

A Scary Story

It was the time of the calamity. Many, many people got sick. A proportion of them died. Jonah's wife Lottie got sick, and didn't die. In fact, she breezed through it. Then Jonah got sick. He didn't breeze through it.

It was about nightmares, for Jonah. The fever was bad, but the nightmares it engendered were of a different order of magnitude: jerky, charred, vivid things, driven by unmastered compulsions, like an engine running out of control. They started long before he lost consciousness at night, as if the living world folded, with a clever origami twist, and transformed into something worse.

Jonah roamed in his fever dreams. He visited sick wards and marshes and crypts. He visited lonely roads across inhospitable terrain. The visions were horror-movie slick, informed and textured by a lifetime's consumption of Gothic imagery. They were, frankly, cheesy.

He dreamed of teenagers in distress; pock-faced killers with wicked smiles; a corpse bride and groom, all done up in formal tatters.

A corpse bride and groom! It was embarrassing how on-the-nose his subconscious narration could be. Just like the songs that got stuck in his head. Most of the time it was one fragment from a minor track by an off-kilter country-western band, a song whose name Jonah couldn't remember. Five notes, crooned in an interrupted glissando: "I've... got a fever."

In the lucid daylight hours, Lottie cared for him. She sponged him down and took his temperature and helped him get where he needed to be. He lived off honey dissolved in water.

After a few days, he could smell his own digestive system. There was a foul sweetness rising, which he thought was the honey, fermenting. But he wondered later about fasting, about the breaking down of fats, and then muscle, as an ancient energy sacrifice. Jonah was shrinking. He lost his gut, his butt, his tone. No surface felt comfortable to rest on; everything pressed a bone.

At night, voices coalesced out of the ringing in his ears. Roars and whispers all at once, modulated by the rhythm of his heartbeat, always too fast and sometimes incredibly loud, BOOMing and BOOMing like something trying to break through a vital membrane.

One night he heard distinctly a voice telling him he would die. The next day he discussed his terrors with Lottie. He wanted her to make him feel all better. She did make him feel better - but not *all* better. How much comfort, Jonah asked, can any person give another person? There are limits.

"You're not going to die," Lottie told him.

"I believe you," he said.

"You don't believe me."

"I want to believe you, but I'm scared."

"You're not going to die. You've got the flu. It's scary. It's always scary. But I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I've got you."

He looked at Lottie. He filled his vision with her face. He had never loved her more. Never felt so grateful.

She was looking at her phone. She sighed.

"I hate the way people talk about illness," she said. "I hate the language of fighting and struggling and staying strong. As if everybody who gets a disease is in a duel with that disease, literally fighting it, and they only get sicker, or die, because they didn't *fight* well enough. Like your body and the disease and how they interact is something you can control with your will. But you can't control it like that. It's chance. It's a genetic lottery. And every time you say someone survived a disease because they were a 'fighter', you dishonour all the people who didn't survive, through no fault of their own, because the lottery decreed it."

"That's not very comforting," Jonah said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. What I'm trying to say is, this isn't a judgement on you. It isn't a punishment. What worries me is that you're taking it personally, you're making it about *you*, and it isn't. It's a virus."

*

It wasn't about him. But it kept on being about him. In lucid hours he started vividly remembering the house in which he spent his childhood. He remembered the narrow

kitchen, upon whose countertops he would lever his arms and swing his legs like a pendulum. He remembered the flavour of lemon squash. He saw a view of the moors. An old car. He remembered his parents, younger than he was now, their hair thick and dark.

He felt tenderness. He was astonished at the gift of his existence. Such a long, strange life. It wasn't flashing before his eyes. It was folding in on itself.

Nightmares again. He toured a dense mathematical construct on some subhuman strata of consciousness. Ever-iterating geometries, expressing dread laws. An endless contraction into infinitesimally shrinking spaces. Voices providing instructions; voices counting up and down. He started using a night light again; something he hadn't done since he was a child.

One morning Jonah thought about fear. It was a corrosive thing. A phrase came to him from his memory: fear eats the soul. It was the title of a film, about something else entirely. Not about him. Yet it resonated: Fear eats the soul.

Because it's sickness that kills us, not death. We don't just grow old and die. We grow old, and fall sick, and suffer, and end. And what dreams will meet you in that ultimate sickness?

Jonah feared that his would always be the same nightmares. He understood his latest maths dream to be a reiteration of another one from his childhood, when he had fallen and his mother had tended to him with lemon and ginger, tucked him into bed *as*

snug as a bug in a rug, and his fever had burned out in one strange night. He recognised the signature of the dream. It had originally mapped onto a two-dimensional plane, as simple as a piece of graph paper; and yet here it was again, thirty years older, grown labyrinthine and hoary.

Considering this nasty possibility led Jonah to imagine himself as a healthy man again, standing on what seemed like solid ground. The garden outside, perhaps. But beneath the surface was a spiraling morass of slimy things. Always there. Crumpling in on themselves, corrugating, but never ending. Waiting to rise.

It was an ancient fear. It recalled Saxon boasts and terrors: simple tales of Wyrms and Serpents, reinforcing the meaning and value of bravery in a cosmos that offered no hope. Jonah tried to remember where he'd read that phrase. He couldn't.

Who chooses the dreams to which we are subject? Do they go away because we fight them? Or is it just a genetic lottery? Some of us, Jonah thought, are born brave. Others, cowards.

As the morning burned on, Coward Jonah drifted in realms of mathematics. Suddenly there reared before him the concept of the square root, and the claustrophobia implicit within that dread symbol sent him faltering, driven but directionless, out of bed.

Oh. Lightheaded.

Wandered into the.

But he couldn't. He lowered his head as his vision filled with geometric clouds. More fucking maths. He folded. Onto his knees. Onto the floor. No good, even down here. Go lower. Smaller. He heard Lottie's voice. What was he doing down there. Light tone, panicky. Saying his name.

He couldn't.

Jonah, she said.

There was a powerful undertow, a rushing cold mucky flow pulling him into the. Then Lottie's face. Talking loud and clear and slow. Wide wet eyes. Lottie.

She was afraid. She'd slapped him awake. His eyes opened but he didn't move and she couldn't get him up off the floor. Say his name. Jonah. What was she going to do if she couldn't get him up. Jonah, she said, wake up. No hospital. You need to help me, I can't lift you. Jonah. Help me.

Time passed in struggle. Jonah resurfaced in bed. Snug as a bug in a. Lottie was talking. No fat on you, she said. But heavy enough. How long was he out? Oh, not long, not long. Not too bad, really. Here's the thermometer. Talking. That was scary, wasn't it. But not too scary. Was that your first time? Scary, isn't it. When it happens. But not too bad, no, it's okay.

You must drink this. More, sweetheart. More than that now. Come on, you can do it. You must.

For a while, then, standing was risky. Then Lottie got to understand the nutrients that Jonah's body would accept, and he could walk again unaided. Then his fever went down. Eventually it ended.

The nightmares didn't end. But in that first night of cold sweats and popping pains, as the toxins finally started flushing out, they took a heroic twist.

Brave Jonah was granted audience with the virus, in its space locker. The entity looked as the media portrayed it: a simple sphere, complicated by spines. It rested in a casket frame of frozen iron. It vibrated a subhuman code, black leagues below all storytelling: no hope, no love, no horror-movie monsters. Its vacuum sky contained no stars, because its favoured horizon was a box, within a box, within a box.

Yet Jonah understood that he had defeated it. Its secrets were revealed to him, one by one, accompanied by a sequence of rapid and jarring internal implosions. Snap, crackle, pop. Pain, and release. Victory. He was alive because of who he was: a fighter, brave and strong. His private punishment was over.

He didn't tell Lottie about this dream.

*

Two weeks later Jonah was well enough to sit outside, on deck chairs, with Lottie. They enjoyed their garden. The calamity was ongoing. In the context of the calamity, Jonah and Lottie had been neither lucky nor unlucky. Statistically, they sat somewhere in the

middle. The stories that whirled around the world were about outliers: heroes and victims. Not about them.

Jonah could talk about the calamity without bursting into tears. He still preferred not to. Lottie encouraged him to meditate. It helped.

Still, there were moments when the sky tilted, and the subterranean snakes made themselves known. Such a moment happened while they were sitting in the garden. Jonah found himself staring at the sycamore, thinking *trees are the external lungs of it*.

Of what?

Of what?

He tapped Lottie's hand. "Tell me a story," he said.

"What kind of story?"

"A scary story."

Lottie considered his request.

"New, or old?" she asked.

"Ancient," said Jonah. "Known by everybody."

Lottie thought hard, and chose carefully.

"I'll tell you the story," she said, "of the Hook-Handed Killer."

Jonah nodded. He thought he knew it.

"There were a pair of teenagers driving one night across the moors."

Jonah smiled. He knew which moor Lottie was talking about. It was Dartmoor. He remembered the wind and damp of Dartmoor from his childhood. Bracing walks between car parks and pubs. He remembered lichen and moss; gorse; tufts of hardy grasses concealing deep, cold pools.

He remembered, more recently, showing these things to Lottie. He had shared with her the circular walks of his childhood. They had driven over undulating roads between mist and rocks and sheep, all similar in shape and texture. A ghostly landscape. He remembered, too, the power inherent in driving: his hands on the steering wheel, the twists of the road, the rally-route gear changes. Lottie beside him. Magical.

"What were they driving?" he asked.

"Her mother's car. A great big American car. A station wagon."

Jonah's smile broadened. He saw the great big incongruous American auto. He saw chrome and pleather and walnut. The teenagers were dressed now in 1950s rollerskaters' outfits.

"When was this?" he asked.

"Some time in the second half of the 20th Century. Before the Internet. After power steering. When car radios had an analogue dial."

"Okay," Jonah said. He saw the analogue dial. He saw printed labels which read *BBC World Service* and *Radio Free Europe*.

"The kids were driving at night, through the mist. They were listening to pop music on the radio."

"Country-western?" Jonah asked.

"Sure," Lottie said. "But the car broke down."

"Oh no!"

"Indeed."

"Where were they?"

"In the middle of nowhere."

Jonah could believe it. Lottie and he had driven great distances over Dartmoor trying to find a petrol station. They had felt alone, reliant on their own resources, like strangers in an inhospitable realm.

"The boy teenager, he thought he knew where he could get some help. He decided to walk there. The problem was, it would take two hours to walk there and get back. Better for his girlfriend to stay back, in the car. Let's give her a name. Let's call her Sally. Sally, it was decided, would wait in the car for her boyfriend to return.

"And, he told her, when he did return he would knock three times on the roof of the car. Not once, or twice, but three times. She was to keep the door locked and open it only once he knocked three times."

"That's not logical," Jonah interupted.

"It's perfectly logical."

"But it doesn't make practical sense," Jonah said. "It's not realistic."

"Do you want to hear a realistic story, or a scary story?"

Jonah thought about it.

"A scary story, please."

"Okay. With those instructions, the boyfriend disappeared off into the darkness and mist. Whistling as he went. Sally waited in the car. It was cold, but she had her boyfriend's college jacket on over her dress. One of those two-tone jackets. She listened to the radio. Country-western music was playing. An hour passed.

"Then the music was interrupted by a special broadcast. A grave-sounding newscaster announced that a violent maniac had escaped from Dartmoor Prison. He was a serial murderer, and he could be recognised by the fact that he had a hook instead of his right hand.

"Everybody in the area was warned not to pick up any hitchhikers and to keep their doors locked tight - and not, for heaven's sake, to drive around in the middle of the night across those lonely moors, and break down at the side of the road, and wander off into the mist, alone - or just sit there in the broken-down car, listening to the radio, never knowing who's looking in from the darkness, looking at the back of your head, the nape of your neck on which small fine hairs are prickling, tingling, standing to attention, knowing innately *what you don't know*.

"Hearing this, Sally was naturally anxious. She checked that each door of her great big car was locked. She did this one by one, in a circle: front passenger, front driver, rear driver, rear passenger. All doors were locked. Nothing outside the windows but blackness. Another hour passed.

"Now was the time that Sally's boyfriend was supposed to return. She was cold, and frightened, and desperate to see him. She didn't dare play the radio, but hummed country western songs to herself to keep her spirits up.

"She waited another twenty minutes. Half an hour. An hour.

"Then, finally, when she was almost out of her mind with worry, Sally heard a knock on the car roof.

"BOOM. One. Was it him?

"BOOM. Two. Sally peered out through the windows, but saw nothing. She reached over for the driver's side lock.

"BOOM. Three. That was the signal. Sally was fingering the lock, just about to open the door, when some instinct told her to stop, to wait.

"BOOM. A fourth knock. Then BOOM! A fifth, even louder. Then BOOM BOOM BOOM, the banging from above became a cacophony, as whoever or whatever was out there started beating and beating on the car roof. Sally screamed. She realised the entity was right there, above her. She felt its weight jolting the car's suspension. She saw the

roof bulging inwards, further and further, with every blow. Something was going to rip it open. Something was going to get in.

"Please!" she cried, 'Please, make it stop!'

"And at that moment, light flooded in. It was a light from car headlamps, only far far brighter, like those lighting rigs on pickup trucks that rednecks use to dazzle deer. Like floodlights, arc lights, prison spotlights. The car was bathed in it. Yet the banging barely paused.

"Then an amplified voice reached her. Unmistakably the voice of a policeman shouting into a bullhorn. 'Young woman,' it said, 'listen to what I say and do it carefully, and you will live. First, I need you to breathe deep. Make yourself brave. Then, open the passenger door. Carefully. Then duck your head, and crawl out of that door. Hands, first; then knees. Keep your head down. Make your way towards the light, and the sound of my voice. And whatever you do, don't turn around.'"

"What did she do?" Jonah asked.

"She did as she was told. She steeled herself, and unlocked the door. She opened it and crawled out. She kept her head low. All the while the terrible banging was continuing behind her. She crawled towards the light."

"And did she turn around?" Jonah asked. "Did she look?"

As if he knew that she did look. As if he knew what she saw.

"No," Lottie answered, with some satisfaction. "She never turned around. She never looked back. She got into the police car, and they wrapped her in a shock blanket and gave her a cup of hot sweet tea, and that was the end of her participation in the story."