

I don't remember the first time I had the dream. That's odd, because I have many memories of my early childhood. My first distinct memory is of chaotically tumbling while all around me, people scream. When I described it to my parents, they were shocked. They wondered how I could remember something that had happened to me when I was barely three years old. Father told me that a tire had blown on a slick road, and he had caused the car to roll over while trying to counter the effects.

But for all that, I have no clear memory of the first time I awoke from that same eerie dream. I am standing in front of a mirror, looking at my reflection. What I see is the me of that moment. As a young boy, I saw a young boy. Now, as an adult, I see my adult self in the mirror. But as I stare at the mirror, I see another face appear.

It is ghostly at first, like the beginnings of a sketch. But as the dream progresses, the my face disappears, replaced by a face like mine, but different. It was a young girl when I was a young boy. Now, it is a grown woman. Her hair is midnight black like mine. Like me, her nose is long and thin. Her lips are fuller than mine, but it is her eyes that are the most striking. Like mine, they are brown, but they lack any warmth, which I find find disconcerting. And always, always, she looks out of the mirror, smiles...and I know. I know she knows I can see her.

Who she is, I don't know. I asked my parents about her, even going so far as to accusing them of concealing a twin, for that is how she appears to me. They denied it, denied that I was ever anything but their only child. I could see the truth in their eyes, but my heart still wonders who that strange yet familiar face in my dream was.

The dreams began to come more frequently. From a once-a-month occurrence, they became weekly. Then they visited me every night. And for the first time, the dream changed. The image in the mirror still morphed from my face into that of a woman very much like me. But now, rather than smile knowingly at me, she spoke. And her words were chilling.

"I am here, and I not be ignored any longer."

Now, instead of awakening with a start, I bolted awake screaming, her ominous words still echoing in my mind. I began to dread the night, to fear sleep that offered not rest, but terror. I began staying awake, sometimes all night. My work began to suffer, my friends started noticing my listlessness. But I couldn't tell them what kept me from the sleep I needed. Nor could I tell them that those times I did sleep offered no rest.

Then I got sick.

It started as odd stomach aches, annoying but something I could ignore. As time passed, my pain grew. From discomfort, it became more and more debilitating. My doctor was baffled, as were the specialists he sent me to. Tests found none of the tell-tale cells that would indicate I had cancer. Finally, an MRI finally found something, what the doctor less than helpfully described as an 'undefined mass' in my stomach. He wanted to do a finer scan, but the machine would not be free again for a week. They gave me 'pain management' medication, and told me to return.

The medicine, huge pills that looked like something for a horse, did what the doctors said they'd do. Within an hour of taking the first one, the pain was little more than a nagging twinge at the edge of perception. But the pills also brought something else, a very unwelcome guest. They brought sleep, sleep that would not be denied. No matter how I fought, my eyes kept sagging shut. My last memory was sitting in my favorite chair, struggling to stay awake; the next, I was in the dream.

This dream soon turns different. Instead of overlaying my face, the woman's face slowly materialized next to mine, like she were standing behind me looking over my shoulder. I see a hand rise, descend, and felt a touch on my shoulder. My mind tells me it is impossible. I *know* nothing can touch me, can harm me, not in a dream.

But it is real. I can feel the pressure of each of those fingers on my shoulder. I feel warmth were they rest upon me. I scream, but I do not wake up. Behind me, the woman waits. She neither smiles nor frowns, her face a blank mask except for her eyes. In them, I see amusement, and the willingness to wait until I stop screaming, to wait as if she has all the time in the world. I master the fear that always

strangles me when I saw that face and stop screaming. She nods, once, a motion much like my own. Then, she speaks.

“So, this time you can’t escape? Now, I can finally confront you, murderer.”

“Are you crazy? I’ve never hurt anyone, let alone murdered anyone.”

Her eyes harden. “Liar! You *are* a murderer, and I will exact revenge from you!”

I want to turn around, to face her instead of arguing with a reflection, but my feet, my whole body, are frozen in place. I can’t even turn my head. Only my eyes and lips are at my command. I feel panic rising and try to force it down. “Fine, if I’m a murderer, who did I kill? When am I supposed to have killed them?”

Her eyes narrow, and her grip on my shoulder tightens. “Don’t play the innocent! You know who you killed, and you know when you killed them too!” Her grip tightens until I feel her fingernails dig into my flesh. Her lips thin, exposing her teeth as they stretch into a fierce smile. “So, you can get away? Only for a while, murderer, only for a short while.” Her presence begins to fade, and in that final moment, I hear the thing I fear the most. “I’ll be waiting for you, and *when* you come back, I’ll make you pay!”

I wake up on the floor, arms wrapped around my legs, knees pulled as tight as I can pull them to my chest. My throat is raw like I have screamed all night, and my shirt clings to me, soaked in a stinking fear-sweat. I force myself upright and look at the clock. It’s 6:30 in the morning, and the patch of sky visible through the window is growing light. I wonder if this is how the rest of my nights will be? And if it is, will my sanity survive the week?

The pain in my midsection begins to reassert itself. But take another pain pill, and possibly face that angry presence? No. I pull out a favorite book to try to distract myself, but it is no use. Every minute, every second, the pain increases. It increases, becomes like a wild animal trying to claw its way out of my belly, and I give in. Time passes, the pain recedes, and I feel my eyes sagging again. They are starting to close for what I fear will be the last time before sleep claims me when my cell chirps at me. I know the voice on the other end of the call, my internal medicine specialist, but it seems to be coming from a million miles away.

“Mr. Sanchez, it’s Doctor Linden. We’ve had a patient cancel their MRI appointment. If you can get to the clinic in the next hour, we can get your scans done and, hopefully, get a handle on what’s going on.”

I mutter something that doesn’t make sense even to me, and the voice on the other end picks up on my state. “Sir, are you having a reaction to your pain medications? Sir?” I can’t even work up the energy to answer, all my body wants to do is sleep. I hear a distant voice shouting. It wants my attention, but I can’t make myself even bother to try. “Help is on the way, Mr. Sanchez. Just hang on, sir, help is on the way.” The voice sounds concerned, and I know I should stay awake, but my eyes sag shut. Sleep takes me again.

There is no mirror in my dream this time. Now, I am in a vast space, a dark plain that extends beyond sight. And I am alone. She, who ever she is, is not here. In a way, this complete emptiness is more frightening than she ever was.

“Are you afraid, murderer?”

Her voice is soft, hardly a whisper, but the words are spoken so close to my ear I feel the warm breath that makes them. I jerk away from the unexpected closeness, and unlike every previous dream, I move. Free of my imprisonment, I turn to face her. She is shorter than me, but only slightly, and her rounded body reminds me of my mother. Her face, so like mine, is lined, her features drawn together in an angry scowl.

“Why do you keep calling me a murderer? I don’t remember *ever* seeing you, and I’ve never hurt anyone in my life. So how can I be a murderer?”

She steps close to me, close enough that I feel uncomfortable. Her voice, when she speaks, is filled with a cold, contained anger. “But you *are* a murderer. *You* killed me in cold blood, *you* snuffed out my life without a thought.”

Her statement makes no sense. “But if I killed you, why can’t I *remember* killing you? Are you saying I’ve somehow repressed the memory of murdering you?”

“Oh, you remember killing me...if you didn’t, how could I be talking to you?”

“You could be...I don’t know, a figment of my imagination, or a manifestation of my wish that I hadn’t been an only child.”

“You wanted a sister?”

The anger drops from her face like a curtain falling, replaced by an intent gaze like she’s trying to catch me in a lie.

“It might sound selfish, but a sister, a brother, hell, even a *dozen* siblings. My parents heaped all their hopes and dreams on me. I hated the expectations, the pressure to succeed. If I’d had brothers and sisters, I’d have been happier, and maybe they’d have been happier too.”

Her face changes. The suspicion, the doubt, the anger, all of it drops away, leaving a stunned stare.

Then I see something I had never thought to see on that cold, cynical, face. Tears well in her eyes, run down her face. When she speaks, her voice is a hollow echo of what it has been before. “You wanted me? You didn’t kill me because you hated me?”

I open my mouth to tell her that I didn’t know her, so I couldn’t have hated her, but her scream stops the words in my throat. A broad red slash appears on her left arm, and when her eyes fix on mine, I see the hate, the anger renewed a thousand times over. She charges me, and her hands go to my throat. Her fingers, surprisingly strong, sink into my flesh and I find myself gasping for breath. As she strangles me, she screams in my face.

“Liar! You kept me talking so you could kill me again! I won’t go, not without you!”

I try to free myself, but as it has in all my other dreams, my body refuses to respond. The blood thunders in my temples, my vision darkens, but even knowing death is close at hand, I can still do nothing. My sight dims to nothingness, and the last thing I see is not my attacker, but my Mother. She smiles, and as she always did, she looks sad as she does it. I hear voice one final time.

“It’ll be all right, Paulie, it’ll be all right.”

My nose tells me I am not dead. It brings me the smell of a hospital room, so familiar from my vigil over Father. I am surrounded by the same harsh chemical scent filled with a background of human filth that I associate with a hospital room. My body comes back to me next. It tells me I am lying on my back with something stuck to both of my arms. There is a steadily beeping, the noise far too loud for my comfort, and my brain tells me it is a heart monitor. My eyes are reluctant to open, but I force them to obey, and I see off-white ceiling tiles set in a white metal framework. It’s a hospital ceiling, if ever I saw one.

Something is pressing against my left hand, and I shift my head to see what it is. A white cord, ending in an oblong box studded with buttons...the same sort of control and communications pendant my Father had at his bedside. I fumble with the box, stabbing the big button with the nurse’s head outlined on it until a young woman comes in.

“It’s good to see you awake, Mr. Sanchez, I hear you gave the doctors quite a scare. Do you need help, maybe something to drink?”

She says drink, and I realize my mouth is dry, so dry my tongue feels like sandpaper. I try to speak, manage a croak, and purse my lips like I’m sucking on a straw. She nods, grabs a foam cup, and places the straw sticking out of it in my mouth. I suck on it and cold water floods my mouth. I keep sucking on the straw until I’m sucking air, open my mouth, and let her put the cup down. I try to speak again, and I’m happy to hear even the rough echo of my voice that comes out.

“What happened? I remember being at home, and the doctor calling...then, I’m here.”

I notice her name tag. “Brandy” shrugs as she answers me. “I don’t know the details, but you’ve only been on the floor for a couple of hours. Before that, you were in ICU for three days. The doctors haven’t made their rounds yet this morning, so you should be able to find out what happens when they come around. Until then, would you like something to eat? Breakfast was served about the time you

were being brought in, and lunch won't be for another two hours, but I can get you something from the ready fridge. Maybe some ice cream?"

Ice cream, even three of the small tubs they serve out, does little more than take the edge off my hunger. Five minutes is all it takes for me to know there is nothing on the TV besides daytime programming, so I turn it back off and wait.

Some time during that wait, I fall asleep. I know I was asleep because I have memories of the sunlight slanting low through the window, then the light is shining down from a much higher angle. An older woman with skin as dark as mine and a stethoscope is standing by my bed, her finger pressed against the inside of my wrist.

"Good, you're awake, Mr. Sanchez. I'm Doctor Bajaj, your attending physician. How are you feeling?"

"Honestly, I feel confused. Do you know what happened to me?"

She picks up a tablet I hadn't noticed on my bedside table and begins tapping the screen. A few swipes, and her eyes begin to scan the screen. "I wasn't part of the team that operated on you, but according to the admission notes, you were brought in unconscious and rushed into the ER." A pause as she reads, then her eyes widen, and she flicks the tablet's surface again. Her hesitation is beginning to worry me. What could she be reading that would cause her to stop so suddenly? Her eyes meet mine, then shift away... and I felt like she was saying something the wasn't entirely true. "All the details of what was done aren't here, but it does say you underwent emergency surgery, and that you suffered a cardiac incident caused by acute loss of blood which lead to you being placed in our ICU until your surgical team was satisfied with you condition. Your surgical team should visit you sometime this afternoon, so you can get the details from them. Now, I'd like to listen to your heart and lungs...."

I'd seen what happened next done to my Father and Mother, but being on the receiving end of it helped me understand why they frowned through their examinations. Doctor Bajaj was perfectly civil to me, yet so detached that I felt more like an animated piece of meat than a human being. Finished, she tapped the tablet, I guess making notes, then addressed me.

"Your heart and lungs sound good, but your blood pressure is still low. I'm going to recommend that you remain in the hospital for at least another day, and I'll be ordering another unit of saline to help build your blood volume. I'll be back this afternoon..." and that was it. She walks out without giving me any information, leaving me feeling as if I'd ceased to exist the moment she made her decision on my treatment.

I was in a room by myself, and staring at the walls soon got boring. I was spared having to resort to watching TV doctors pretend to treat pretend patients by a cheerful young man who brought me a newspaper, then handed me the day's menu.

"I'll be back later to get your order, or you can call the kitchen and they'll put your lunch order on the cart. The doctors don't have you on a special diet, so you can order anything you want."

I hadn't noticed how close to noon it was. My stomach growled, letting me know it was looking forward to me eating something. "Thanks. If you'll tell me how to call the kitchen, you won't have to come back."

He points a number printed across the bottom of the page, "Just call that number, sir." leaving me feeling like an idiot. I thank him and he goes about his business. Lunch, I soon find, is not going to be a five-star affair. I pick what's described as an 'open-faced sandwich' and coffee, call it in, and open the paper to occupy my mind. Ten minutes later, I've read everything of interest.

Lunch, when it arrives, could generously be described as 'inoffensive'. It has no real taste, not even much of a scent despite its description. The coffee is hot, bitter and completely lacking in stimulation. I eat and drink all of it knowing that ordering something else will not improve the situation. The server returns, clears the dishes away without comment, and I am left with my boredom.

Sleep come to me, but I don't realize I've slept until I note the different angle of the shadows on the wall. What woke me up isn't hard to figure out. The familiar Dr. Bajaj stands beside my bed with an older man and a woman who looks like she should still be in college. They are discussing me in the

cold, abstract terms doctors use, but the medical jargon is thick enough that I can't understand whether I am living or dying. I shift my position and they realize I am awake. The man approaches me, pitching his voice to give the impression he wishes to engage me and failing.

“Mr Sanchez, I'm Doctor Werten, the doctor who operated on you. How are you feeling? How is the pain you were experiencing?”

Until he asked, I hadn't noticed the absence of pain. How could I miss something that had so been the focus of my life? “It's...gone, doctor. Do you know what was causing it?”

His eyes, which had been fixed on me, shift away. “Yes, I do. Your spine was under pressure from a foreign mass. That was triggering your pain episodes. The mass was also partially wrapped around your aorta, but what the scans didn't show was that there were several small blood vessels running through the mass that connected to your aorta. I'm sorry to admit it, but I severed one of those, and you nearly bled out before I could close it off. After that, I kept an eye out for more vessels and managed to seal the rest off without further incident. Once your blood volume has returned to normal, you'll be free leave and go back to your normal routine.”

I heard the words 'foreign mass' and the rest of it became minor details. “What do you mean when you say you removed a 'foreign mass'? Was it cancer?”

Dr. Werten's eyes begin shifting around, like he's looking for something, anything, to look at but me.

“Mr. Sanchez, do you know what a vanishing twin is?” I shake my head, and he continues. “In about ten percent of pregnancies where more than one embryo is formed, one of the embryos will absorb the other one. It's not something that causes problems...or I should say it's not *normally* something that causes problems. Usually, if there's anything left of the absorbed twin, it's fragments. The most common form it exhibits in the surviving twin is stray teeth, hair and other fragments in a benign cyst. But in your case,” He pauses, and a chill sweep over me. What did he find inside me? I don't have to wonder. “In your case, we found significant development. Teeth, hair, even a partial skeleton. We also found...well, we found what we think were undeveloped brain cells. But important thing is that the growth has been removed, and you should be free of pain from this point forward.”

Now, the chill I feel is like I've been submerged in an ice-covered pond. I don't want to know, but I ask. “Dr. Werten...could you tell if the twin was female?”

His eyes meet mine, and I see he is shocked by the question. “We'd have to do a DNA test to find out. If you don't mind he asking, why do you ask?”

She'd said I had killed her. I even heard her screams as they'd removed her. Had she been alive inside me all this time? Was that why I'd always had the dream? How could I explain that to him? I can't.

“Oh, no reason, no reason at all.”