

## “Snuggle Buddies” by Ava Jo

### Personal Narrative

I’m lucky that I don’t have a fear of spiders, tight spaces, or flying on airplanes—but what I do have is a fear of the dark. I can’t shut the door to my room while I sleep at night, and sometimes I have to listen to music to distract myself. I’m not distracting myself from the fact that, in the dark, my sense of sight is almost gone. I’m distracting myself from the fact that my sense of hearing is heightened.

Our house is more than one hundred years old. The floorboards creak. The basement makes noises that sound like a person walking around, and I can hear them because the walls and floors are so thin. And the only thing that scares me more than hearing nothing is hearing a little bit of something.

This fear might partially stem from the fact that I read many books where terrible things happen. Sometimes, the main character hears some suspicious noise before being assaulted by robbers, assassins, wizards, monsters, the undead, etc. Take *Mockingjay Part II*, for example. The brigade of characters penetrating the capital hear an odd scuttling noise coming from a tunnel, then—boom!—half the group is killed by corpse-esque creatures.

Despite knowing that nothing like that will ever happen to me, my mind imagines crazy scenarios against my will. Even when I was younger and not yet reading books that scary, I’d sometimes have trouble falling asleep. One of the worst spells came in fourth grade. Every morning I would wake up thinking I’d be fine the next night, and every night I’d almost have a panic attack thinking of going to sleep. I’d try not to listen to the noises the house was making,

but of course that only made me listen harder, and then I would be convinced someone was there. No matter what I told myself, I couldn't banish the fear that everything I had, including my life, could be ripped away in a heartbeat.

It didn't help that I *also* had a fear of falling asleep.

No matter how many people I asked, it seemed I was the only one with this particular fear. Even my parents couldn't understand it. But whenever I thought of my brain falling unconscious for the night, I would freeze up and panic would well up inside me. I'd stare at the ceiling, trying not to cry, wishing morning would come. For me, the most frightening thing possible is not being *me*. This includes death, memory loss, and strangely enough, sleep. I felt like if I let down my guard, I'd be dragged under against my will. One moment I'm here, the next I'm completely unresponsive and unable to wake myself up if necessary.

For a while, I slept in the same bed as my younger brother. Having someone else there helped me calm myself down. After my parents said he had to go sleep in his own room, I would wake up my folks at twelve o'clock and crawl into bed with them. But none of these things was a permanent solution. Nothing seemed to be able to fix my problem.

Ironically, I love the actual act of sleeping. I love it because in my dreams I can be anything, like a wizard or someone with superpowers, and I can own anything I want to own. I can fly, swim, or fall. Soon I started recording my dreams. I was surprised to notice that most of them had plotlines, like a story. That's essentially what I was living in, at night. A story.

If I ever woke up in the early morning, I'd be able to go right back to sleep easily to preserve the story I was engrossed in. It was just going between day-mode and night-mode that was hard for me.

This is how a normal night would go:

I hop into bed and stare at the ceiling. I start to think about being unconscious for a whole night. An hour passes. I constantly feel myself slipping away. Whenever my mind starts to wander, I wrench myself back to reality. Repeat until 12 o'clock. I give up and bug my parents to let me in their bed.

Finally, when I was starting to think my fear of sleeping would never go away, we adopted our dog Mochi. She's a small golden-haired mutt with floppy ears and a very obvious underbite, and she loves to cuddle up next to us whenever we're sitting down. Mochi wasn't potty trained at first, so she had to sleep in her cage next to my bed. Still, I hoped that her presence would help me sleep better. Unfortunately, I quickly discovered that having a living thing that I was responsible for in my room at night—something that would often wake me up whimpering because she had to go to the potty—just added to my anxiety. So Mochi went into my parents' room until she was completely trained. I kept having trouble sleeping, but I had found that I could fall asleep *while* reading, so I was doing a little better most nights.

Eventually, Mochi stopped urinating every two hours, and she was able to move in with me again. My parents wanted her to sleep on the foot of my bed, but instead Mochi crawled under the sheets and curled up by my feet. I found that having her warm little body pressed up against me was comforting. I suddenly became more relaxed at night, because I figured that with her superior sense of smell and hearing, the dog would start barking if anyone did enter the house. Sometimes, Mochi would sleep with her head on my pillow, or on the pillow next to me, with the rest of her body under the covers—like a human sleeps. In the moments before conking out, she'd look at me with her big brown eyes, and sometimes she would open her mouth wide

and yawn, making a funny little noise almost like a cat's meow. After only a few days of having Mochi as a roommate, I found that I was sleeping better. I was starting to overcome my fear.

It's common knowledge that dogs are empathetic, but I didn't understand just how much until Mochi started living with us. Whenever I'm scared, or mad, or cold, she'll rest her little head on my lap and stare up at me with her big, dark eyes. She licks me a lot, too, and it's cute, even if it's also annoying and her breath smells like poisonous gas.

Mochi isn't a very big dog. She weighs about sixteen pounds, and there's no way she could ever be a guard dog because she loves everyone. If a burglar came into the house, she'd probably run downstairs and roll onto her back for a belly rub. Even so, her presence gives me comfort. She's totally carefree, and she only lives in the moment. If we ever step on her paw, she'll forget it in less than a minute. Her only concerns are when her next walk is and when she's going to eat.

I wish I could be more like Mochi. Not in the sense that I want to have a simple life, but I want to be able to let things go as easily as she can. I heard from someone once that the only way to be entirely happy is to live in the moment. To be peaceful and only worry about what's right in front of you. I know there will be plenty of time for worrying in my life. If I start off now, it'll just get worse.

But none of that is as easy as it seems. A lot of things feel like the end of the world, even though they're not. For example, when I don't have any pants left in my pants drawer, when I get twenty mosquito bites on my leg during a vacation, and when I get hit in the face with a basketball at school. Or when I'm afraid to go to sleep. It sounds ridiculous when I spell it out on

paper, but my fear doesn't listen to logic. It doesn't listen when I tell it it's stupid, or when I ask it to go away.

This week, I read that Apple launched a campaign to stop HIV and AIDS. When I read about this terrible disease and how so many people are suffering from it, I realized how small my own problems are compared to some other people's. I am lucky to be happy, healthy, and getting a great education, not to mention fortunate enough to be able to live in San Francisco. Even if I can't always prevent myself from feeling anxious at night, I can live with my occasional fear of falling asleep. And I'm certain that someday I will get over it completely.

One night not long ago, Mochi nuzzled into my left arm while we were lying in my bed. I had a stuffed animal tucked under my right arm, and I was staring off into space. I turned to look at Mochi. She licked me. I smiled. Then, something miraculous happened. I nodded off to sleep, my book forgotten on my nightstand.