*, I began to seriously doubt his expertise. And his attitude seemed more combative than supportive. Was this part of his shrink technique?

“It’s a parasomnia,” I began.

He scowled at me. I figured I might be invading his territory, but I had no way of knowing, so I just told him my last few experiences, the knock, the slam, the bark.

“Well,” he said, “These are obviously not dreams.”

I nodded. “They’re too quick. But sometimes there’s a dream afterward.”

“Your head explodes but you remain asleep?”

“Apparently. I really don’t understand it. That’s why I’m here.”

“You realize your head isn’t actually exploding?”

“Obviously.”

“Well, there’s no psychological reason for these things to happen.”

“It’s not stress, or some buried anxiety?”

“No. Clearly, someone is messing with you.” He tilted his head as he said this, and looked me up and down. His tone was ambiguous, and I couldn’t decide if he was serious or not.

“Messing with me?”

“Obviously. What else could it be?”

“I don’t know! I thought you would.”

“Well, I’m telling you, someone is messing with you. Do you doubt my expertise?”

“Well, you said you’d never heard of EHS—”

“Listen,” he said, straightening up. “Dreams have context; these ‘explosions,’ as you call them, are isolated, and they fit just perfectly into your replay memory. Why do you suppose that is?” He paused dramatically. “So they’ll be the only thing you’re aware of when you wake up. It’s obviously deliberate.”

“That’s preposterous,” I said, my eyes wide. “Who would do that? Who even could?”

Dr. Hälftgehirn leaned back again. “No idea,” he said. “Not my field.”

“What exactly is ‘not your field’?”

“Messing with somebody’s head.”

“Well, can you recommend someone who does know about this? Someone who can help me?”

“Wouldn’t have the faintest.”

“Then how—”

He frowned. “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” I said. “Not at all.”

“Then I must leave it to you to work that out,” he stated, tonelessly. He stood up and held out his hand. “Nice to have met you.”

Reflexively I stood and we shook hands. “If you could please just—” I said.

“My secretary will bill you. No need to come back. Please pay promptly. Have a nice day.” He turned and went back to his desk.



For a week I pored over listings of psychologists, psychiatrists, analysts, counselors, advisers, and life-coaches. The variety of professions surprised me, and the diversity of methods was even greater, but none of them sounded like an expert in messing with someone. I was dying to ask Dr. Hälftegehirn what he meant by that, but I wasn’t about to intrude where I’m unwelcome.

The next morning, a large glass shattered on my kitchen floor. I had to get up and look for the shards, but of course there was nothing there. Later, I wandered the streets, hoping to find a bookstore that might hold some clues. I stopped at a lunch counter for coffee, and sat brooding.

I hadn’t noticed the old woman on the next stool until she turned to me and said, “You look-a for me.”

I turned. She was disheveled, but not alarmingly so. “I beg your pardon?”

“I know-a you,” she stated. “You look-a for me.”

“Not really,” I said.

“Oh yeah. Head boom. You look-a. I wait.”

Her confidence was disarmingly intense. I told myself there was nothing mystical going on; then I decided I’d better tell her, too.

“I’m not into ooga booga,” I said.

“No booga. Just talk.”

So I swiveled my stool toward her, and spilled out my whole story, from the knocks to Dr. Hälftagehirn to this morning’s broken glass. She listened intently, her eyes fixed unwaveringly on my mouth, her head bobbing in time to my speech, as if she could see the words coming out.

When I was done, she said, “He right. Messing with you, somebody.”

“Really?” *What did she know?*

“Or some *thing*.”

“Thing?”

“No booga. Messing, sure. Maybe not somebody.”

“What does that mean?”

“No mean. You got-a forget.”

“Forget what?”

“You forget all this business. Quick!”

“You mean just drop it? Don’t try to make it stop?”

“Ya, drop.”

“But why? What if it keeps getting worse?”

She bent closer. “Drop. You only hope,” she snapped. “Or it get real.”

Get real? What was she talking about?

She wagged her finger at me. “You keep think—splode get real.”

“You mean there will really be someone at the door?”

“You betch-a.”

“But that time it actually was a dream,” I said.

“No dream. Messing.” She raised her wag finger again, and cocked her head.

“Then what do I do? I have to do something!” I couldn’t believe I was seeking advice from this unknown, terse little old lady.

“No do! Forget do! Do go boom!” Her eyes were wide, and her body was shaking. I stared at her, and she gathered up her things, rotated clockwise, and slid off the stool. She stormed out of the luncheonette in a flurry of mismatched fabric.

My coffee was cold, and so was I.



The next day I awoke normally, and I wondered if somehow I was actually

going to get past this. I didn't think much more about my problem, and the next day was also silent.

Then, for four days running, I woke to a loud pop, a screen door slamming, something heavy falling, and a splintery chopping sound. I began to obsess. Throughout the day, my replay memory would deliver up one or another of the recent sounds, and my heart would jump. By the end of the day I was close to panic.

It was impossible to sleep. I dreaded hearing the next sound, knowing that whatever it was would wake me up startled, full of adrenalin. The nights were long and restless, and I couldn't get my mind off the knocks and bangs. Was the old lady right? Was obsessing on it going to make it more and more real? That was impossible, but obsessing obviously wouldn't help.

There was an old bottle of tranquilizers in the bathroom, left over from my air travel days, so I took a couple and fell into a deep sleep.

I woke late the next morning hung over and exhausted, in exactly the same position in the bed. I hadn't moved, and there hadn't been a sound or even a dream all night long. But it wasn't real sleep, and the day was worse than ever.

My daily routine had become erratic, and I resorted to playing loud music to drown out my replay memory. After a few days (punctuated by another dog bark, a huge metal bar, and a rat-trap snapping), I took to leaving the radio and the TV on all day, along with the music. I left the lights on. I surfed the web compulsively, hoping to stumble on something as unpredictable as the old lady. I was desperate and totally ready for ooga booga.

On Saturday, I woke to the sound of ticking, like an old alarm clock with a pair of bells on top. It reminded me of a cartoon with wires and sticks of dynamite. Then I realized it was *still ticking*—or was my replay memory just looping the echo? I pondered this for a minute, and then there was a loud click—