

The Tapping

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This piece has an accompanying audio file.

I wake up. At first, I'm not sure why; I'm aware of my body heavy on the mattress, and my deep, slow breathing. I know immediately that my awareness isn't natural. While my brain is whirring, rapidly shedding the fog of sleep, my body is entirely relaxed. My every instinct tells me to listen – that my sudden wakefulness is due to a noise. I don't know what.

I lie, listening, with my eyes closed. One of the cats clicks her paws over the laminate outside of my door, patrolling away down the corridor. Was it her? A pounce on a stray spider, perhaps? Or a mad race through the house that only stirred me from sleep at its very end?

I am aware of my phone lying next to my pillow. I don't reach for it. As tempting as it is to check the time, I know that if I do, I'll spend hours scrolling through emails and Facebook and I'll never get back to sleep. I keep my eyes closed and let my still body sink further into the mattress.

It's blowing a gale tonight. I can hear the wind rattling off the cheap aluminium frame of the greenhouse and whistling through the gaps in its plastic panels while a metal bin lid rolls and clatters off the patio. There are tree branches tapping on my window, and the wind slips through the gap at the top to tug at my curtains. Not the cat, I decide. The wind.

The realization that something is wrong comes slowly. It rises through the last lingering remnants of tiredness and strips away all sense of peace. My ground-floor window looks out on a stretch of lawn. Not a tree in sight. And yet, there is a tapping and a clattering on the window that dances with the wind. My heart pounds as adrenaline floods my body. As soon as I'm aware, I'm afraid. That sound shouldn't be there. Afraid and, if I'm honest, irritated as rational thought wins out against instinct. The tapping is artificial, it has to be. On the other side of that stretch of lawn is the front street. A drunk wandering home from the local pub must have decided to play the idiot. My fear dissolves in favour of anger and frustration at having been woken, and I go to roll over - to get up and give this phantom tapper a piece of my mind – only for my body to fail.

I lie, heavy on the mattress, as the tap-tap-tapping grows louder. My body is detached. Disconnected. I try to wiggle my toes or twitch a finger. Nothing. Beneath my eyelids, my eyes are darting. Panic rises, but I don't open them. I can't. Through the panic, a half-forgotten warning surfaces: "don't open your eyes or you'll hallucinate". *Or*. Something like hysterical laughter gurgles in my throat, but doesn't escape through my clenched teeth. Keeping my eyes shut isn't stopping anything.

I debate opening them as the tapping starts to move. It dances over my window; it taps at the glass in my front door. I hear it move off, tapping its way around the house in a hideous circuit. Hunting. Searching out weak spots. If I had been truly awake then it would have been frightening; paralysed, with my body still fast asleep and my brain working overtime, it's terrifying.

I hear it circle the house once, twice, three times, tracking a path anticlockwise through the garden. There's a clatter as something slams into the side of the house, and the wind screams. Somewhere, a cat skitters in fright. The tapping continues, no longer working with the wind. Just circling and circling, going faster and faster and faster until I can't stand it. It's not laughter trying to fight its way out of my throat anymore, it's a scream. Every impulse is telling me to run. To get out. To get away from the windows and whatever it is that threatens my home. My fight or flight instincts are fully

engaged, but my useless, stupid body doesn't listen. Not a twitch. I scream and scream through my lockjaw, but whatever noise I make is drowned out by the wind and the ta-ta-ta-tapping on every window on the house.

Then, silence. I stop trying to scream. I take as many long, slow breaths as I can, trying to force my heart to slow down. Silence, I think, is good.

Scraaaaaaaaaape.

Paralysed or not, every hair on the back of my neck can still stand on end. I try to trace the sound, but something isn't right, and instead of telling me where the sound has come from, my mind insists on conjuring images. Claws feature prominently. I try to banish them, try to focus on listening or on moving a finger – on something useful.

Scraaaaaape. Tap tap tap tap scraaaaaape.

The scraping. The tapping. It's no longer coming from outside. The sound echoing through my room is the sound of claws on wood. Not the cats; too loud and too high up to be the cats. The thing that had been circling is –

Scraaaaaaaaaape

It's inside my bedroom. It's in here with

me, running claws over the inside of my door as it watches. I can hear its breathing, not quite moving with my own. It's an uncomfortable, rasping noise, and as I listen it begins to quicken. I have its attention. I can feel it watching me, *staring* at me – even with my eyes closed, I know exactly where it is, what it's doing. I may refuse to look, but that doesn't mean I don't know where it is or what it's doing. I can feel. I can *hear*.

I can hear my name. In between harsh, panting breaths, I can hear the syllables of my name. I can hear the anger and the hatred in its voice as it whispers in the darkness. I can hear the *amusement*. It knows me. It knows my fear. It finds my terror *funny*.

It starts to speak. Its voice never rises above a soft whisper, but its words sear themselves into my brain as if it shouted them. Obscene threats conjure images of my prone form mutilated under its clawed hands, of my blood bubbling in its laughter.

A soft whine builds in my throat. Not a scream; I've learned that lesson. Instead, I sound more like a wounded animal. As much as I might wish it, I can't not listen to it. I can keep my eyes closed out of sheer stubbornness, but I can't move to cover my ears. I can't even turn my face away from where the thing is lurking. And no matter what noise I make that escapes my clenched jaws, it will never be loud enough to block out the whispering or the scraping or the tapping.

The tapping. Claws on wood and on plaster and then, worst of all, a pause. A long, pregnant pause as it waits for me to open my eyes. To look. I don't. I can feel its breath on my face. I can't smell it, I realise, and the thought would have been comforting if its presence wasn't so very definite in every other way. I can feel its knees settle on either side of my rib cage. I whine as my chest compresses under its incredible weight and it pins me to my mattress. I can't breathe. It rasps its threats and its hatred over my face and I can *hear* its smile.

Above my head, its claws tap tap tap-tap-tap on the wood of my headboard. I squeeze my eyes so tightly shut that purple and green patterns blossom behind my eyelids. I throw everything I have into moving – I focus on my right index finger. The way it's curled against my palm, caught in the edge of my pillow case. The weight on my chest increases. I can't breathe. I can't move. I can't, I can't, I can't –

There's something about suffocating that triggers you out of sleep paralysis. One moment, there's a monster on your chest, compressing your ribs and whispering your worst nightmares into your ear; the next, you're propped up on your elbow, gasping for air and clutching at your chest. Your body reconnects and wakes up just fast enough to stop you from dying. It's not pleasant – it's a lightning bolt to the brain that leaves every synapse screaming, and every muscle aching as if your earlier attempts at moving were equivalent to running a marathon – but any muscular pain is secondary to the pain in your chest. The burn of your lungs and the hammering of your heart. Waking up from sleep paralysis hurts far more than the slow, suffocating death sleep would bring.

At least, that's what it's like for me.

I lie in the dark, propped up on one arm, with my free hand pressed to my sternum. Behind it, I can feel my heart just beginning to calm. My eyes are open, and the light from the streetlamps filtering through my curtains illuminates the familiar shapes and shadows of my furniture. It's bright enough, just, to tell me that there aren't any monsters. There aren't even any claw marks on my door. I flex my jaw and wiggle my toes and bend and stretch every joint in my body before rolling onto my back once more.

I close my eyes and listen to the wind as it rattles against the greenhouse and whispers through the gap at the top of my window. I can feel the cool draft of it over my face; smell the honeysuckle scent of the garden that it brings inside. My heartbeat slows. My body relaxes and grows heavy. I sigh softly and turn my head towards the window, my earlier fear gone. By the morning, I'll barely even remember.

Tap.