

Nightmares in Pink

Her eyelids snapped open to the first note of Beethoven's *Für Elise*. The chords resounded through the room, but sounded tinnier than the original, and slower, as though calm waves drawling lazily from some enormous music box, an oversized ballerina spinning in time with the somber music. She blinked a few times, and looked around. The half drawn shades over the window let in a swath of moonlight, cutting through the darkness and illuminating a pastel pink carpet. She started to sit up, but felt her head cry out in pain. Propping herself up on her right arm, she reached up with her left and gingerly touched the side of her head where it hurt. Her fingers brushed a dried clump of something in her hair. Fingering it gently, she started pushing harder until she cried out in pain, but couldn't hear her own voice over the music. In fact, she wasn't sure if any sound had come out at all.

Gritting her teeth, she felt around in her hair for the source of the pain. When her fingers touched something wet, she pulled away and pushed the heavy quilt off of her and away with her feet, toppling off the bed towards the moonlight. She reached her right leg down, and then her left, and pulled herself towards the ground, but misjudged the distance and faltered, landing in an undignified heap on the carpet. Wincing as she extracted her legs from under herself, she lumbered towards the illuminated rhombus of bright midwinter moonlight on the carpet. Laying her palms face-up on the windowsill, she squinted her eyes and examined her fingertips for the liquid that had come from her head. Confirming her suspicions, she saw something red smeared in her fingerprints. She wiped her fingers on the windowsill and pulled the blinds open.

The room was still dim, but she could finally see her surroundings. She shut her eyes and rubbed them for a few seconds, then opened them and looked around at what was unmistakably her childhood bedroom. She blinked again, and narrowed her eyes to scrutinize her environment.

She had spent the first 11 years of her life in this room, before her family moved, and could tell something was off, but wasn't able to put her finger on exactly what. Her gaze panned around the room, from the many swimming and track trophies lining the top shelf of her desk, to the bookshelf overflowing with childhood favorites and modern classics she had read in high school and never returned, to the pink quilt and overstuffed pillows on her twin bed. She noticed three small crimson dots standing out against the cotton candy colored carpet, and instinctively reached up to the side of her head, lamenting how difficult it would be to get those stains out and already worrying about what she would tell her parents.

Aside from the stained carpet, everything seemed to be exactly as she had known it for her entire time living there. Suddenly, she realized that's what it was; she was now a grown woman, and should've felt ridiculous standing in a child's room, completely out of proportion, but instead didn't feel out of place at all. For a brief, frantic moment she worried that she had been shrunk down, like Alice, but didn't remember any vials labeled "Drink Me." She looked down at her slender, bare legs and felt her breasts with both hands, as if to make sure they were still there. For the first time, she realized she was completely naked. She often slept naked, but for the first time in a long time felt embarrassed by her nude form. The juxtaposition of her fully developed, naked body and a bedroom clearly meant for a child, even herself, felt wrong somehow, perverted in a way.

She crossed to her closet and opened it, looking for anything to drape herself in and hide her shame and recognition of her own nude form. She thought of Eve, from the bible. She had always hated that story, hated the way it was taught in Sunday school. Eve was a pawn, nothing more than a tool for the men to toss around and blame their mistakes on, made to be ashamed of

her body for no other reason than the pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment. Not a very good moral for young girls, if you asked her.

She opened the right-hand door of the closet and stepped back, looking inside at all her dresses from elementary school. She thought of how she might one day give them to her own daughter, though she had no plans for children at any point in the near future. On the door of the closet hung a full length mirror; she remembered playing dress up when she was younger, standing still in front of the mirror in heels three sizes too large and a gaudy tiara, as her mother smoothed out the creases in a pink satin dress that was too large and ended in a pool of fabric around her feet. She stood still before the mirror, completely stark naked, remembering this scene from her childhood. She hadn't thought about her mother in a long time. As if in a trance, she stayed standing for several minutes, before she was awoken from her reverie by the sudden realization that the music was gone. She had grown accustomed to it, and had stopped listening, but now the silence was deafening. Shaking her head slightly from side to side, she opened the left door of the closet, to see what else might be lying inside. To her shock, the exact pink satin dress from her memory was hanging there, as if waiting for her. It was the exact same color as the carpet, with white lace below the neckline. She took it down from the hanger and stepped into it. As she was zipping herself up, she thought she heard a slight cranking noise, like a key turning, though it may have just been the sound of the zipper; the dress clearly hadn't been worn in some time, though there wasn't a single speck of dust on it.

She stepped back and admired herself in the mirror. Everyone had always told her she looked exactly like her mother, but this was the first time she had ever seen it herself. She smiled, and the room seemed to feel a bit more familiar and comfortable again. As she reached forward with both arms to close the closet door, she heard the familiar notes of *Für Elise* start up

again. She sighed out loud, to no one in particular, though she enjoyed the song, and it was certainly better than the silence that had invaded just moments before. It had felt heavy, crushing her under its magnanimous weight. Taking one last look around, she opened the door and slipped out into the hallway.

Though she hadn't thought about it in decades, she still knew this house as well as if she were still living there. As she padded down the carpeted hallway, she peered in each room she passed, both to check for anyone lurking there, as well as to make herself feel more comfortable with each repeated confirmation of her childhood. She started to feel more assured of herself, more at home in her own house. She felt confident she had at least some control, whatever was happening. She worked up the nerve to call out, to assert herself in what she now viewed as her own domain:

“Hello? Is anybody there?”

Her own voice shocked her. Unlike before, when she wasn't sure there was any sound at all, this time there was a definite noise, but it felt wrong. It sounded like her voice, she thought, but it didn't sound as if it had come from her mouth. It felt distant, as if someone were calling to her from a dream, traveling through oceans and deep space to deliver to her a message, but it had gotten mixed up along the way, like a childhood game of telephone. She decided to try again, to keep herself calm by talking.

“Please, if anyone's here, please say something.”

There was no answer, but she felt better talking. She had always enjoyed the sound of her own voice, and it made her feel more secure, more sure of herself in a strange situation.

“Listen, if you’re here to steal from us, there’s nothing here. We moved out a long time ago, and we never had many valuables to begin with. If you leave now I won’t press any charges for trespassing, you can just leave and be on your way.”

As she walked, she heard the music getting louder. It sounded as if it were being played on a baby grand piano, but her family had never had one, nor was there enough space for one anywhere in the house. Nevertheless, she walked towards the source of the music, continually talking to keep herself busy. Her voice was returning to normal, or at least she was getting used to the way it sounded. Either way, she felt more at ease.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here really, I haven’t been back here since we moved out. I guess I could be the one trespassing, if so I’m really sorry. I guess I’m mostly confused. Also I think I have a head injury, is there a First Aid kit here? My mother always used to keep it in the kitchen, but I assume it was hers. She was a nurse, so her skills always came in handy when I was a child. I was pretty rambunctious, always running into things and getting hurt. I haven’t seen my mother in a long time, not since—”

She stopped talking abruptly. She sighed and closed her eyes for a bit, then pushed open the door in front of her leading to the room where the music was coming from. As she stepped through the doorway, she half expected to see a giant music box, but instead the room was pitch black. The door slammed shut behind her. She tried to turn back and yank it open, but she couldn’t find the door. She started running, anywhere through the darkness, but it felt like trudging through molasses. Her feet got slower and slower until they weren’t moving at all. She yawned, and consigned herself to her fate as she lay down and let herself get swallowed by the black sludge enveloping her until there was nothing left.

Angela woke up with a gasp, sitting straight up in bed. She sat there with her head in her hands panting heavily for a few minutes before she calmed down. She took one last deep breath and looked up. The image of drowning in nothingness played over and over in her mind. She pushed the covers away and walked to the kitchen, where she took out a wineglass and an opened bottle of merlot. She filled the glass halfway and drank it all in one gulp. She swilled the bottle around to see how much was left, then filled the glass almost all the way to the top and took a sip, smaller this time. She put the wine back in the fridge and carried the glass with her to the bathroom.

She turned on the light and set the glass down on the sink. She turned the cold water on and sat down on the toilet, resting her head in her right hand and her wineglass in her left. She closed her eyes again for a few seconds, before opening them to take another sip of the wine, larger this time. Setting the glass back on the sink, she stood up and checked the water. It was as cold as possible, the way she liked it. She cupped both her hands together and put them under the faucet, bringing the water up to her face. She repeated this several times and then dried her face with a hand towel next to the toilet. For the first time, she looked in the mirror. Everything about her face seemed normal. This was a face she knew, one she had seen thousands upon thousands of times before. It calmed her down. But somewhere in the depths of her mind, something was wrong, something was different. She examined herself closer, turning her head this way and that. When she looked at the left side of her head, something caught her eye. A pink streak lined the left side of her face, just in front of her ear. Looking closer, she followed it up towards her hairline, feeling it with her fingers. Just above her temple, she felt a clump of hair and a sharp prodding of pain, just as in her dream. Startled, she jumped back. She could've sworn this wasn't

there before she went to sleep, and she knew herself to be a fairly still sleeper. So, if this part of the dream were real, what else was?

She ran to her closet and threw open the doors. Relieved not to find the pink dress hanging where it was in her dream, she rifled through all her other clothes just to be sure. Convinced it wasn't there, she relaxed slightly, sitting down on the edge of her bed. She looked up at her closet again, just to be sure. Something pink caught her eye and she startled. She couldn't find what it was, probably just her mind playing tricks on her. She looked at herself in the closet's mirror to calm herself. Her face, hair, neck. All exactly as they always were. Her gaze shifted downward and her mouth dropped open. Somehow she hadn't noticed it up until now, but she was wearing her mother's pastel pink dress with the white lace just below the neckline.

The next morning, she woke up for work as usual. She tried to clear the previous night from her mind, pretend it hadn't happened, but her memory was being annoyingly persistent. Unlike most other dreams, it didn't get fuzzier in her mind the further she got away from it. As she dressed, she was careful not to look in the closet where she knew the dress must be hanging. Out of sight, out of mind, she told herself.

She threw herself into her work, attempting to focus on the tasks at hand and ignore what was waiting for her at home. However, this was to no avail, as her mind constantly drifted to her childhood home. Every time she went to the bathroom, she saw her mother standing behind her in the mirror. Every time her head throbbed, her thoughts flew to the bloodstained carpet beside her childhood bed.

At home, she avoided the bedroom. She headed straight for the kitchen, finishing off the bottle of wine from the previous night and moving on to another. She feared sleep, but knew it must come soon. Collapsing on the couch, she drained the last drops from her glass and set it down on the coffee table. She reached for the remote and flipped on the TV, but was asleep almost before the screen crackled to life.

The dream was the same. Same bedroom, same head wound, same dress. This time she rushed through, knowing how it would end and hoping to get there as soon as possible. She careened through the hallways of her home, slamming her shoulder into a picture frame as she rounded a corner. She reached the piano room and scrambled for the door handle. She stepped through the threshold into the molasses and finally stopped, taking a deep breath. She lay down again, feeling the darkness crawl over her body. All of a sudden, she noticed a glimmer of movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head to see her mother, standing still in the pink dress. Slowly, her mother lifted her hand to her head. Despite the darkness, she could see the glint of a gun in her mother's hand. She tried to scream out, but the darkness filled her mouth. As her mother pulled the trigger, the darkness flowed over her face, covering her eyes and pulling her mother away from her, yet again.

She grabbed her phone from her nightstand and dialed her father's number. She had him in her contacts, but she knew it by heart and didn't have the time to search for it. She was worried he might not pick up, as it was the middle of the night, but the call connected after the fourth ring.

“Angie? Is everything ok?”

“Hi dad.”

“What’s wrong? Do you know what time it is?”

“I know, I know, and I’m sorry, I just really had to talk to you.”

“Angie, is everything ok? Answer me.”

“No, no, everything...” She paused. “Everything is fine. I just really need to ask you something, something about mom.”

“What is it?”

“Do you have her dress? You know, the pink one with the lace? Do you still have it?”

“Did you seriously call me at three in the morning to ask about a dress?” He was pissed. “I’m hanging up now.”

“Dad, please! This is important, I swear.”

“Ugh, alright. The pink one? Why that one...? No, I don’t, why would I? We sold everything when we moved. Should I have it?”

“No... no I suppose not. One more question. I probably should have asked this a long time ago, but... how did mom die? I remember you said she was hit by a drunk driver, but that never seemed to make sense, but I guess I just wanted to avoid it at the time so I never pursued it, but...”

There was a long pause. Angela was worried her dad had hung up, but she could still hear his faint breathing on the other end.

“I guess I should’ve told you. You were so young when it happened, I just didn’t know what to say. I guess I was hoping I could just avoid it forever, and you would either forget or find

out for yourself. Obviously that's kind of silly... I remember once I told you she was abducted by aliens... I just didn't know how to tell you what really happened. Besides, that's really not that far from the truth in a way.

“Your mother killed herself. She did it while you were at school, in your bedroom. She stood in the center of your room, on your carpet, and shot herself in the head. She put a tarp down, so she wouldn't make a mess. She was always so considerate, more than I ever was. She was wearing that dress. I remember because it was the exact shade of your carpet. Or at least it was before. Despite all her careful planning, the dress was ruined, and three small spots of blood got on the carpet. I was never sure if you noticed.

“She had told me about weird dreams for months leading up before she did it. I should've listened. I can't help feeling like it was my fault, like I could've done something. She told me she felt like she was swimming through molasses. I thought she was just complaining about work. After she died, I tried to stay in that house but I just couldn't do it. That's why we moved, I just couldn't bear the memories in that house. I'm so sorry, darling. I should've told you sooner. I miss her every day.”

There was another silence, this time on Angela's end. She sat silent and still for a few moments while she collected her thoughts. Eventually she realized her dad was still on the line.

“Thank you for telling me that. I'll see you soon ok?”

She ended the call without waiting for him to respond.

The next day, she got up in the morning and dressed her wound. It was mostly dry, and her hair covered it, but she wanted to be safe. It was Sunday, so she didn't have to work. She had some errands to run, some shopping to do. She got home around five o'clock and cooked herself a simple meal, chicken and cauliflower with rice. After dinner, she sat with a book and drank some wine. She didn't want to go to bed late, as she had to wake up early for work the next day. At 10:30, she got ready for bed. She had been wearing the pink dress all day, but still didn't want to take it off. She didn't feel dirty and wasn't ready to remove it.

That morning, she had looked through her various things and found an old music box her friend had given her long ago. There was a ballerina on top that twirled when you spun the key, and it played Beethoven's *Für Elise*. After turning the key several times, she set the music box down on her nightstand and got into bed. She fell asleep instantly.

It was the same as the night before. She opened her eyes in her childhood bed, in her childhood bedroom. This time, she was accustomed to it all. She slid out of bed and didn't fall this time. She was already wearing the dress. The notes of the Beethoven composition floated over her head, feeling more natural than somber this time. She walked through her house into her mother's old room. It took some time for her to find it, but there was the gun, nestled in her mother's desk. She took it out and walked back to her own room. Preparing herself, she stood in the center of the carpet and looked out the window. The moon was even brighter tonight, either full or a day off. She took a deep breath, and smiled at herself in the mirror, remembering the image of her mother standing behind her as they played dress up. She lifted the gun to her head, and gently squeezed the trigger.

In her real room, the ballerina continued to spin as the final notes of the piece played themselves out. In her real bed, a small stream of bright red liquid fell out of the side of her head,

staining the shoulder of the pastel pink dress with the white lace below the neckline. She seemed to be sleeping quite peacefully.