

Helen

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short story narrated in the first person. Susan is a woman haunted by a dark secret that has locked itself away in the chambers of her mind only to resurface every night in the form of a terrifying dream.

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1 - Dreams

I stand upon the edge of a wasteland. Before me lies a great plain. The grass emerald green infused with the silver of early morning dew. The trees, majestic, strong and proud, their spreading branches swaying gently in the light summers breeze. The scent of flowers hangs pungent on the air. Behind me lies desolation, death and despair these are the building blocks of this land, that make up every last blade of withered, yellowing grass.

Thunder like the crash of a thousand symbols, sounds overhead, deep purple clouds roll across the dark sky. The wind howls, seeming almost to scream as if in pain. The sound chills me to the bone and a blind, wild panic seizes me. I cannot see. I am blinded by the darkness. Stumbling forward. But I can't escape. The fields green as ever lie feet away yet are kept from me by, some force blocking my path. Some wall that prevents passage. The scream on the wind consumes me. My whole world consists of the voice and nothing else.

I awake drenched in sweat, shivering uncontrollably. It had seemed so close, so real. I had not thought of it for weeks. Somehow I'd managed to drive the memory away, but it seems that it has managed to worm its way into my subconscious, like a snake in the grass.

A wall of water. Someone, crying out desperately. I have to help them...

I shake myself, there was nothing I could have done and I was being silly. Swinging my legs over the side of the bed I get up. There was some thing I had to do.

2 - Photographs

The key scrapes in the lock. Silently I push the door open. My eyes take in the hallway. A carpet of dust, inches thick, coats dark wooden floorboards, festoons of cobwebs cover every surface and small, sliver framed, black and white, photographs hang at varying angles on the wall, the wallpaper faded and peeling slightly, dark brown stains of damp clearly visible. I stride swiftly across the floor, my footsteps muffled, and into the dark, musty living room. This room is in even more of a state of decay than the hallway. My eyes travel over the armchairs and sofa, moth-eaten and threadbare, a small, round coffee table, infested with woodworm and an open chest of drawers. Here, as in the hallway, is littered with photographs, well she had been something of a fanatic; they cover every inch of bare wall or unused surface. One picture in particular draws my eye; I lean to get a better look. And my heart jolts with fear. *The roar of a waterfall. A face shining with excitement, full of warm, friendly laughter, changing with horrible speed to fear, utter terror...*

She stares back at me. Faded, yet still seeming so full of life. I replace the photograph. My heart is thudding, like a hammer upon an anvil. The shock of seeing her there smiling and yet knowing she can smile no more. It's stupid I know, but all the same.

I walk over to the open chest of drawers and start to sort through the contents. Like everything the chest and the few of the objects inside were draped in spider webs, like a silvery shawl. In the topmost drawer I find a handful of paper and an inkbottle, placing them on one side, I proceed to the next; I find nothing of interest until the very bottom of the chest, reaching inside I pull out a wad of crumpled letters and photographs. I heave a great hacking cough and sneeze as a cloud of dust billows into the air; I turn my attention to the photos. I smile to myself I had no idea she'd kept them, all this time. The first shows two girls one, the taller, myself and the other, her. We both have our hair, mine silver blond; hers ebony black, tied back in long straight plaits held with a scarlet ribbon and dressed in identical, grey, gymslips, thick woolly tights and matching blue boots. Our first day at secondary school, we almost looked like twins, in fact most people had always assumed we were sisters, one was never seen without the other. A lone tear trickles down my cheek and lands with a soft splash on the picture. Rubbing furiously at my eyes, I stuff the pictures roughly back into the drawer, what did it matter anyway, it didn't not now.

A hand reaching out, from the foaming broil mine drawing nearer to clasp it, tears pouring down my face. Her, desperate, screaming, pleading...

3 - Letters

Slamming the drawer, with a bang like a gun, I turn away still rubbing my eyes. Sinking into an armchair, I draw the letters to me sifting through them, the shadow of a grin flitting over my face. They're the secret letters we sent each other when we kids, of course our parents knew all about them really, we just used to imagine that we alone held the knowledge, we even had our code. We could just as easily have lent out our bedroom windows and called across to each other, but it was the excitement of waiting for the next letter, full of plans and schemes, that made it fun.

"Dear Helen, Mother says I'm to finish my homework before I come out and it's bound to take all night. Tomorrow though we shall start on the tree house as planned..."

"Dear Susan, Life here is so dull. I can't wait until tomorrow; we will go down to the stream and search for tadpoles, like we did last year it'll be such fun..."

Standing up, I go to return the letters to the battered oak drawer, but as I do so something falls out of the pile. Fluttering like an autumn leaf to the ground, stooping I pick it up and glance at front. I stand arm in arm with a young man. He is extraordinarily handsome. He is tall, strikingly so, his eyes are the colour of the sea on a bright summer's morning and his hair black as the night sky, Geoffrey. I'd been going to marry him; he left me at the altar.

"It was my fault, my fault he left you. He left you for me."

Helen's voice echoes horribly inside my head. Where had the words come from?

A hand reaching out, from the foaming broil mine drawing nearer to clasp it, tears pouring down my face. Her, desperate, screaming, pleading. My hand withdraws. For a second I look into her eyes with loathing; she'd once left me alone, now to let her see how it felt. No. My hand plunges into the water. For a moment my fingers brushes against her arm, but then she's pulled under and I can't reach.

I'd killed her. It was me all along. It was my fault. My jealousy had destroyed an innocent life. I sink to my knees and weep silently onto the floor.

END

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