

All I wanted was some sleep.

At first it was kind of nice; it reminded me of vacation when I was a kid in school or college, staying up all night playing video games and partying with friends. I was job hunting still, keeping myself busy with that and keeping in touch with social circles, but as the noose starts to tighten you have to give up things you enjoy and focus on the necessities. All of the money I had was going to bills, food, and internet. You know, the necessities.

See, I got laid off from a big company around three months ago, so I was lucky to get unemployment which helped a bit and part of our severance was that we'd get to keep our health coverage for six months, so that was a pretty big relief from worry in itself. Still, I was feeling the pinch without that normal income. I was surviving without going into debt, yeah, but it wasn't easy.

I didn't start having insomnia until the middle of the second month. It started how it usually does for people, I think. Realizing the time with a moment of surprise and then being surprised further still when you notice you aren't even tired. That first night I think I might have gotten four or five hours of sleep. It wasn't that I was broken down tired, either. I just felt like something had gotten pulled out of me from the chest and up my shoulders through my eyes, and they'd gone a bit bloodshot.

A bit bloodshot. I wish that was the end of it all.

The next week was intermittent, a mix of restless sleep for an hour here and there and entire nights where I couldn't seem to shut my head off. I just kept tossing and turning, distracting myself with the TV until I was able to remember the lines in the worst of the infomercials like I was reading for a part. I acknowledged my dog on the floor by my bed with a kind of miserable envy, wanting to jostle him awake with my foot out of spite every time he snored.

Finally I called my doctor and scheduled an appointment. I must have been looking kind of rough from the looks the receptionist gave me, and I realized despite my shower that I hadn't bothered to shave or straighten my hair. I had about ten day's growth in these ugly shrub-brush patches all over my face that went surprisingly well with my now-sunken and bloodshot eyes. I'd been going to Dr. Ramesh for years, and the guy was decidedly not a pill pusher. I went in expecting him to tell me to exercise (tried it) or change my diet (that too) before he'd suggest anything pharmaceutical. I must've looked worse than I thought, because after I explained the insomnia, the first thing he did was provide me with some samples of a prescription-strength sleep aid with the promise of a script if it helped. You'd think he placed the keys to a getaway car in the hands of a bank robber by the way I thanked him, and when I

left I had high hopes that I'd get back on track with some restful sleep and my world would straighten out.

I got home in the early evening. I walked my dog, made some supper, took the pills and then watched a little TV. It was one of those terrible pawn shop shows- you know the ones where you feel like it's all staged and they're just dancing through the steps for "quality TV". I couldn't watch for long so I killed the blue glow of the screen and went to my room where I settled into bed and shut off the lights. I closed my eyes and focused on the rhythm of my own breathing, allowing the pills to work their magic.

That's when I felt something change. Now, I've never been a lucid dreamer, but you can always kind of separate a dream from reality when you wake up at the very least. This was different. I didn't have any kind of sensation to tell me I'd been asleep and come awake, but I wasn't dreaming either. I felt the pressure change on my skin; a light and tingling feeling like I'd fallen asleep with my arm raised over my head, but across my entire body. It traveled in waves with every breath I took, shivering down to my toes and coming back up with a sensation that almost felt like sea-sickness. I replayed the list of side-effects on the back of the little paper carton the pills came in but didn't recall nausea. I decided on a glass of water and a little walk to get the blood flowing again, but I realized I couldn't really move my limbs much. My arms rose like useless weights and I couldn't close my fingers on the hem of my sheets to pull them off. When I tried to kick them away my knees made a billow in the fabric for a moment before my heels dumbly slid back out under the weight of my legs. I began to panic and my breathing quickened as I worried about things like terrible drug reaction horror stories and being found dead in bed by my family when no one had heard from me in a few days.

The faster I breathed the quicker the sensation increased, like my veins were being drained out and filled with air instead, and despite how light it made my limbs I was only more subdued, weak and unable to move, trapped in my bed. That's when the sensation started to spill over and out of me. I felt like a bucket held down under the water and turned upright, letting all of its air tumble up and away while the water rushed in. The bedsheets began to close down over my body as I soaked them through with sweat, the material clinging over me in a cold, damp second skin that felt like it was crushing me down into mattress beneath me. My body felt like a pocket of air rising up and out of its self, like I was escaping in every direction. I knew I had to be having a bad reaction to the drugs; that something was going wrong in my biochemistry. Still, I couldn't shake the sensation that I was separating from

myself, peeling apart and escaping like that air bubble but still just trapped beneath the sheets. That's when I first noticed that the impression of those terrible waves had stopped. Whatever was happening to me had come to an end, and I was coming down from it.

My breathing calmed down slightly when I felt the pins and needles across the entire back half of my body like blood rushing back into a sleeping limb. I waited until I was no longer panting and then tried to sit up in bed. Despite the flush of warmth and the sensation returning, I couldn't. Then I started to notice the pins and needles weren't alleviating the lightness my body felt or the weight of the sweat-drenched sheet that seemed to hold my body prone. Instead the feeling became more acute. I began to feel the space where my muscles should have been start to twitch and shudder, jerking in little snaps while the prickling sensation only grew more noticeable in these places. It reminded me of plucking an errant hair, but it reached into my body an inch or more, grasping with miniscule pincers and pulling away with a rip.

The mental picture snapped into focus when I made that connection and I envisioned the bottom of my bed opening up like the crust of some ancient caldera over a colony of monstrous ants, each with long mouths that ended in impossibly sharp needles that they plunged up into my body as I was forced to lay prone, closing on morsels of my flesh and stripping them away to carry back below for the millions which crawled and burrowed through the world below me. I stared wide-eyed and unable to move at the ceiling of my bedroom above them all, focus fixed on the spot past the slow spinning blades of my ceiling fan that were just barely illuminated by the green glow of my alarm clock.

I'm pretty sure this was the first time I screamed since the whole thing had started. It only seemed to aggravate the terrible horde as they gnawed and plucked away ribbons of my bloodless flesh, leaving porous holes in their wake as they ate me alive.

I finally felt the support of my body give way as it was hollowed out from within by thousands of the needling little mouths of the voracious insects, no longer able to support its own shell and the weight of the sheets and the air around me crushing in. I folded inward on myself as I was squeezed out through the holes that the ants had chewed through me. I lost any grasp on reality when the fan blades disappeared overhead and were swallowed in blackness, the damp sensation still present and gnawing cold. It reached every part of me: my breaths became frigid; limbs still frozen and useless. The whole world closed in and surrounded me.

I struggled to even manage a sound now, screams coming back at me like I wore an iron maiden sealed to the skin of my body, pressing in on me in a way that surpassed

claustrophobia. I was mummified alive, my burial shroud a million pounds of geological weight crushing down on me deep beneath the earth, unable to see or feel anything but the terrible pressure of it all. I was already at the height of panic, but I discovered hysteria when breathing became difficult and then impossible. The weight pushed the last heavy breath from my lungs and then refused to let anything else in.

I was dying, afraid and alone in the dark.

The terror I felt was very real, but it proved to only be a dream. I awoke shortly after I dreamt I was dying, stuck in my bed ice cold with feverish sweats and weaker than I've ever felt in my life. I managed to sit up and peel the soaked sheets off, but it took me almost an hour to get my feet under me and the confidence to rise and make it to the bathroom. I vomited in shaking bouts for another hour and then looked at the clock. I'd slept for ten hours.

I called the doctor the next day and explained the side-effects, neglecting to go into detail about what I remembered from the experience. He told me to discontinue the use of the pills immediately and scheduled me for blood work at the beginning of the next week. I finally managed to put some food down and did the laundry, changing out clean sheets on my bed but still feeling nervous about sleeping there. Instead I stretched out on the couch that night and tried to doze off.

I did. The lightness returned, the helpless paralysis and terrible sensation like I was on the verge of drifting away. Then the ants, those horrible, gnawing, fucking ants came back and ate me alive all over again. I woke after the same terrible moment of death, unaware I'd even been sleeping as far as my body was concerned.

That next day I went to the ER. They checked me over, ran my blood work, and confirmed that the drugs were out of my system. As far as they were concerned, I shouldn't have had any reaction still. They kept me overnight for observation and despite my best efforts with the tiny TV of the room I felt that lightness creep into my body again. I had my finger poised over the nurse's call button but I couldn't muster the strength to press it. I endured my nightmare again, explaining it to the nurses in the morning when they came to check on me.

Since then I've done sleep studies, succumbed to MRIs and CT scans, and spoken with experts who have tried to figure out what's happening. I even told a shrink everything about myself thinking somewhere in the mix of my mind they'd find a way to fix me.

Nothing works. Where I found it hard to sleep before, I'm finding it even more difficult to stay awake. I've got every light in my house on, even during the day. I'm drinking red bull like water and eating No Doze like candy just to try to stretch out the time between visits.

It's not working anymore, though. I read up on sleep deprivation and learned about microsleeps. See, my mind shuts itself off for a few moments at a time, just snapping itself out of focus to try to recover from what I'm doing to it, but every time it does I can hear something scratching away beneath me. Every time I can feel a thousand ants and the weight of the world pressing up under my feet, waiting for me to fall into a deep sleep so they can consume me all over again. I can't do it. I can't live like this anymore.

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