

SARAH'S first scream echoed loudly around the small bedroom of the flat, instantly waking her husband Andy.

The second scream that followed almost immediately, reverberated from wall to wall, dragging him from out of the deep slumber he'd been enjoying.

He turned towards her, took her in his arms and gently woke her.

"Sarah!" he called, raising her head off the pillow.

"Wake up. It's just a nightmare."

"You're fine. I'm here."

In the darkness, Andy could not discern her features clearly but had he been able to, he would have seen that her eyes were wide, bulging . . . full of fear and staring into the darkness.

"Andy?" she whispered suspiciously.

"That's me," he smiled, hugging her tightly.

"Everything's going to be OK. It was just a bad dream you were having."

"Probably caused by that Stilton we ate at dinner last night!"

"Andy, it is you!" she said in realisation and clinging to him.

"Oh God, that was awful. I thought I'd died!"

"Well, you haven't," he said, reaching behind him and switching on the bedside lamp.

"Like I said, it was just a bad dream — it wasn't real."

They remained sitting up in their queen-sized bed holding one another and slowly, very slowly, Sarah began to relax as reality replaced her imagination.

"What time is it?" she asked, finally letting go of him.

"Just after 1.30," Andy said, glancing at the alarm clock next to the lamp.

"Is that all?" she said. "That means . . ."

"You were only asleep for a couple of hours, max," he said, getting out of bed and putting on his dressing gown.

"It seemed much longer," she said softly.

"I thought that . . . where are you going?"

"To get you some warm milk," he said.

"With a splash of scotch in it to help you get back to a more restful sleep."

"I'll come with you," she said, starting to get up.

"No, I can manage," he said.

"It'll take me less than five minutes . . . and I'll put the main light on if you want?"

"Please," she said, somewhat sheepishly.

by Peter J. Hedge

"And leave the door open too."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"The first thing I noticed was a pressure on my chest," said Sarah, sitting up in bed hugging her knees and holding the mug of fortified milk that was beginning to settle her down.

"Initially, I thought it was Brambles who'd decided to use me as her pillow."

"Your kitten?" Andy asked.

"Yes," Sarah nodded.

"But she died just after we were married — four years ago," he reminded her.

"I know," she agreed.

"And once I remembered that, I was really freaked out."

"But that wasn't the worst part."

"So tell me," he smiled at her.

"Remember I'm a psychologist, so I do know a bit about dreams."

"I couldn't move," she said so quietly he could hardly hear her.

"Not one inch."

"My hands, my fingers . . . even my toes were completely frozen."

"You were cold?" he teased.

"No, you idiot," she said, managing a smile and nudging him with her elbow.

"I was paralysed."

"I knew I was wide awake and simply trapped in some horrible dream," she said vacantly.

"I realised that if I could wake up everything would be fine . . . but I couldn't do it and when I tried to call out your name . . . my voice wouldn't work."

"Well, it did eventually," he said, taking her mug and getting out of bed.

"It's as well the neighbours are away for the weekend, otherwise I'm sure they'd have called the police to tell them you were being murdered or something."

"Boy, you can really scream when you want to!"

Andy walked into their bathroom and placed her empty mug on the counter.

Then, turning off the main



The Old Hag

light, he climbed into bed next to her, lay on his side and pulled her close to him.

She was still very tense.

"It seems as though the Old Hag has paid you a visit," he said quietly.

"Who?" she said turning around to face him.

"The Old Hag," he repeated.

"She's been about for hundreds, if not thousands, of years."

"I don't understand . . ." Sarah was confused.

"The phenomenon you just experienced is not that uncommon," he said as though she were one of his patients.

"It has various names, Night terrors and sleep paralysis being two of the more scientific."

"We're not absolutely certain, but we believe it happens when the brain confuses its sleep patterns and we go into wake-up mode while we're still in the REM — that's when we dream — stage."

"It's never happened to me but from everything I've read on the subject, it's a truly terrifying experience."

"You can say that again!" Sarah agreed.

"But where does the old hag come in?"

"Some cultures believe that an old hag enters the bedroom," Andy said, turning off the bedside lamp, "and sits on your chest to paralyse you before taking your soul."

"Why?" asked Sarah, feeling the goose bumps break out on her arms and legs.

"No-one knows," yawned Andy.

"Maybe she's a malevolent witch simply out to scare you."

"But hey! It's just a myth handed down from one superstitious generation to the next."

"Well, she sure scared me!" said Sarah.

"I don't doubt that for one moment," said Andy.

"But now let's go to sleep."

"Goodnight, Andy," said Sarah, turning over and fluffing her pillow.

"I love you."

But her husband did not reply and was already snoring soundly.

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How long it had been since Andy's explanation of the Old Hag syndrome Sarah wasn't

sure but downstairs, the grandfather clock in the living room was chiming some early-morning hour.

At first, she assumed that this was what had woken her, but then she felt the weight on her chest and the scratchy caresses of gnarled and calloused fingers on the soft skin of her cheeks.

Beside her, she could hear Andy still snoring and smell the whisky on her own breath.

She was dreaming again, she reassured herself.

There was no such thing as an old hag — that was merely an illogical rationalisation for a well-known medical happening.

She was in a twilight state — half awake, half asleep.

All she had to do was to wake herself up and everything would be OK.

Very gently, she tried to move various parts of her body.

"Do not stir, my pretty!" came the crone's cracked voice from a few inches away.

"Stay with me. Open your eyes and look into mine. Then your soul will be mine."

Sarah's heart was pounding loudly.

Maybe if she managed to open her eyes she would see there was nothing to be afraid of.

The ancient woman sitting on her chest had her knees bent beneath her, pinning down Sarah's shoulders.

She was smiling, a single yellowed tooth protruding from her mouth, her filthy fingernails tracing patterns on Sarah's skin.

In absolute terror, Sarah managed to take in a deep breath and tried to scream — but no sound came out of her mouth.

"Relax, my pretty," repeated the Old Hag.

"Just relax."

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The filtered sunlight was streaming in through the curtains of the bedroom windows when Andy woke up.

Through habit, he immediately checked the alarm clock.

"Look at the time!" he said out loud.

"It's almost noon. We're supposed to be at your parents' place by two!"

Quickly, he turned to his wife and held her shoulders.

"Come on, Sarah," he said. "We have to get up."

But Sarah did not move or make any sound.

She simply lay there, her eyes wide open, a look of absolute terror on her face.

"Sarah?" he said fearfully as he saw her expression.

Then, his voice growing more frantic by the second he began to shake her vigorously. "Sarah, for God's sake, wake up!"

But his wife remained in her catatonic state, still staring at the ancient face a few inches from her, that only she could see.

'Some cultures believe an old woman enters the bedroom and sits on someone's chest to paralyse them before taking their soul'