

The Man in the Dark: Looking into Sleep Paralysis

By [Marie DeFreitas](#) • SCAD Contributor • [Lifestyle](#) February 24, 2018 at 11:30pm



In the darkness of my room I can feel myself falling, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness, drifting in and out as I try to sleep. As it happens I'm almost sure I'm still awake. My eyes are open, or I think they are, but I can feel I'm not alone. I face the wall and feel someone behind me, standing, leering, staring. I don't need to face them to know how big they are, they're peering over my shoulder. My heart races and I feel my breath suffocating under the panic. I want nothing more than to sink deeper and deeper into the safety of the mattress. The room is now an abyss where everything is out of my control. A space of darkness that holds everything unfamiliar. And yet this feeling is all too familiar.

There's a man in the dark. He takes a few different shapes, some nights he is nine feet tall and like a shadow standing in the corner across from me. But other nights he is different. Now he is crouched and crawling towards my bedside. His hair is black and long, draping on the floor as he moves. His skin is grey and infected. He crawls nearer and waves his head in an "S" shaped motion while he laughs hysterically with a blackened mouth and long rotting teeth. The weight of the darkness sits on my chest, and I can feel my breaths getting shorter. My body is stiff, paralyzed in my fear. But just as he gets close enough to lay an anorexic hand on my face, and in the moment I'm sure I will suffocate, he vanishes. My body is free but I'm left in the aftermath of a chaos that didn't really happen. I should go back to sleep, it wasn't real.

This paralyzing fear accompanied by vivid hallucinations has been given the term *sleep paralysis*. It's essentially your body going into REM sleep before your brain, making your muscles stiff and immobile. It happens just before you fall asleep, or just as you're waking up and it is very common. Various studies have shown that anywhere between twenty to sixty percent of people experience sleep paralysis at least once on their lifetime. But there is a much smaller percentage, about five percent, who experience these hallucinations. Unfortunately I've consistently have been one who has experienced this, where it feels as if you have momentarily descended into an episode of psychosis, drifting slightly away from reality. But when you wake up, you're back. Left with a memory that hangs on your mind, threatening to reappear each night.

According to the American Sleep Association "Sleep hallucinations may not need treatment, as they often occur infrequently and do not affect sleep quality," but I beg to differ. Seeing this figure, this man in the dark, would happen several times in a night, and for awhile, almost every other night. I would sit up in my bed and wait until sunrise to go to sleep. I thought I was only safe in the embrace of dawn. It made sleeping in the same bed with any significant other difficult, and quite honestly, embarrassing. I was embarrassed that I was more often than not, too afraid to even close my eyes again for the night.

While sleep specialists have deemed that the sleep paralysis may be linked to some factors such as stress, anxiety, use of drugs or alcohol, and sleep deprivation, there is no truly known cause that could tell me why I was seeing this man in the dark. And there is no "cure" per se, other than getting a good night's sleep. But I found that rather difficult when I was too afraid to close my eyes. And this would create what would seem like an endless cycle of sleep deprivation, worsening the frequency of my nightly visitor.

As I searched for explanations to the man I was seeing in the dark, I found that sleep paralysis Got it! concept. v This website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you consent to HerCampus.com's usage of cookies and similar technologies. [Learn more](#). The Sleep Paralysis Project website - as you can imagine - has written extensively about it's origins. Here I found that records of these attacks date as far back as 400 BCE in a Chinese book on dreams. Numerous accounts have popped up over time, from Greek doctors in the second century, to Dutch physicians in the

1600's, to the famous artworks such as Henry Fuseli's painting titled *The Nightmare* (1781), and Francisco Goya's etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1797). Back then accounts of sleep paralysis were oftentimes regarded merely as nightmares. I can say, in regards to what we now think of as nightmare, this is much, much worse. However, this makes sense given the original concept of a nightmare. The definition of a nightmare comes from the old english word "mare", which was meant a female evil spirit or demon that lies upon the chests of sleepers and suffocates them.

Seeing a sinister female presence in the night couldn't just be happening for no reason, people thought. So around 1692 it led to women being accused of witchcraft and causing this terrifying sleeping experience for people during the Salem Witch Trials. Owen Davies, a British historian and professor of social history at the University of Hertfordshire, writes consistently about this subject. His paper *The Nightmare Experience: Sleep Paralysis, and Witchcraft Accusations* discusses dozens of examples of this that happened in many more places than just Salem.

Witches were only one of the many alternative interpretations of sleep paralysis throughout history. Farther back in other cultures, sleep paralysis was thought to surely be the work of demons or an evil spirit. Countries like Africa, East Asia, Mexico, China and Newfoundland all have a history of assuming sleep paralysis was caused by some perverted demon. A demon seemed like a strong term for what I saw in the night. I was sure I never saw anything that wasn't human, but that didn't make it any less terrifying. But many people in their accounts say they've also seen demons and animals. Another more recent interpretation, was the experience being associated with alien abduction. Many alien abductees recounted the exact feelings of sleep paralysis right before they thought they were abducted. Whether or not you believe in such things, the fact that sleep paralysis was associated with things like witches, aliens and demons says a lot.

I guess if sleep paralysis has the power to make people think that they are being messed with by witches, or aliens or demons, then I guess it's quite okay to just admit that it's terrifying. If you've ever experienced this, you know how scary, weird, or just simply annoying it can be.

But not to worry, there are many ways to aid and ease the weirdness of this sleep phenomenon. Check out some of them here:

<https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/sleep-paralysis#1>

<http://dreamstudies.org/2010/04/29/9-ways-to-wake-up-from-sleep-paralysis/>

<http://www.thesleepparalysisproject.org/about-sleep-paralysis/treatment/>

Tagged:

[sleep paralysis](#)

[Sleeping](#)

[history](#)

[origins](#)

[Marie DeFreitas \(SCAD\)](#)

[Marie DeFreitas \(SCAD\)](#)

Currently in her third year at the Savannah College of Art & Design, Marie is pursuing a double major in Illustration and Writing, as well as a minor in Photography. She loves Stephen King, snacking on croutons and impulse buying in thrift shops.

Got it!

- This website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you consent to Her Campus.com's usage of cookies and similar technologies. [Learn more.](#)
- [Humxix of UCT - Abdud-Dayyan Badrodeen](#)

[Culture](#)

- [Evil Eye Jewelry: There's More to It Than Meets the "Eye"](#)

[Culture](#)

- [Things That Will Help Reset Your Mind](#)

[Wellness](#)

Let's Hang

Not another boring AF newsletter.

Trending

1. [The Ultimate Guide To Productivity](#)
2. [BUY IT NOW OR CRY LATER: Self-Care Must Haves](#)
3. [The Study Space For Every Zodiac Sign](#)
4. [How To Check-In On The Health Of Your Relationship](#)
5. [Overtime & Overtired: 8 Tips for Staying Healthy When You're Working 60+ Hours a Week](#)

User Login

E-mail or username *

Password *

Remember me

- [Create new account](#)
- [Request new password](#)

This website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website, you consent to HerCampus.com's usage of cookies and similar technologies. [Learn more.](#)