

Evelyn Carson sat at her desk, leaning back in her leather chair, propping up her chin with her hand as she braced her elbow on the chair arm. She had been gazing out the office window that overlooked a small, ocean-front beach below for at least an hour. Her thoughts wandered. The day was sunny and warm, but slightly humid—perfect for procrastinating and daydreaming. Soft crashes of the tide on the sand mesmerized her.

Evelyn jolted from her daze as the front porch screen door slammed against its wooden frame. Her desk chair scraped across the floor as she stood when she decided to go down the hall towards the front of her small cottage to investigate. The wind was too calm to be the culprit.

She stepped out onto the porch, closing the creaky door slowly behind her, and stepped down onto a short flight of stairs that lead to a paved walkway, destined for the mailbox. She didn't know whether the mail had arrived, but desperately needed a change of scenery.

She breathed in deep, savoring the thick, salty air as she admired the two palm trees lining either side of the walkway. As she rounded the corner at the edge of the white picket fence that lined the expanse of the small property set back from the main road, she waved at her older neighbor, Alice. As they both opened their mailboxes, Alice called out to her. The two exchanged a few social pleasantries and then smiled and waved each other off as they made their way back to their homes.

The springs of the porch door screeched as Evelyn opened it, letting it slam behind her as she reentered and walked to the back of the cottage. Instead of turning right, into her office, she turned left into the kitchen to prepare an after-school snack for her daughter. Being an active eight-year-old, Evelyn knew Autumn would be ravenous the minute she skipped through the house. After setting up Autumn's plate, Evelyn poured herself a glass of white wine and sat down on a stool at the island in the center of the kitchen and waited.

Halfway through her wine, Evelyn heard the familiar slow creak and sudden slam, followed by a thud from Autumn's backpack being dropped in the entryway. Autumn ran into the kitchen, climbed up on a stool next to her mom and began devouring her snack. Evelyn let her get a few bites in before she asked her about her day. She enjoyed hearing her daughter's stories on the trials, triumphs and tribulations of the second grade.

Evelyn's husband, Alan, had come home just as she was setting the table for dinner. He kissed his girls on the forehead and settled in his designated spot at the dinner table, tucked into a nook at the back of the kitchen. Evelyn and Alan were a typical middle aged couple, stuck in the

rut of monotonous and predictable routines. They made small talk about their day's experience, Autumn repeated a shorter version of hers to her father and then moved on to the next phase of the evening as the sun dipped—preparing for tomorrow and tucking Autumn into bed.

Autumn's room, over-flowing with toys she hadn't managed to pick up, was adjacent to Alan and Evelyn's, which was straight up a narrow stairway along the wall to the right of the front porch door. Each bedroom faced the front of the cottage and had large, double-paned windows that looked out onto front yard—perfect for viewing the two palm trees and neglected front landscaped foliage.

After reading Autumn a bedtime story, Evelyn snuggled up to her for a few minutes, gave her a final kiss goodnight and turned out the light before heading back down to work. Most of the house was dark and quiet now. Evelyn enjoyed it. She switched on a light at the edge of her desk and propped open one of the windows to let in the ocean breeze.

Evelyn plopped into her desk chair and tapped on her keyboard. The computer screen came to life, illuminating Evelyn's face with a soft glow. She began typing with focused control that alluded her all afternoon. Evelyn continued to work well after midnight and then quietly, stepping up the stairs on the pads of her bare feet, crept upstairs. Careful not to wake Alan, she crawled into bed and settled into a comfortable spot and drifted off to sleep.

“Momma?” a soft little voice called.

“Momma?” the voice repeated.

Autumn stood at the side of her parent's bed with her small hand wrapped around her mother's arm, shaking it softly until Evelyn's eyes opened.

“What is it?” Evelyn asked, mid yawn, as she glanced over at the alarm clock on the night stand next to her bed. It was 1:00 a.m.

“I'm scared. Can I sleep you with?”

Too drowsy to argue, Evelyn scooped her up and laid her between she and Alan, pulling the covers back over them, and closed her heavy eyelids. Evelyn hadn't been asleep long when she felt a shudder. She urged her eyes to open, thinking Autumn had crawled out of bed to go to the bathroom and needed help back into her spot. Evelyn tossed and turned. Her eyes felt cemented shut.

Slowly her lids began to lift. As her vision cleared, a crippling fear immobilized her body. An old Victorian-looking woman, in a high-necked, black-lace mourning dress hovered

above, glaring down at her. The woman's hair was dark, with clusters of silver streaks cascading across the sides of her loosely bound bun.

Evelyn's heart seemed to pound at her tightening chest like a fist against a slab of raw beef. All she could do was stare back at the wrinkled old woman. Minutes felt like hours as she struggled to break free. From the corner of her eye she could see Alan and Autumn still sleeping soundly. The woman pursed her lips and glared at her with an anger that seemed to pour from the whites of her dull, gray eyes.

Evelyn's breathing became quick and shallow. Fear welled up into terror the more she struggled to mobilize her limbs. She tried to tell herself it was just a dream. She tried turn her head away from the woman's gaze or think about something more pleasant.

*What do you want?* she thought, still struggling to wake herself from the nightmare.

The old woman's arms reached out for her. Evelyn sat bolt upright as a blood curdling scream emerged from her throat.

Alan and Autumn startled awake, but Evelyn dismissed her alarming screech as nothing more than the effect of a nightmare and urged them to lay back down to sleep. It was 3:00 a.m. and everyone would need up and ready in a few hours.

Morning seemed to come far too early. Alan had risen with the morning alarm and immediately hopped into the shower. It was his morning wake-up ritual. Evelyn, still in her pajamas, went to Autumn's room to help her daughter pick out clothes for school. She shivered and walked over to close Autumn's window.

*Hmmm, that's strange,* she thought, realizing Autumn's it was already shut. She quickly dismissed the thought and went on with getting her daughter ready for school. As she walked down the stairs to the kitchen, brewing coffee wafting through the air hit her nostrils.

"You don't drink coffee," she hollered down the hall at Alan who had already made his way to the kitchen for breakfast.

"What are you talking about?" he hollered back.

"The coffee. Why are you making coffee?"

Evelyn rounded the corner into the kitchen. Alan was sitting at the island with his usual class of orange juice and a bagel slathered with cream cheese. He looked perplexed. Evelyn was stunned.

"I swear I smelled freshly brewed coffee. You didn't make any?"

They both glanced across the kitchen to the one-cup coffee maker that was tucked away in the corner on the counter next to the stove. It hadn't been used in months. They glanced back at each other and shrugged in unison and continued with their routine. Alan went to work, Evelyn put Autumn on the bus to school, waved goodbye and returned to her home office to work and then they would repeat the same afternoon routine until Evelyn returned to her office in the evening.

At long last, Evelyn sat straight and tall in her cushy leather chair and leaned in to view her monitor. With Alan and Autumn fast asleep upstairs, the only audible sounds were the ocean lapping upon the beach, the cool breeze rustling the curtains and ruffling loose papers on her desk. Time seemed to evaporate as she typed.

"Evelyn," a woman's voice whispered.

Evelyn stopped typing to listen more carefully, uncertain whether she heard anything at all.

"Evelyn," the voice whispered again.

Evelyn turned her head in the voice's direction, listening intently. When she found no cause, she chalked it up to her imagination playing tricks on her. It was very late, after all. She was just creeping herself out, she told herself. But the whispers grew louder and more agitated when she ignored them, making it difficult for Evelyn to focus on her work.

The windowsill creaked. Evelyn peered over her reading glasses, away from her computer, at the window. It creaked again. As she stared, the curtains heaved in and out like they were breathing. It's windier tonight, she told herself but she could not stop staring. After the third wave from the curtains, Evelyn braced for impact as if expected something to jump out.

Evelyn leapt out of her seat, nearly knocking it off its casters, "Okay, that's it!" She threw her hands into the air, shut the lights out and hurried out of her office.

Despite feeling as if she had only been in her office for a few minutes, a quick glance at her alarm as she crawled into bed revealed she had been downstairs for nearly four hours. Moments later, Autumn appeared at the side of her bed, claiming to have had a nightmare. Evelyn breathed a deep, heavy sigh. Again, she was too tired to argue. She pulled Autumn in, kissed her forehead softly and closed her heavy eyes.

Evelyn hadn't been asleep long before she awakened from tossing and turning. She lay on her back staring up at the ceiling in frustration. She contorted her hips, twisting and cracking her spine, hoping to get comfortable again.

A sudden weight fell upon her shoulders. Each felt as though it were being cupped by a pair of hands pinning her into the mattress. Evelyn closed her eyes and struggled against it but her entire upper body was unable to move. The grip tightened. Fear swelled inside her belly like a thousand fluttering butterflies frantically trying to escape.

She turned her head from one side to the other, leaning toward the edge of the bed. She told herself it was just a nightmare and that changing the position of her head would somehow shift the lucidity of the dream and release the weight. Exhausted from her struggle, Evelyn slowly opened her eyes. She screamed.

The shrill cries of his frightened wife jarred Alan awake. He leaned over to comfort her, realizing she was shaking uncontrollably. Evelyn sat forward with her knees to her chest, clutching her pillow.

"What's going on?" Alan asked softly.

"I had a nightmare too," Autumn said, rubbing her tiny hands across Evelyn's back.

Evelyn let out a heavy sigh, "I saw an old man in a pair of overalls crouched down next to my side of the bed. He looked like a very old and tired farmer. He was angry. And, he was screaming at me, but no sound came out. His mouth was...sort of long and warped," she blurted.

"That sounds creepy," Alan said.

"It was weird. I felt this weight on my chest like someone was holding me down and then I saw him. Everything was in black and white," she said, still trying to analyze the experience, "It seemed like the old man was trying to tell me something but I just couldn't hear what he was saying."

"Both you and Autumn had bad dreams tonight. That's all it was. I'll tuck Autumn back into her own bed. You lay down and try to relax. It was just a nightmare, nothing else," he said as he scooped Autumn up into his arms and carried her back into her own bedroom.

Alan's breath clung to the air in Autumn's room. His eyebrows scrunched and his mouth slid to the side, noticing the chill. He laid Autumn down and pulled the blankets up around her. Alan didn't understand why her room was always, regardless of the time of year, the coldest room in the house. He had always meant check it out but discovery project was always placed on

the back burner. Alan leaned in and gently brushed Autumn's bangs away from her forehead as he swooped in for a kiss.

"It was just a bad dream," he said in a deep, soothing voice. Autumn just nodded as he placed her favorite stuffed animal in the crook of her arm and patted her on the head before he turned and went back to his own room.

"I'm afraid to even close my eyes," Evelyn admitted to Alan as he closed the door behind him, "This isn't the first experience."

Alan crawled back into bed and put his arm around her as she explained the black-laced Victorian woman that hovered above their bed the night before. He was concerned, but didn't want to overact, especially with how unsettled his wife was.

Just as Evelyn calmed down, they heard the faint sound of footsteps in the hallway as a shadow wisped passed the underside of their closed bedroom door. Evelyn figured it was Autumn getting up to use the bathroom. They listened intently but didn't hear the bathroom door open or close. Evelyn's eyes widened as she looked at Alan before getting up and check. She opened the door to find Autumn just standing there.

"Momma?" she looked up at her mother.

"What is it Autumn?"

"I'm scared. There's something in my room," she said, looking down at the floor as she pointed with one hand and clutched her favorite stuffed animal in the other.

Still thoroughly freaked out by her own nightmare, and utterly exhausted, Evelyn brought Autumn back into their bed for the night. As they snuggled back under the covers Evelyn glanced over at her alarm clock. It was 3:00 a.m.

Morning for the family seemed to arrive extra early. Alan was already downstairs, having completed his morning ritual, while Evelyn and Autumn dragged their feet groggily as they dressed for the day and went downstairs to meet Alan in the kitchen. Evelyn quietly prepared Autumn's cereal bowl, placing it at her spot on the island. Alan packed up his work materials, kissed each of his ladies on the cheek and headed out the door for work. The front porch door slammed. Evelyn's body tensed.

Weary from the long night, she slumped down at the island next to Autumn and propped her heavy head up with her hand, bracing herself with her elbow. Remembering Autumn had claimed something was in her room, Evelyn decided to have Autumn draw what she saw. She

had hoped that by asking her to perform this task it would draw out whatever fear Autumn had and she would be able to let it go. But Evelyn still couldn't fathom why no one seemed to have regular nightmares until she did and it seemed worse when Autumn slept in their room.

Autumn was content with drawing and coloring. She enjoyed the task her mother had given to her and was excited to show her the artwork, but Evelyn was perplexed. Autumn had drawn a very good depiction of her room and the armoire that sat in the far corner, with a tall, black, cat-like figure hiding behind it.

"Why does this look like a cat?" Evelyn asked.

Autumn shrugged. A shiver ran up Evelyn's spine. The drawing was the creepiest artwork she had ever seen her daughter draw, but decided that perhaps her child's imagination was the culprit and decisively dismissed it. Autumn's eyes sank, she knew her mother didn't believe her. She also knew there wasn't much she could do to convince her either. All Autumn knew was that she was absolutely terrified at night and hated sleeping in her room. Her mother's suggestions to cuddle with her stuffed animals or dolls, or to hide under the covers when she felt scared, provided little comfort.

Evelyn put Autumn on the bus to school as usual. She waved at her neighbor, Alice, who was working in her flower beds, as she turned to head back to her office.

Evelyn sat down at her desk and stared at her computer wondering if she should do some research about this collective nightmare within her family unit. Her lips thinned out and tightened as she bit her lower lip.

*What would the neighbors think?* She wondered as she even considered the possibility of contacting a paranormal researcher. She changed her mind and began typing on the keyboard, returning to the novel she had been attempting to write for months.

With each keystroke, she began to feel as though she were being watched or that someone was standing behind her. She stopped typing and contorted her neck to see what was causing the air displacement around her. Nothing. Feeling deeply engrossed into her story she returned her gaze to her computer screen and began to type again, until she suddenly sat frozen, unable to type and unable to move. The old Victorian woman hovered above her—the stiff, pointy shoulders of the dress looked just like the ears of a cat. With one long hard gaze into the woman's dead eyes, she suddenly she knew what the old lady wanted.

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Alice, Evelyn's next door neighbor, and her husband Jerry, both long since retired, met up with a few friends down the street at the local coffee shop. It was their morning ritual. The pair had been the first to arrive and were halfway through their first cup of French roast before the rest of their troupe showed up.

"What's this I hear about the excitement you had a couple weeks ago down your block?" a short gray-haired woman asked Alice and Jerry.

Shaking her head, still dismayed, Alice replied, "Are you referring to our neighbor's death?"

"I hadn't heard. I knew there were a bunch of lights and sirens." the lady replied, stirring her coffee.

"What a shame, she was a nice girl too," Jerry replied, "Always seemed to have a smile for everyone."

"Do you know what happened?" another, older man asked.

"Well, as I hear it, she had moved from here to write," Jerry began.

"She was a writer?" the gray-haired woman interrupted.

"Apparently," Jerry affirmed as the others settled into listening to his story, "Anyway, apparently, she was a fairly well-known author. I'd never heard of her, but she had quite the collection of published books—mostly horror novels, from what I've been told. A few weeks ago, Alice and I noticed mail overflowing in her mailbox and she never seemed to pick up packages at the door.

"Never a good sign," another older man interjected.

"Well, Alice and I were a bit concerned so we contacted the authorities to check on her. Before we knew it, the ambulance arrived, followed by the sheriff."

"What happened?" the gray-haired woman asked, anticipating a dramatic ending.

"They found that poor woman in her office, staring up at the ceiling with her eyes wide open—dead," Alice replied.

The group gasped.

"Oh dear," another woman said, "Do they know the cause?"

"I ran into the corner at the grocery the other day. He said the autopsy came back as if fear killed her. Fear!" Jerry said with extra dramatic flair.

"Fear?" The gray-haired woman screeched.

“Yep. Fear,” Jerry confirmed.

“How does someone sitting in an office in their own home die of fear?”

“I don’t know,” Jerry continued, “The coroner said the document opened on her computer at the time was one of her new novels. It was like she died in the middle of typing. Maybe it was so terrifying she literally scared herself to death,” Jerry speculated, “it could happen.”

“Did she have family? How are they taking it?” the other older man asked.

“She lived in that cottage by herself, as far as I knew. I never saw anyone else ever come and go,” Alice said.

“Maybe it’s just that house,” the gray-haired woman said, “no one seems to live there very long. Didn’t the last owner put it up for sale after only a month?”

“Yes, I have wondered,” Jerry said, looking over at Alice wondering if she knew more than she admitted.

“Such a shame. I would have liked to have read her novel,” Alice said, pursing her lips and squinting her eyes at Jerry as she tucked strands of gray streaks behind her ear and drained the last drop of coffee from her mug.