

HORROR

Dreams Aren't Real

By Tori Schroeder

The room was pitch dark. Before my eyes all was still. Bathed in moonlight, the curtains radiated a faint glow by the window. Not a single incriminating creak could be heard from the floor of our aged home, and the door to the hall, slightly ajar, hung unmoving. For a moment I wondered if I had seen anything at all. My drumming heartbeat began to slow. I dared to close my eyes for a just second, and a shadow whipped by in my periphery.

I shrieked.

A moment later, lights flooded the room, and my parents rushed in. I was enveloped by coos of concern and warm embraces, and my fear melted away with each streaking tear.

“What was it?” I cried. “I know I saw something!”

“It was only Juno, Sierra. Nothing to be afraid of.” My father gestured to the dresser in the far corner of the room. Our cat was perched there, visible only by the small speckles of white around his paws, and by his unblinking yellow eyes. We'd only had the cat a few months and although he seemed harmless, he still gave me the creeps.

“It's alright, sweetie, you're safe,” my mother said. She took my hands and smiled reassuringly. “Dreams aren't real.”

That was far from the last time she told me that. For two years, I was tormented by frequent and recurring nightmares that left me scatter-brained at school and paranoid anytime after sunset. My parents consulted countless specialists in a desperate attempt to restore order to their lives and mine, until finally, we met Dr. Kelley.

A soft-spoken woman with salt-and-pepper hair, she was able

to alleviate my subconscious-dwelling maladies. After a series of consultations and a prescription of the experimental new medication Gespenstine, I made a full recovery. The only side-effect? I was unable to dream from that point forward.

Due to the largely untested nature of the medication, Dr. Kelley doubted I'd ever be able to dream again. To my parents that sounded like extra insurance, and with my traumatic experiences, I never *wanted* to dream again.

But then I did, unexpectedly, twenty years later.



With my bagel in hand and mouth gaping, I watched the neighbour, a scrawny man in his sixties wearing a blue polo shirt, amble towards his trash can. It was one of those old metal ones like you always hear about raccoons getting into, but though city regulations on waste management had changed, he had not. He opened the can and unceremoniously discarded his filthy deposit. Then he hesitated.

The old man examined the lid, glinting in the morning light, and scratched his bare chin three times. He flipped it around once, twice, then replaced it firmly and returned to his home.

As the back door clattered closed behind him, I inhaled sharply. Everything crystallized, and my head rung as if I was standing in a chiming bell tower. I had seen him perform exactly that sequence of actions once before. Except, in the dream I had last night, his shirt was orange.

I let my half-eaten breakfast fall by the wayside and scrambled to dial up my fiancé.

“Drew, you won’t believe this.”

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” He responded airily, obviously out of breath. I was definitely interrupting his workout, but this couldn’t wait.

“I’m fine, but I just watched the neighbour take out the trash *exactly* like he did in my dream, scratching his chin and everything. It was like déjà vu. The only difference was, he wore a *blue* shirt.”

There was a pause, and I could hear the energetic beat of some pop song playing in the gym distantly. “Oh, and in the dream...?”

“It was orange.” “Well that’s neat,” he chuckled, “maybe you’re becoming prophetic.”

“I—I don’t know. This is just so... *strange*. Is this what dreams are usually like?”

“Not at all. In my last one my teeth were falling out. But it’s interesting that it’s coming back to you like this.”

It was my turn to fall silent. Words escaped me and my mind flew. Was it possible? Like riding a bike, could my subconscious just pick it back up again?

“Sierra, you still there? Listen, I’m happy for you, but I really gotta get back to work. See you at home, alright?”

“—Okay, sorry. Talk to you then.”

He hung up. I was still lost in thought.

I had been completely content after Dr. Kelley’s treatment ended my nightmares. It felt like a veil had been lifted, and I could see things clearly again without the filter of constant fear. I did get the inkling a few times, though, that maybe I was missing out. Now my juvenile wishful thinking could be fulfilled.

On my way out to work, I hesitated in the doorway. There was another side to this coin. What if my resurfacing ability to dream brought on the nightmares again?

I tried to bolster myself with the facts: I was an adult, living a secure and generally satisfying life. I wouldn't be swayed by silly night terrors of decades past. But gooseflesh sprang up across my arms. A sudden wave of fear momentarily brought me right back to what I once was—a small, helpless child alone in the dark.

I swallowed the feeling down. On my commute, I practiced the deep breathing that Dr. Kelley taught me all those years ago to ensure that the memory stayed in the past, where it belonged.



For a few days no other dreams found me. I assumed it had been a fluke, and although I was disappointed, a deeper part of me was relieved. A week later, however, it happened again.

It was very disorienting, at first. I couldn't place where I was, or what was going on. Some part of me was familiar with the experience, of course, but after having my nights pass uneventfully for so long, to have something capturing my attention was unexpected.

Eventually, I became vaguely aware of my surroundings. I intrinsically identified the rows of cubicles and drab tan walls as my workplace--though the place was so nondescript that it could have been any number of different office buildings. The rhythmic taps of typing keyboards echoed from every direction, slightly too tinny.

Out of nowhere, a figure appeared beside me. Although most of his features were blurred, I could tell by the groomed mustache that it was one of my managers, Phil. He began to speak, but the sound was delayed and distorted as it reached my ears. "...wanted to thank you for all your help training the new interns and working those added shifts. To show our appreciation, the management team has decided to add a sizeable bonus to your next paycheck."

A delighted smile tugged at my cheeks. This was incredible.

Phil clapped a hand on my shoulder. “You’re a real asset, Sierra.”

By the time I awoke, I was still grinning. Any lingering concerns I had about dreaming again were gone. This was exactly the news I wanted to hear. For a few weeks I’d been taking on extra workloads and volunteering to help out in hopes of moving up the corporate ladder. Now if only I could find that same, sweet recognition in the waking world.

“Okay, you know I was kidding, right? About you being able to tell the future?” Drew sat across the dining table from me, shovelling cereal into his mouth. I had regaled him with my latest dream and hypothesis, and his brows were skewed skeptically. “I mean, anyone can dream about a neighbour, and lots of people want to succeed in their careers—a wishful dream doesn’t make it so. I just don’t think you should get your hopes up over nothing, is all.”

“But what if it’s not nothing?” Logic and order governed life; I had never doubted that before. It was always present, from the clockwork of my morning routine, to the meticulous way I filed paperwork at the tax company every day. It was the way of the world, but I also couldn’t deny the possibility, however small, of this convenient anomaly. For once, I was excited by the prospect of logic being proven wrong.

“Then I’ll be real surprised.”

I shot back a sour look. Why didn’t he ever take me seriously anymore?

Drew shrugged, and swallowed another spoonful “All right, if you’re so sure, go buy a lottery ticket or something. But don’t be disappointed if your dream doesn’t come true.”

When I got to the office that day, I sauntered past the series of cubicles feeling like I had an ace up my sleeve. My smile was smug as a child's on Christmas Eve, knowing exactly what presents they'd tear open come morning. In fact, this morning may as well have been the adult, mildly supernatural equivalent.

I sat down at my desk, logged into the computer, and joined in the keyboard-clicking chorus for a short while until someone sidled up. Naturally, Phil, right on schedule.

I turned around with a cheerful greeting on my lips, but before I could speak, I noticed his sour expression and drooping mustache.

"I need to talk to you."

"What's going on?" This was not good.

Phil scratched the back of his neck. "The management team has been discussing your recent... efforts. We appreciated you being more flexible with your schedule and helping to train the new hires, but Sierra, you *are* using the new operating system, right?"

I glanced at my computer screen and back. Was this a trick question? "Of course. I mean, I still run across functions I don't understand occasionally, but I always come to you or one of the other managers for clarification."

"See, I thought so, but then why did you train all the interns on the old system? We're supposed to be working our way out of that one, and the fact is, now somebody'll need to re-teach them. *And*, they'll be making the same mistakes as all the rest of us. Do you see how this is," he did a reverse circular motion with his fingers, "counter-intuitive?"

"I'm sorry Phil, I didn't mean—I'd be more than glad to teach them how to use the new system, if you'd give me the chance." I could feel heat rising to my ears and my palms growing clammy. How could I have not realized?

“No, that’s all right, we’ll have someone else handle it.”

My heart sank. This is not how it was supposed to go.

His gaze bounced from the floor to the walls as he continued, never lingering for long. “I really hate to be the one to tell you this, but management’s going to be keeping a closer eye on you for the next while to make sure you’re dancing to the right tune.” Phil must have understood my devastated expression because he quickly tacked on, “Don’t worry too much, but be aware of that, all right?”

Somehow, I found the wherewithal to nod.

“You’re an asset to this team, Sierra. Let’s keep it that way.” He patted my shoulder sympathetically and left.

Once he had gone, I turned back to my computer screen and held the edges of the particleboard desk until my world stopped spinning.



There was no question, I was dejected, and ashamed. By the end of the workday, however, a surmounting fear had risen and swallowed both feelings whole. There was something definitely not right with these new dreams. I couldn’t be certain, but what else could explain the similarity between what I saw in my sleep and what really happened. Coincidence? *Twice?* When I dreamt of orange, I saw blue, its opposite. Recognition at work became reprimanding... oh god, what would be next?

I couldn’t help it. I hung my coat up that evening and jumped at my own shadow.

I took a deep breath and focused on the facts. These “dreams” hadn’t scared me at all, that was a good sign. They couldn’t be considered nightmares by any standards, so it was irrational to worry that I would fall back into my old condition. I was cured. This was

probably just a weird, late-blooming side-effect of the medication. How could I have gotten my hopes up so much for that bonus at work?—I cringed remembering that whole situation. But those were my own honest mistakes, and I just need to make up for them. I hadn't been fired; I should count my blessings.

Despite myself, before bed that night, I gingerly opened my old medical report. Though Dr. Kelley had passed away a few years ago, I scribbled down the phone number of my old paediatric office on a sticky note. While Drew brushed his teeth, I tucked the page in the drawer of my nightstand. *I won't need it*, I told myself. Besides, if Drew saw how much this had shaken me, it would turn into just another disagreement—and neither of us needed that. But as I drifted into a dreamless slumber, my mother's old adage rang through my head with a new and ominous undertone. *Dreams aren't real.*



Bells rang, only three nights later. In my dream they tolled a proud proclamation for all to hear. I held my breath, and dreaded what visions were to come.

“Sierra, what’s wrong? You look positively radiant, and everyone’s here—you’re not having second thoughts, are you?” It was my mother’s voice, calm but concerned. “You know, even I had jitters on my big day.”

I began to see now: I stood in front of a tall mirror, my mother beside me. Her graying hair was curled, and mine pinned up in an intricate bun. A myriad of ivory sashes and delicate embroidery was draped around me, and a string of pearls lay at my neck. I felt constrained. The necklace suffocated me; the dress was an elegant straight jacket. “No.”

“Okay dear, I just worry about you,” she said.

I held her gaze for a moment, wanting so badly to believe that this could be real. But by seeing it, I couldn't help feeling that it was already compromised. "I'm worried too, mom."

"Don't be. We're all here for you, and it's going to be a perfect day."

"It won't be perfect," I replied, a bitter taste lingering in my mouth. "But maybe I can still salvage it."

I pushed past my mother but stopped outside of the building for an instant to drink in the scene. The procession was arranged with a tactful symmetry, all lavender decorations with scrolling silver accents. Familiar faces from Drew's family and mine intermingled between the greenery, and an awning was pitched by a picturesque pond. It was beautiful.

The truth was, Drew and I had been in a rough patch for a few months. Not long after he proposed and we started to make plans and send invitations, a rift began to widen between us. Disagreements cropped up like weeds, we spent less time together, and things hadn't felt quite right since. The wedding was supposed to fix all that, and smooth out the kinks of too much focus on work or the finances of organizing such a big event, or whatever it was. But now....

I scratched at the tight sleeves of my dress and glanced around. If what I saw in my dreams was the opposite of reality, then there was only one thing to do. The first sleeve ripped awkwardly, and I took a pair of garden shears to the other to save time. I marched towards the convergence of guests and snatched a champagne glass from one. Reaching the pond, I shattered it against a tree. All conversation stopped. All eyes were on me.

Dreams aren't real, so maybe I could save my wedding day by destroying it here. It was radical, but what choice did I have? I couldn't stand by and let this day be ruined by some curse or a cruel twist of fate.

With hot tears pricking my eyes, I yelled into the crowd. “The wedding’s cancelled! Everyone, go home! There’s nothing for you here now!”

Confusion rippled across the faces of everyone I loved and respected. I tore my necklace off and sent pearls tumbling through the garden. “Leave! It’s over!”

I watched a crashing wave of expressions—from shock to disappointment to anger to heartbreak—and screamed until my voice was hoarse and my body wracked with shuttering sobs. Tears flowed for what felt like days. I wept for all I feared losing, and for what I had done to ensure that I wouldn’t lose it.

Everyone else must have gone, because by the time I rose to my feet once more, only one person stood in the garden opposite me. Drew.

His hazel eyes glowed with betrayal. “You ruined everything.”

“I had to,” I rasped. I reached out to him, but he batted my hands away.

“I thought you loved me.” Drew turned his back on me and faded. The colours of his silver suit and sweeping sandy hair bled into the vibrant hues of the greenery, until the whole scene became a distorted mockery of previous splendour. It was an oil painting, the colours not yet dry, ravaged by a rainstorm.



I gasped for air. My first waking moments were spent clutching the blankets around me and stifling a sob. It was over. *But what had I done?*

After catching my breath, I ran to the kitchen. It was illuminated in the early morning light, and Drew was pouring a coffee with his back to me, just as he had been when...

“Drew.”

He turned around immediately.

“I need you.”

He left the coffee half-filled and embraced me.

I spent the next few minutes scrambling to explain what I'd just experienced, desperate for comfort, or at least validation that I wasn't as horrible a person as I felt.

“You dreamed about our wedding?”

I nodded and rubbed my temples. “Yes, but I had to do something. In all my other dreams the opposite kept happening, so I had to, I had to make sure....”

“You sabotaged it? In this dream?” I watched his brows furrow, and his jaw set.

“You have to understand, Drew, I would never do anything like that, really. I want our wedding to be—”

“Sierra,” he interrupted, “how am I supposed to understand that, from what you just said?”

“Don't you remember my other dreams? I needed to....” My voice broke.

His gaze hardened. “To ruin it.”

I barely spoke above a whisper. “I want the best for us.”

“How could you do that?” Drew began to pace the kitchen, running a hand through his hair. “They're just dreams, Sierra, but that was your *choice*. Did I encourage this too much? Are you under that much stress right now? Like, what the hell?”

I couldn't breathe. I was doing it all again. The wedding was supposed to fix everything.

“Maybe you need help or something, but this is... I can’t be around you right now. I need to go.” Drew’s hand reached for the door.

“Drew, I love you.”

“I thought you did.” And he was gone.



My logic lapsed. Completely eclipsed by raw emotion, it wasn’t until evening that I had gathered myself enough to make decisions. The first was to call my old paediatrician’s office. Even without Dr. Kelley, maybe something from my old files could point to a cause, or better yet, a cure. If Gespenstine was still available, another prescription of it could solve my problems. I explained all this to the office’s answering machine, since they had already closed down for the night. I hoped they were timely with responses.

At a loss for anything else, I called the nearest local psychiatrist. Thankfully, the secretary hadn’t left yet. Though I struggled to speak clearly, I was booked for an emergency appointment in two days.

It was a relief. Though my world had become a tumultuous sea, this was an anchor I could hold on to. So I held tight.



The last thing I remember was sitting at the dining table, nursing a cup of coffee in the wee hours of the morning. If I didn’t sleep, I wouldn’t dream, and if I didn’t dream... too late.

A fog must have washed over me, from which a shape began to appear. As it coalesced into a vaguely humanoid silhouette, a groggy realization began to bubble within me. I had to wake up. But before I could shake the grip of unconsciousness, I recognized the figure in the mist. I saw a face, my face, replete with lines that defined my brows, and jowls. My dark hair was greying, almost reminiscent of Dr. Kelley's salt-and-pepper.

I managed to shake myself awake and clambered from my seat at the table. The room was too bright, and my bleary eyes watered, squinting in the light. It was morning. I wobbled to the door, sore and shaky from exhaustion. I steadied myself against the wall and breathed deeply. I could do this.

My eyes shut for what I thought was only a moment, and a vision of my older self appeared again. She was walking along the sidewalk, maybe somewhere just outside of town. Despite a fatigue behind her eyes, she smiled contently.

No. I stood back up, clutching at the doorknob. I just had to get to my appointment, and then everything would be all right. It took two tries to slip on my shoes, but by that point a new thought floated up through the muddle of my mind: in the dream, I was walking as an older woman. They don't come true, Sierra. I strained to think critically. If I walked to the appointment, I might not live long enough to go grey. Besides, it would take longer on foot, and that meant more opportunities for things to go wrong. It'd be much better to drive there—faster, and therefore safer. My fingers wrapped around the car keys.

The Toyota's engine revved. While the noise made my head pulse, I could use it to keep myself focused. This would be fine. I pulled out of the driveway, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

I managed to make it most of the way there without stopping. Each passing street brought me closer to finding some answers, to reaching help. No more fear, no more games from my own malicious dreams. Then maybe I could start piecing my life back together.

At the second to last intersection, I was caught at a red light. *Stay awake!* I started tapping my feet and stretching out my arms. As long as my eyes stayed wide open, I'd get there.

Except, I had to blink. When I did, I tried instinctively to shake myself out of it, but my eyelids felt heavy and my limbs immovable. It was the honking from behind me that jolted me awake, but an image lingered before I could block it out. I saw the colour green.

The light was green; maybe I was just seeing the colour ahead of me. I sped forward, regardless. I rounded the corner and the squat building came into view. The only thing keeping me from my salvation was the final approaching streetlight, this one yellow. I took a deep breath and curled my fingers around the wheel. As it turned red, I didn't stop.

Horns blared as I barrelled through the intersection, but I wasn't listening. A single thing distracted me from my destination ahead, though. The last thing I remember seeing was the bright green pickup truck that sent me careening out of control.