

## THE INTRUDER

I've been having the weirdest dreams lately. They started right after my grandma died. She and I were really close. After the funeral, I stopped by her apartment to grab a few things of sentimental value. She left me a ring, an antique doll, and a picture of us together which she put in a beautiful ornate frame. I hung it in the bedroom right when I got home and felt comforted by her smiling face.

Joe thought the doll was so creepy, and we fought about where to put it. He didn't want it in the living room because he didn't want to scare guests away. This doll had a sweet porcelain face and tight blonde curls. How scary could it be? It was in great condition despite being over eighty years old, and my grandma wanted me to have it so I wanted to put it where I could see it. Joe preferred to stuff the doll in the back of the closet so we fought it out. He can never say no to me, especially after I suffered the loss of my dear grandmother, so I won that argument. I set the doll next to our TV in the bedroom so she could watch over us as we slept.

Soon after, the dreams came. The first time it happened, I woke up in the middle of the night and saw a shadowy figure in the corner of the room. I was startled to say the least. Pure primal fear would be a better way to describe it. I sank into this deep dread from having a stranger standing in my bedroom in the middle of the night. I tried to get a better look to make out any details of who this person was, but the shadow was blurry and undefined. One second later I realized I was staring at a shadow on my wall like a crazy person at 3:30 in the morning so I fell back asleep and forgot all about my wild imagination.

The next time it happened, the same shadowy figure came to visit me, but this time it was standing at the foot of my bed. Its presence shook me out of a deep sleep and felt much more intense. If it wanted to get my attention, mission accomplished. I sat up so fast I almost gave myself whiplash. This time, it wasn't a shadow playing on the wall. It was standing there on its own free will. It had the shape of a person, but none of the detail I needed to assess what kind of danger I was in. I tried but failed to lock eyes to find out what it wanted. This thing didn't even have eyes as far as I could tell. When I leaned in to get a better look, there was nothing there. It disappeared without a word or a gesture.

The next morning, I told Joe what happened, and he insisted it had something to do with that doll. He said it was probably possessed or something. I thought he was crazy, but saw the coincidence since the dreams didn't start until after we got the doll. I wondered if it was my grandma coming to tell me she was okay, but if that were the case, I think I would have felt comforted. Instead, terror consumed me when the shadow appeared. This threatening presence didn't feel like my grandma. I can't explain how, but I could tell it was male. Weird right? Well, things got even weirder from there.

A few weeks later, it happened again. Out of the blue, I jolted awake at three in the morning. I don't know if a sound woke me initially or what, but I looked up and there was a man standing in the doorway of the bedroom. This time, I could see his features. This time, he was very much real. He had a thick beard and dark wavy hair that wasn't quite to his shoulders. His eyes were intense. It was as if they were glowing, yellow and filled with intent. His facial expression was serious. He'd come for a reason.

My heart pounded. My entire body tensed. I was sweating. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. What do you do when there's an intruder in your home? I closed my eyes, maybe to pretend I was sleeping. Maybe if he didn't realize I was awake, he would take whatever he wanted and leave me and Joe alone.

I opened my eyes a moment later to see what the intruder would do next. Was he barreling toward me with hands poised to wrap around my neck? No... he was gone! I didn't know if he had moved into the room or not, so I scanned the room to find him. I peered around to the right from the corners of my eyes, but I didn't see him. Joe was sleeping next to me, snoring lightly like he always does. In deep sleep, oblivious to the world around him.

I looked to the left of me, and there he was. The intruder was standing right over me! He was so close, I could feel his breath on my bare skin. His eyes bore into my soul, piercing down into my deepest darkest

fears.

I gasped with sheer and utter terror. A million thoughts spun through my head all at once. What was he going to do to me? Could I push him away and get to my phone in time to call 911? Would Joe wake up to save me or would this very tall and intimidating man throw Joe across the room like a rag doll? I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer.

When I opened my eyes, he was gone again. I couldn't believe it. He seemed so real. I turned over and grabbed onto Joe so tight, he actually woke up with a shudder. And he can sleep through anything!

Joe coughed and whispered to me. "You okay?"

"Oh my god, wake up!" I said in a whisper. I wasn't sure if the intruder was still in the house ready to pounce. Maybe he had gone to raid the closet of any jewelry he may find, or maybe he was already downstairs ransacking any electronics or things of value. He could take anything for all I cared. As long as he left Joe and me alone.

"There was a man," I managed to say through my quick shallow breathing.

Joe was like, "What?"

He sat up and turned on the light. I scanned the room for any evidence that this man actually existed. I hoped to God that he didn't, but I also was starting to feel like I was going crazy. How could I dream with such detail when I was clearly wide awake?

There wasn't a trace of any intruder in sight. Nothing had moved from my nightstand. The mirror in the corner was untouched. The coat rack in the room could have been mistaken for a person, but it was tucked back on Joe's side of the room, not where I clearly saw the man looming over me. Unless coat racks can walk, that wasn't it.

The bedroom door was wide open. When I first saw him it was only open half-way. Open just enough for the man's figure to peak through the moonlight from the hallway window.

I asked Joe if the door was open when we went to bed. I could have sworn we had closed it. Joe shrugged it off, he didn't remember and was ready to get back to his comfortable slumber.

"Probably," he said.

Joe told me not to worry, it was all a dream. He was most likely right. But still, I couldn't get back to sleep that night. My heart pounded in my chest. My adrenaline pumped through my body. My fight-or-flight response kicked into overdrive. I could have run a marathon that night in record time. I was shook!

Dead tired at work the next day, I cursed my imaginary intruder. I decided we needed to stop watching any dark dramas on TV before bed in case it left a residual streak on my psyche. Only comedies for us from now on, at least right before bed. I didn't want to mention it again to Joe because I knew he would blame the doll. I didn't want to put it in the back of the closet because I didn't want to forget about my grandma.

Well, a week or two flew by with no incident. I forgot all about the mystery man of my dreams – or should I say, nightmares. Life moves on, you know?

Joe had a big work trip coming up, he goes to D.C. twice a year for his job. He's usually only gone two or three days. No big deal. This time he left on a Thursday and was scheduled to come back on Saturday morning. One day of meetings and he'd be done. I don't love being in the house by myself when he's gone, but again, it's only a few days so I've gotten used to it.

Friday night rolls around, and I was dog tired from a crazy week at work. I went to bed pretty early, like ten o'clock. In a deep sleep, nothing could wake me. Or so I thought.

I don't even know what time it was, everything happened so fast. Amongst the commotion, I didn't have a split second to look at the clock or at least it didn't occur to me. I snapped out of sleep when I heard a noise coming from downstairs. It sounded like glass breaking. At first, I wondered if it was the cat. She loves putting her entire head in glasses of water we leave out on the counter. Maybe she drank from one and tipped it over. I had no idea if that was what happened so I tried to stay alert. I craned my neck to listen for any other clues as to what the noise was.

Silence.

I laid my head back on the pillow and thought I heard the crunch of footsteps on the carpet. It could have been my head hitting the pillow, so I craned my neck again to hear better. Sure enough, light footsteps

came up the stairs.

I froze. I thought to call out Joe's name. Maybe he came back from the trip early. But that seemed very unlikely, and if it was the intruder again, I didn't want to tip him off that I was alone in bed.

I looked up at the open bedroom door. Should I get up to close it? That could maybe buy me a few minutes to call the police, but again, it might tip him off to my existence. I grabbed my phone off my nightstand, poised and ready to call the cops, even with the door open. My phone dinged from being unplugged from the charger and for a moment, the footsteps stopped.

Damn it! Whoever it was now knew someone was home. Maybe that was a good thing? Maybe it would scare them from coming any further? Maybe it was the cat walking up toward the bedroom and I was being silly? God, I hoped it was the cat.

The footsteps continued toward the bedroom, brisker this time. I dialed 911, but before I could hit send, a man entered the room wearing a ski mask. He held a crowbar in his right hand. He came here for a purpose, and there was nothing I could do about it. It was dark, and he was wearing the mask so I couldn't make out any of his facial features, but I knew one thing for sure. This wasn't the phantom man from my dreams. This man was actually real. He slowly raised the crowbar and prepared to strike.

I didn't think I was going to make it out alive. Maybe all those dreams were a prophecy of this moment? Like I was psychic or something. Even so, I wasn't prepared and had no idea what to do, no clue how to protect myself.

Then the craziest thing happened. The shadowy man I had been dreaming about arrived. He legitimately appeared out of nowhere like a ghost or something. I was convinced he was really there because the man with the crowbar saw him, too. He flinched a little, he definitely wasn't expecting that. He even took a step backward, away from my dream intruder. Now I know he wasn't an intruder at all. He was my protector.

He ran toward the man with the crowbar and pushed him with a vengeance. The real intruder fell back and hit his head on the bedroom doorknob. The photo my grandmother gave me fell off the wall and slammed down to the ground. The glass from the frame cracked and shattered all over the carpet.

My protector lunged toward the man throwing punches, and the intruder held his arms and crowbar up to protect himself. He tried to swing the crowbar in retaliation, but he didn't have enough leverage to actually do anything with it.

I sat up in bed to get a closer look. My protector rained blows down upon the intruder's head. I could hear the smacking of skin on skin, muscle against muscle. The intruder let out a whimper. He went from a position of pure power down to the level of a slaughtered lamb. I couldn't believe it. I was saved!

My protector stopped his attack long enough for the intruder to get up and run the hell out of there. His footsteps stomped down the hallway and back down the stairs.

I looked up at my protector and saw his face through a tiny streak of moonlight peering out of a crack between our blackout curtains. Now I could tell he had a bushy red beard, thick wavy red hair, and beautiful green eyes. He had a small scar on one of his rosy cheeks.

I whispered a thank you to him. Actually, I don't know if I said it out loud or thought it, but either way, I know he heard me. He said nothing in return. And then faster than he came, he disappeared.

I sat in bed alone and in awe. Did I dream all of that? Usually my dreams aren't so detailed, but surely it couldn't be real. This might sound crazy, but I was too scared to get out of bed to investigate. I was paralyzed, I couldn't move. I sat there in bed, crying. They were a mix between tears of horror and tears of joy – because I was safe. In that moment I experienced a flood of every single emotion that has ever been felt in the history of mankind. I realized how much I take my existence for granted, and I'm more mindful of being alive than ever before.

Joe got home from the airport early the next morning. I would have picked him up, but his work pays for the taxi so we take advantage of that.

I woke up to the sound of the front door closing and Joe yelling out my favorite cliché. "Hi honey, I'm home!"

I must have fallen back asleep in the night because I was now awake again. My eyes looked puffy from crying and my head felt foggy from a lack of sleep, but hey, I was still alive.

I ran downstairs and wrapped Joe in the tightest bear hug my arms could handle.

I recounted the night's events in such a quick and jumbled manner that Joe comprehended none of it. The cat meowed, and we looked over toward our little kitty. She was in the living room and sure enough, the cat perched in front of a broken window. We both moved over to it so fast, I cut my foot on a little shard on the carpet.

We hurried to wipe up my blood and clean up the glass before we, or the cat, could step in it again. Once we'd cleaned the mess Joe was ready to hear the story again. I wasn't ready to re-tell it, but I managed to take a deep breath and recount the details almost as clear as I am talking to you now. I wasn't able to hold back my tears then though. It's so hard to recount an emotional story when it's still so raw.

Joe dropped a few f-bombs. He felt terrible that he had left me all alone, but I don't know if he believed me completely. It's a lot to take in. Still, Joe will always support me no matter what so he accepted my story as I provided it.

The moment I knew for sure I wasn't crazy was when I went back up to the bedroom. What did I find? A few splatters of blood on the back of the door – from when my protector beat the crap out of that guy.

Behind the door sat the picture frame my grandmother gave me. The glass was cracked and the back of the frame separated from the front. Joe cleaned up the glass before anyone got hurt.

Joe wanted to go to the police, but I felt weird recounting my tale to the authorities. Maybe they could find the guy who broke in based off his blood sample, but I'm not sure. I doubt he'll ever break into another house again after what happened that night. Now Joe is on this crazy kick to get the most advanced security system that exists. I joked that my protector is the best of the best, but Joe would prefer to rely on actual technology which makes sense.

I wondered who my protector was. Is he some ghost that lives with us? Maybe he was the previous owner of the house and he's stayed there to watch over me. Joe thought he came from my grandmother's doll. Maybe he's a real life vigilante who protects the local streets from trouble like Batman or something. Best neighborhood watch I've ever seen!

Well, the mystery of my protector's identity was soon solved. As I picked up the broken picture frame, I discovered another photograph behind the picture of my grandmother and me together. Behind it I saw a couple on their wedding day in a crisp black-and-white image. I recognized my grandmother as a young woman, and the man who stood beside her was none other than my protector. He had the same beard, the same wavy hair, the same scar on his cheek.

I asked my mom who it was and guess what? It was her father. My grandfather. He died before I was born so I had never met him. I'd never even heard about him despite being so close to my grandma. I needed to know more about my protector so I bombarded my mom with questions about him. What was he like? What did he do for a living? How did he die?

My mom tried to push off my questions for another day, but I insisted. I could tell it was hard for her to talk about him, but I needed answers so I wouldn't let her avoid the conversation. When pressed further, she finally opened up.

He was a tough guy to live with, apparently. An alcoholic with a mean temper. His death was as shocking as his life. He was out drinking at his favorite bar on St. Patrick's Day – my family is Irish, and well, he was an alcoholic. After hours of binge drinking, someone mugged him on his way home. Hit in the head with a bottle. Murdered in a dark alley. Now I understand why no one ever talked about him. How sad is that?

But clearly he still lives on in spirit. Maybe he felt compelled to make it up to his family. Maybe he took a vow to protect us in death to make up for the damage he'd done in life. And there's nothing sad about that.

I replaced the glass in my grandmother's picture frame and rehung it, proudly displaying my grandfather, my eternal protector.