

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Frozen between slumber and waking, people around the world sometimes seem to see strange presences preying on their serenity.

Sleep paralysis, the inability to move when a person is waking, can be scary enough. But around the world and across the ages, people with sleep paralysis have often recalled feeling the presence of strange spirits in this twilight state between being asleep and being awake. Scientists are beginning to explore this mystery, which has been the subject of folklore in many cultures.

Sleep paralysis can also happen when someone is entering or exiting REM sleep — a stage when we dream and limb muscles are temporarily paralyzed.

While this phenomenon isn't usually dangerous, some scary things can accompany sleep paralysis. It might include feelings of dizziness, auditory illusions, even a sense there is an additional person who sneaks into the room. Most commonly, there's a feeling of pressure on the chest, a sense that the sufferer can't breathe.

Oddly, those who experience this pressing sensation often perceive a supernatural being causing the trouble. Sleep paralysis patients sometimes recall witches, demons, ghosts, and aliens (to name just a few) "sitting" on their chest and sometimes whispering frightening comments.

Such dramatic experiences invite a lot of questions. Why do some people with sleep paralysis see demons, for example, and some see witches?

Several researchers are trying to answer this centuries-old question. It's an abiding mystery going back at least centuries, when ancient Greeks recounted waking up to "the choker" or "heavy breather" resting on their chest, ready to pounce.

According to several studies, differing cultures might shape what horrifying vision surfaces during sleep paralysis. In fact, many cultures even have specific names for the frightening being who seems intent on taking a victim's breath away.

Let's begin with Brazil, where Pisadeira is said to lurk at night. Researchers José F. R. de Sá and Sérgio A. Mota-Rolim

describe Pisadeira as a crone with long, skinny fingernails who waits on the rooftop in the dark, anticipating the person to cross from sleep to wakefulness so she can pounce. Their findings in *Frontiers in Psychology* detail how, in some parts of Brazil, this visitor is scrawny, while in other parts of the country, she is large and sometimes appears wearing a red cap. Either way, for just a few seconds to around two minutes, the perception of Pisadeira horrifies people.

Meanwhile, in the Catalonia region of Spain, the Pesanta is a large beast, often a black dog or a scary cat, who invades the home and takes away the sleeping body's breath and causes nightmares. De Sa and Mota-Rolim continue northward to Scandinavia, where the monster is a supernatural, cursed mare who visits townsfolk in their sleep and rests on their chest quietly, forcing them to have nightmares as they begin to awake. Indeed, in Northern mythology, "mare" comes from "mara," a spirit who torments or suffocates those asleep.

In Mexico, the entity is quite large, and the experience is widely believed to begin when an evil presence lying beside the person is felt while sleeping. Alejandro Jimenez Genchi and his colleagues report in *Psychiatry Clinical Neuroscience* that upon waking, Mexican adolescents (where sleep paralysis is more predominant) encounter a phenomenon popularly described, in translation, as a "dead body climbed on top of me." Why there is a high prevalence in adolescents is not fully understood.

On the other side of the globe in China, a growing population of people encounters ghost oppression phenomenon, where a phantom called Yan causes paralysis upon entering wakefulness. According to Yun-Kwok Wing and fellow researchers whose work was presented by the American Sleep Disorders Association and Sleep Research Society, the first time the Yan character was recorded was

124 A.D. in one of China's earliest dictionaries.

In nearby Japan, "Kanashibari" is the fearful apparition during sleep paralysis. Thomas Heffron, writing at sleepeducation.org, says Kanashibari was named in connection with Buddhist monks believed to have magical powers to paralyze others.

The Inuit's interpretation of sleep paralysis was studied by researchers Laurence J. Kirmayer and Samuel Law in *Transcultural Psychiatry*. They found that in that indigenous culture in the Arctic, "shamans" cast spells during sleep to cause paralysis and visit in the appearance of a shapeless or headless presence.

In Canada, some sleepers encounter "Old Hag Syndrome," where the Old Hag can supposedly run around rooftops and houses as she awaits the proper time to show her face. She's perceived to jump on a sleeper's chest in an attempt to take the breath away. The Old Hag may have originated from folklore, particularly from Newfoundland, according to Heffron.

In the United States, our melting pot of so many cultures, the illusion of breath takers appears in all of these forms: ghosts, witches, demons, beasts, and dead bodies. A particularly Americanized version of the breath takers manifests itself as aliens, and there have been discussions of the possibility of "alien abductions."

