

Bad Man

Kenneth Halpern

- Father, I don't want to go to sleep.
- I don't blame you, son; who knows what happens when you are asleep?
- What do you mean?
- You are entirely helpless. If someone were to enter your room, they could do anything they wish. By the time you awakened, it would be too late.
- I hate scary stories.
- If your door isn't locked, a psychopath could make his way into your room and commit unspeakable atrocities.
- But I always lock my door like mother told me. Once, I forgot, and she locked me in the room for a whole day.
- Never cross your mother.
- I feel safe in my loftbed when the door is locked.
- What about the windows? Do you lock them as well? If not, someone could easily drop from the roof onto the sill. Then, they could pry the window open. Nobody would know they are in here with you.
- I would scream.
- If you are asleep, you cannot. What if they cover your mouth with duck-tape and tie your hands? Then they gently rouse you, that you may better see the horrors to be inflicted upon you.
- Why would someone want to hurt me?
- The only glimmer of hope remaining would be knowledge of the finite duration of the pain; though remote, this may save you from madness.

In fact, death must come with daylight or the intruder would likely be caught. On average, this would amount to six hours of suffering.

- What sort of suffering? Wouldn't they just take my things and leave?

- That would not be their purpose. Of course, if we are away then the time scale could significantly lengthen. It is likely that they would come when we are away- when you are alone with nobody to raise the alarm.

- Who would come?

- They. The ones who would enter through your door or window to do these terrible things. To make you wish for death.

- But I lock my door. If the door and windows are locked they cannot get in.

- Indeed. And that is why you should listen to your mother. Always lock the door and windows. We do. Even to one another. Who knows when an ordinary person could lose control. Do we ever really know someone?

- I know you. You're my daddy.

- But what else am I - or could I be? We do not know. It is best to be safe.

- Are you afraid, father?

- Of course. I am afraid of many things, though no man should admit to this. I fear failure and death, pain and grief, the contempt of others, the cold blade and the red flame, and water without end. Sometimes I fear your mother. Always I fear myself.

- You don't fear me, do you?

- Don't be silly. Why should I fear you, who are but a child?

- Then why does my weakest cry tear you from the chair with great haste?

- It is love, not fear. Fear is deep and pure. It is confined to one's own person. When all pretense of intellectual detachment is destroyed, it is what confronts us. In pain and cold, the elaborate constructs of our ego melt away and this physical reality alone remains to us.

- I don't understand.

- One day you will.
- If the door and windows are closed, what can harm us?
- There is one other from whom we cannot hide.
- Who is that?
- The bad man. No barrier obstructs him and he is always near.
- But if we cannot hide, why hasn't he killed us all?
- It is not his way. Like an animal, he senses fear. He only strikes those who think of him.
- Then I won't. That is easy.
- If one falls asleep thinking of him then he will come.
- Where does he come from?
- He slowly appears, as if rising from the ground. Once wholly present, he begins his work. You would first sense him, and then see his hand rising above the bed- groping toward your soft flesh.
- But you know of him. Why doesn't he come to you?
- I do not know what he looks like. He only appears if you have an image of him in your mind. You must know the details. A vague fear alone will not do.
- Do you know what he looks like?
- As I said, no. Obviously not, or he would have come.
- What does he do when he comes.
- Nobody knows for certain. The autopsies are usually sealed; for his existence is widely known, a dark secret that few openly speak of. It has been said that the victims were not recognizable and had taken a very long time to die.
- Who did he kill?
- Again, it is not clear. These details tend to be suppressed. Perhaps some of the unsolved cases or disappearances have been misrepresented by the press.

- Is he the devil?
- No. The devil does not exist. He is merely a fiction created as a necessary antagonist to God. Every religion has one. The bad man is simply mean. He enjoys watching others suffer. And he is real.
- But he can't harm us because you don't know what he looks like.
- Actually, I do. But I didn't want to tell you because you might not be ready to handle such a secret. You might accidentally think of him as you doze off. Only a grownup can handle such responsibility.
- You never forget?
- I never sleep.
- Yes you do. The other day, I saw you on the couch.
- Like Noah's son. Yes, I do indeed sleep. Yet I know what he looks like and have never been harmed.
- That must be hard. What if you forget? If you even worry about forgetting then you will have thought of him. Once the thought is embedded, you would be doomed. [seed is planted]
- This is true, except that most of us cannot summon him. Only very special people can do so.
- Am I special?
- To me you are. But probably not to him. Few are.
- I can handle the responsibility. Tell me what he looks like.
- I can't. What if you are one of the few?
- Is there a way to know?
- Not until it is too late.
- I promise not to think of him. Please tell me. I lock the door and I'm going to lock the windows. I'm a good boy. You can tell me.
- Very well. But don't say I didn't warn you. And don't tell anyone else.
- I promise not to tell. (Father whispers a description to the son).

- Can you envision him?
- A little.
- Think carefully. Close your eyes. Do you see him? What is he doing?
- Yes. Yes. I see him clearly. He has a carrot peeler in his hand.
- That sounds like the type of thing he would hold. Open your eyes. You don't want to see what he does with it.
- Why?
- You might dwell on him, and neglect to forget about him.
- He doesn't really exist. You told me about that bear who eats people, and that didn't exist either.
- True. But the bad man does exist. I have seen him.
- Then why didn't he hurt you.
- I wasn't one of the special children. And I only saw an image of him, drawn by one of the doomed.
- Why are they special?
- The bad man is part of us. When a typical child falls asleep, his thoughts flit between many subjects without alighting on any. Certain children are different, though. They focus on one object and let it grow in their minds. Their fear expands as fantasy generates every detail of this being and his actions. Through sheer force of will they create him. And through all the horrors and mutilations they endure, their consciousness is incapable of banishing him; for, once created, he is no longer bound. In sleep, the mind loses its mastery and fancy becomes reality. The bad man and his author share a similar fate, but he enjoys it.
- I don't understand.
- You are too young.
- Why did you tell me about him? Don't you love me.
- Yes. Very much. But each parent must test his child.
- Why?

- Those children are different in other ways too.
- Am I one of them?
- No. Now forget about all this nonsense and go to sleep.
- Daddy, I'm scared.
- There's no need to be. Your mother and I are nearby and your door is locked. If you need anything just shout.
- But he'll cover my mouth.
- Don't think about it. Promise me.
- I promise. Daddy, I love you.
- Me too. Goodnight, son.
- Goodbye, father.