

Warning: The following story has images of trauma, emotional abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

Reader discretion is advised.

The Demons Who Watch

By Rebekah Rhodes

I can't sleep. Not now, not ever. All I've known was this dreadful insomnia. I can't sleep. My mind is a terrible place filled with monsters and demons of my own creation. They're everywhere. I see them when I close my eyes. I always have. They're always there. I can't sleep. The monsters are horrifying beyond description. I can't sleep. I'm panting. I feel clammy. I can't sleep. The darkness is overwhelming. I can't sleep. What was that noise? I can't sleep. Just the house creaking. I can't sleep. I can't sleep. I can't—

There it is. The hints of light shining barely through the window. That means I'm safe. There is no more darkness to be frightened of. I calm down my heavy breathing and lay back down onto my pillow. I finally close my eyes to rest for a few moments. Only an hour before I have to start getting ready for the day. I savor every minute of sleep I get because I know this will repeat again and again.

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The sound of my alarm. My zombie-ish body getting ready. There isn't enough coffee in the world to make me any less tired. My routine is the same. Get ready, coffee, get to morning

classes, lunch, coffee, afternoon classes, go home, more coffee, homework, dinner, get ready for bed, don't sleep. The days I do get sleep are when I am so horribly tired that I basically collapse onto my bed into a dreamless slumber. It's when I do dream that my insomnia kicks in. It's as if I am afraid to sleep. It's as if I am afraid of myself.

Morning classes are the hardest because I get my one hour of sleep with the first sign of the sunrise. It's a curse really. It's not that I fall asleep during classes, it's just that I am so tired it hurts every fabric of my being to be surrounded by others. I see my friends at lunch, and we usually discuss what's going on that day or the previous day. I always feel anxious during my afternoon classes because it means the school day is almost over. It's close to having to go home. Close to having to face my demons again. I don't want to go back home, but I can't stay here or anywhere else. Once I'm home it's the usual of homework and dinner. I try to stay in my room as much as possible to avoid *them*.

The long night is always grueling. So painfully slow. I'd do anything to distract myself, but I don't have my phone. I have to put my phone and laptop in my parents' room to charge. I'm not allowed to have them with me after 9 p.m. Having only my imagination to distract me, I resort to a sort of daydreaming. When I get so tired, my daydreaming turns into dreaming. Those dreams turn into nightmares.

So here I lay, making up a story in my head to pass the time. This story comforts me. Helps me ignore the demons around me. The demon that snores loud enough that I hear it from down the hall. The demon that walks into my room to see if I really am asleep. These demons haunt my dreams and every waking hour. So here I lay. Waiting. Listening. Dreaming.

My mind wanders down a rabbit hole, but not one that takes me to Wonderland. A rabbit hole that takes me straight to hell where my nightmares reside. I awake in a panic. Tears are streaming down my face. I'm terrified. I hug my pillow for comfort until I can calm down. My clock says it's only three a.m. Only three hours to go until sunrise. I'm awake now and forever. The sunrise can't come sooner. The nightmarish creature from my mind is burned into my sight.

I'm trying to think of something else, but all I think of is that creature and that dream.

Why is my mind like this? I think to myself, still sobbing into my pillow.

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My demons don't take a break from haunting me. Of course, they're always in my dreams, but they're also always in every waking hour. I can't escape them. I can't escape this perfect cage they've created for me.

The demon upstairs holds my sanity in its monstrous claws. It holds the last time I remember going outside to play. All I do is sit at my desk and study. I don't go outside anymore. I'm not allowed to. The demon and I know it. The demon tells me I have to make good grades. I have to get into a good college. I have to ace every test. Anything below an A is not good enough. I'm not good enough. I'm never good enough to feed the demon's ambitions. The demon holds me on a pedestal so high that I can no longer see the earth below me. It's unsteady up here, and I'm afraid of falling.

The demon watches as I work on today's homework. It's not due until next week, but that doesn't matter. I have to finish it now. I have to please the hungry beast whose mouth is

salivating over my shoulder. My shoulder is gross and soggy from the drool. I want it to stop, but the only way to get it to stop is to finish this assignment. Its breath is moist on my neck. It's hard to concentrate like this, but I have to. I always have to.

Once it is satisfied, it leaves for the day. I let out a sigh of relief. I'm free from now until the next one calls my name. The pressure of having to always succeed has crushed me. I can't move from the weight, all I can do is to sit here and stare out of my window overlooking the front yard. I long for those days when I was a child when I didn't have this pressure. I was able to go outside then. I wasn't afraid of anything. My reflection in the window stares back at me. I can see the cry for help in my eyes. It is only now that I feel my soul start to crumble apart.

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The demon in the living room always wants to sit and chat for a while. But I usually am the one who listens as they tell me what to do and what's wrong with me. If they think I'm eating too much, they tell me what a pig I am, and I should lose weight. If they think I'm eating too little, they tell me to eat more and gain more weight. It never makes sense. I am lost and confused. What am I?

They tell me I have to act more ladylike. I have to marry a rich white man it approves. *I know you're asexual, but you better not be a lesbian*, it tells me through sharp teeth. Its words are as sharp as knives. *You are female, be like one*, it says in response to me coming out as nonbinary. It tells me how to dress, how to act, how to obey. I have no say in the matter. I'm its puppet. I am no longer in control of myself. My soul screams in agony inside this porcelain doll.

My soul is not heard. My soul is trapped. My soul is silenced. The demon plays with this porcelain doll, playing dress up, playing tea party. All while my soul watches from the doll's glassy eyes. This is not me, but who the demon wants me to be. My soul screams, and nothing but a crack in the doll's porcelain skin appears.

This demon watches my every move in the house. Its many eyes are everywhere, always surveilling me. I always feel them behind me, watching. Waiting. Waiting for me to fuck things up again. Waiting for any moment that my soul shines through, so that they can break it. So that they can break me like I'm a wild stallion. I'm not like my brothers. I won't drop out of school like one. I won't get addicted to drugs like the other. I'm tamer than them. My chaos is all internal waiting for the opportune moment to be set free. It's hidden under the surface. Those fools let their chaos show, and now the demon is paranoid that I will end up like them. This paranoia is like a parasite in my veins, consuming me slowly until I am nothing but pieces of inanimate flesh. Yet, I bear with the anxiety. The demon wants to see me fall apart so it can feast on my flesh some more. I will not let it win.

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Who am I? What am I? I look in the mirror, but I don't see a person. It's only an illusion of a person I don't recognize. Is that really me? It's my eyes, my hair, my nose, my lips, my body. Yet, it doesn't seem right. I fear this doppelgänger staring back at me. I fear it will trade places with me and will trap me forever.

This person staring back at me is just a persona created by the demons around me. It's who they know me as, and who I should be. It's killing me. It's not who I am, nor who I want to be. I want to create myself again. Start over. I don't want to be like this. This isn't me staring back. It's the person everyone knows me as and sees, but it's a person I can't recognize.

The demon wants me to be this stunning stereotypical female, anything else just won't do. I can't wear what I want to. Some days I just don't want to wear makeup or pretty dresses. Some days I want to feel handsome and dress more masculine. But that's blasphemy. I don't own any masculine clothes. I'm not allowed to buy any. I have to always wear makeup whether I want to or not. The demons make me present myself in a certain way to the point I don't recognize myself. It's not me. It's who they want me to be. They constructed this porcelain doll and I have to deal with it. I have to bear it. But the porcelain is getting heavy and the cracks are getting worse.

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The cracks became too noticeable and they're all my fault. I couldn't take the weight of the porcelain trapping my soul, and now it's too late. They know. The many demons start to wail and one much worse appears. I don't even want to think about it, but I know it will haunt me forever.

I can still hear it screaming hysterically at me. The gun pointed at its own head, it threatens suicide in response to the bleeding cracks in my skin. *Do you want me to die? I should just kill myself! I'm a horrible mother!* it screams. The gun wasn't loaded, but that didn't make

what was happening any better. They kept waving the gun around yelling hysterically about how I should be ashamed of myself for putting her through this. I should be ashamed for harming what she created. *You have everything! I gave you a perfect life!* she shouted.

I try to get rid of these memories, but it's impossible. The more I try to forget, the more I'm forced to remember. The screaming echoes in my mind day after day. Sure, they gave me everything. Everything but a choice. A choice to control my own life and make decisions myself. Everything is decided for me. What I wear, how I look, how I cut my hair, what I eat, how I act, where I can and cannot go, who I hang around if anyone, and more. I have no control.

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So here I lay, unable to sleep from all of the demons surrounding me. Insomnia has become my only friend inside this porcelain doll. It's so very dark in here. My soul is more fragile than the porcelain and has shattered from all these years from being trapped inside. Pieces of my soul have been long lost. I am lost, so lost. I try to find comfort in the darkness, but my mind wanders as it does. It wanders down the path into the hellish nightmares of my fucked-up mind.

I can't help but to think of all the bullshit I am forced to go through. Day after day. Year after year. I'm still their puppet. Their perfect little doll. I am silenced. The silence is deafening, and my soul's screams cannot be heard. I want to be free, but I am caged. But I am not a bird; I cannot sing. I am not allowed to utter a word.

The demons know I cannot sleep, but that's not their problem. It's not like it's their fault. It's not like their gruesome faces stare back at me when I try to sleep. It's all my fault. Everything wrong with me is my fault. My mind is fucked up because of me. The demons never want to admit their wrongs. They never want to look their problems in the eyes. They never want to admit that they were wrong. They're perfect. They can't do anything wrong. It's all my fault.

I stare up at the ceiling through the darkness, through the doll's glassy eyes. I see the demons dancing around me out of the corners of my eyes. I won't acknowledge them. I don't want to. I'm already sleep deprived as it is. I don't need them staring at me. I don't need them here. I just want to sleep. I'm so tired. So very, very tired. I just want to rest. I just want to sleep.

The demons watch in horror as I tear away at this porcelain skin I was forced to call my home. I don't want to look like this. It's not me. None of this is me. I don't want to be who they want me to be.

Pieces of porcelain crumble away as my soul tries to break free. The demons try to pick up the pieces, but they slip away into dust. I am finally in control of who I want to be. The demons start to wail hysterically at me about how I'm ruining my life. I don't care anymore. If this is ruining my life, then so be it.

Soon enough all the porcelain is gone, and all that's left is my broken soul. A broken soul that's finally free and shines bright with no apologies. I am free. I am finally free. The demons fade away back into my fucked-up mind as I drift off into sleep. My soul is exhausted after fighting for so long. I can finally rest. I can finally sleep now that I am no longer caged by these demons. They can't control me anymore. I am my own person with my own choices. I am finally free.