

Bleeding on the Rug

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Published:



“He’s bleeding on the rug, on the rug on the rug...”

Two days of lifting heavy boxes for the move to the new house had sucked the ever-loving life out of Dane. He should have been able to sleep through an elephant stampede. But the sound of Matti’s frantic whispering shocked him out of his dream like a hooked fish yanked from a pond. There was something about his wife’s voice that had the power to weave through his fatigues and mental blocks and grasp him.

“...bleeding on the rug on the rug...”

Sleeptalking was not uncommon for Matti; it was in fact a trait of hers Dane found endearing. On several occasions over the years he’d listened with a smile as she conversed with the denizens of her dream worlds. Sometimes a conversation with him, sometimes a chat with friends, sometimes just pure nonsense that made him giggle. But from the sound of her voice now, she was engaged in a nightmare. He decided he would give her a reassuring squeeze and tell her she was just dreaming.

“...on the rug, on the rug...”

“Roll over.” He rubbed her side.

Shadows hung heavy in front of him as his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness of the bedroom. The clock beside the bed threw sanguine light onto the nightstand in the form of digital numbers. One rule Dane had while sleeping was to never look at the time; counting the hours until work always gave him anxiety.

Too late. He saw it was 3:45 and compulsively did the math until he had to get up.

“Matti,” he grumbled again.

“...bleeding on the rug on the rug on the rug...”

His wife lay on her back, auburn hair in waves across her face, not a typical sleeping position for her. She was a fetal sleeper, often cradling one of the many teddy bears Dane had given her on birthdays and anniversaries. This position looked too rigid, almost forced, like she'd been tied to a board. And there was something about the way she was repeating the words that didn't feel right. Her voice was hushed, the words fast and sharp, like she was trying to say it as many times as she could in under a minute.

“Honey, wake up, you're dreaming.” He grabbed her upper arm and gave it a little shake. Usually, this method resulted in angry instructions not to wake her up for no good reason. He'd recount the episode to her in the morning, like he always did, and she'd tell him he was crazy and out to sabotage her sleep. Such was their little joke.

But she didn't stir as he touched her, just kept on repeating the sentence, which was beginning to creep Dane out. Who in her dream was bleeding on the rug?

“Honey, you're having a nightmare. C'mon, roll over.”

“He's bleeding on the rug bleeding on the rug...”

He shook her again, this time harder, hoping some subliminal part of her mind would sense it and she'd at least roll over angrily.

Still, Matti didn't respond to his commanding nudge, which shook the hair from her face.

With his mind inherently doing math problems—three hours until I get up, I'll never get back to sleep at this rate—Dane gave it a second while his eyes adjusted. Finally, her face swam into view.

He gasped.

Her eyes were open, staring up at the ceiling. Her skin, pasty white, shined with sweat.

The muscles in his body snapped to attention and he sat upright, a reserve of energy suddenly powering him. What the...?

Her mouth moved quickly as she spoke, like a mouse chewing on a bread crumb: “He's bleeding on the rug, on the rug on the rug...”

“Matti, what's going on? Talk to me. Matti? Matti?”

Letting her go for a moment, he leaned over and turned on the bedside lamp. The room jumped to life, the shadows retreating in the wake of navy blue curtains, a pale green comforter, lilac walls, and boxes of clothes and accessories that sat in piles near the closet, ready for the morning's move. She did not respond to the

light, remaining consistent in her rapid decree that someone was bleeding on the rug.

Urgency welled up in his chest; he grabbed her head and shook it, said, "You're freaking me out. Wake up! Baby, c'mon!"

"He's bleeding on the rug on the rug on the rug..." Eyes still open. Staring through Dane as if he were made of glass.

A cold, crippling sense of helplessness rendered him immobile. What the hell was going on? Was it a seizure? Did she need medical attention? Oh God, please don't let something be wrong, he thought. Not his wife. He'd have to be committed if something happened to her. The depth of his co-dependence came from left field and hit him hard. It was more than the feeling one gets when they lose something they never knew they had. He *knew* what he had in Matti; he just never figured he *could* lose it. Now he was flooded with doubt, and the frailty of life and love and marriage became something tangible, something breakable. Despite the fights and bickering, he loved her on a level too complicated to explain. She was simply a part that completed him, and here she was in a state of duress, scaring the living shit out of him.

Your wife is having a breakdown, Dane. She's non-responsive. Just pick up the phone and dial 911. Yes, he thought, that's something he could do, that was a plan, a way to break the iron grip of fear that now held him.

There was a phone on the small desk near the wardrobe. Throwing the covers off of his feet, he rushed to it and dialed 911. When he realized the only sound he could hear was the persistent voice of his wife, he figured he'd misdialed. He hung up and tried again. This time, he could tell the phone wasn't working. The phone company was set to turn off service in two days; had they jumped the gun? But 911 was supposed to be accessible regardless of account status. He slammed the headset back in the carriage and swore.

"He's bleeding on the rug on the rug..." Matti was still on her back, still looking up at something only she could see.

Try the phone in the kitchen, he told himself. Hurry.

The hallway was dark and crowded with packing materials but he didn't waste time with the lights; he knew this house by heart. Knew that just yesterday he and Matti had made love on the top stair to break the stress of boxing up their belongings. A pang of sentimentality hit him as he descended the steps and maneuvered between the boxes at the bottom, realizing he'd be leaving this place come morning. He and Matti had lived here since before they were married, had even held their intimate reception in the backyard. How inappropriate that he should be thinking of this as she lay upstairs in some type of mental breakdown. Was it a survival instinct, he wondered, a way for his brain to keep him focused on something?

He rounded the corner into the kitchen, saw the phone as a black shadow on the wall near the cabinets, and grabbed it. Apparently the dead line upstairs wasn't an isolated incident; either the phone lines were down or someone had cut the wires outside the house. But then, that couldn't be right, because there was a noise coming from the phone after all. A hissing static, faint but definitely there. And beyond it, at the edge of audibility, a woman's voice saying, "help me, he's bleeding on the rug, he's bleeding on the rug..."

“Hello?”

The faint voice came again through the phone, came from somewhere far away, urgent and fast: “help me, he’s bleeding on the rug...”

The phone dropped from his hand, swung on the tangled cord and banged into the wall, swishing back and forth like his own senility. Out of the earpiece continued the now familiar susurrations, growing louder: “He’s bleeding on the rug...”

Matti’s voice drifted down the stairs and oozed into the shadows, providing a complementary backing vocal to the refrain: “...bleeding on the rug...”

It was confusion that he felt first, not terror. An innate need to rationalize what he was experiencing. And so he stood in the darkness of the kitchen, more boxes around him, listening to both voices chant about the blood on the rug, asking himself just what in the hell was going on? There’s always a logical explanation for strange events, he knew. Looking around, though, all he could see was a nearly-empty kitchen. There weren’t any answers jumping out at him. *Figure it out later. Right now you need to call for help.*

Cell phone, he thought, where was his cell phone? He’d been packing up books in the living room before going to bed and was pretty sure it was in his jacket on the table. Was it still charged, he wondered, or should he just cut across the lawn to his neighbor’s house and wake them up, tell them to call an ambulance and maybe even some men in white coats?

No, he couldn’t leave Matti, not yet anyway. He could feel that in his gut, that need to protect her, that need to make sure she was okay. For her sake, of course, but also for his. Because if anything were to happen to her...

As he passed the front door, moving through the foyer that separated the kitchen from the living room, he saw the Dust Buster sitting on a taped-up box and picked it up. He didn’t know why exactly, it just felt right. Having some kind of weapon in his hand gave him a sense of advantage, even if it was a false one, and led him to believe he could still keep control of the situation.

That is, until he stepped into the living room and saw the figure standing near the sofa, bleeding on the rug.

Dane froze, his heart kicking into overdrive as his body went slick with sweat and his tongue dried up into cardboard.

The lanky figure was shrouded by shadows, its shoulders hunched forward with poor posture, its hair wispy and short. Judging by the lack of effeminate curves, it was a man. Whoever he was he was holding a hand to his head, his body swaying ever so slightly, as if a light breeze might blow him over. There was something decrepit about him, but at the same time...strangely formidable.

He’s here to hurt Matti, Dane thought. Have to protect Matti.

The table in question was off to his right, equal distance from both him and the other man. His jacket lay in a heap on top of it, his cell phone in the front pocket. If he tried to run for it, and the man lunged after him, they’d meet at the same time. Dane hadn’t been in a fight since high school, wasn’t even sure he remembered how to defend himself? Still, he knew he’d fight for Matti, come what may.

Using the Dust Buster to mimic a gun, his heart now trying to rip through his chest, he said, “Whatever you want, you won’t get it. I’ve called the cops. They’re

on their way right now. And I'm holding a gun here. So I'm giving you five seconds to get out of my house and never come back. Got me?"

Calling Dane's bluff, the man staggered forward on stick legs, still holding his head, forcing Dane to backpedal toward the kitchen, the vacuum thrust out in front of him like a pistol.

"I said get out!"

The man ignored the warning and kept advancing, walking with the forced gait of someone severely arthritic, moving into a small patch of moonlight that spilled through a gap in the curtains. The pale blue light swam up his frame until he was solidly illuminated.

Tall. Elderly. Decrepit. Bloody.

Hurt.

Gunshot, Dane realized. Dear God, the old man had been shot in the head, was gushing blood like a ruptured water main through the gnarled fingers he held there. As the blood pooled on the carpet, it hit the shadows and spread out like oil rising from the earth.

Similarly, the Dust Buster hit the floor, shattered, and bounced away.

Dane's back found the wall behind him and stopped him short, his mouth open in a scream that could not find its voice. He didn't know what scared him more, that the man was in his home, or that he was still alive somehow. He'd heard stories of people taking a bullet to the head and living, but this wound looked too severe for such a miracle.

From upstairs, Matti continued to whisper, "He's bleeding on the rug..."

The wounded man drew closer, leaving a trail of gore behind him, until finally he loomed over Dane. His eyes were cloudy and dry, his skin cracked and flaky and sallow, his teeth angled all wrong as if he'd shoved them into his own gums without regard to symmetry. A sad smile spread across his face, denoting a pathos Dane couldn't place.

And that was the curious bit. Judging by the slight smile and aged frame, there was nothing actually malicious about him, not that Dane could tell anyway. If anything, the man looked... content. Not content with the gunshot wound, but... somehow... content with his role as a victim. As if he'd accepted it with a *que sera* attitude. He looked the way Dane's grandpa looked when he would sit alone in a lawn chair at the family get-togethers while everyone else played horseshoes and went swimming. Content to be forgotten, and occasionally patronized, because inside he was truly just happy to be watching his legacy, just happy to be there as a part of it all.

The bleeding man before Dane registered such contentment behind the gore. The sad eyes, the friendly smile, the non-threatening physique.

Dane swallowed hard and asked, "Are you okay? You're bleeding. I... my wife... I need to call an ambulance."

With some care, the figure took his hand away from the hole in his head, blood rushing to freedom, and pointed at a photo on the ground to Dane's right. It was leaning against the wall, along with some others, waiting to be packed up. Without looking, Dane knew which one it was, having placed it there not long ago. It showed him and Matti standing in the living room—this very room where I stand

cornered by a dying man, he realized—wearing matching San Diego Chargers sweatshirts. Matti's mother had taken it during last year's playoffs.

"Who... who shot you? Let me help you. My phone is—"

Dane headed to the table but the old man moved in front of him, blocking his path. A burst of adrenaline rushed through Dane, but again, the man did not come off as threatening, just insistent.

"My phone..."

Shaking his head but still smiling, the man pointed to another of the photos, this one resting on the ground near Dane's foot, where Matti had left it while packing. Dane looked at it, made out what it was even in the darkness.

"What? The photo? It's... it's Matti and me at Christmas. I don't understand and I don't have time—"

As emphatically as the hurt man could muster, he pointed to the photo again, blood running off his hand onto the carpet, urging Dane to take another look.

"Okay." Dane bent down and picked up the photo. Even in the dim moonlight, the picture was as he remembered it, a jovial snapshot of the two of them holding up pairs of socks, taken with the timer setting on the camera. As he stared at it, remembering the day fondly, a sallow-skinned finger dotted with blood tapped the glass frame.

Dane ignored it. "I need my phone."

Again, the finger tapped the glass, tapped it in the same spot repeatedly, leaving a coppery fingerprint. Looking at the bloodied man, Dane shook his head to show his confusion.

Still smiling contentedly, the man wiped the blood off the picture's glass covering and tapped it again.

The fingerprint appeared again in the same spot.

The man pushed the picture closer to Dane's face, as if to say, look harder.

"This is crazy." Confused and scared, Dane tore the back off the frame and pulled the photo out, careful not to rip it. It was a good memory and he wanted to keep it safe, especially in light of the memories he'd be losing a day from now as he handed the house keys over to the new owners. He remembered that Christmas morning well, the way the tree looked in the living room, the way both he and Matti felt that the house was really beginning to feel like home. He remembered pulling out the socks and remarking how much they both needed them, laughing that they were officially grownups now for thinking that way.

Where the bloody fingerprint had been on the glass, there was a lensflare in the photo.

The finger tapped it.

"That? The camera... it's old, it does that—"

The bloody finger rose to the first photo again, the one with Dane and Matti in football sweatshirts, and pressed against it.

Dane bent and picked up the photo. Again, he found the familiar lens flare that was common in many of their photos. He'd meant to buy a new camera, but had never found the time. He put the photo back. Another photo near it, taken in the kitchen on Thanksgiving, also had the lens flare.

But the one under it did not. It was taken at Disneyland with the same camera, and was flawless.

Intent to prove whatever point he was out to prove, the man pointed toward the foyer. A multi-picture frame still hung near the front door, Dane knew, containing similar photos; it hadn't been packed yet. It had been due to get boxed up when their need to feel each other had gotten the better of them, drawing them to the stairs where they made love.

"I have to help my wife, I can't—"

The old man shook his head no and pointed to the foyer again.

Hastily, Dane went to the frame in the foyer and looked at it. Even in the darkness of the room, he could see the man reflected in the glass behind him, his face still a mass of red, pointing to one of the photos in the upper corner. It was taken in the kitchen as well, a picture of Dane drinking a Budweiser.

Lens flare.

Beneath it, a photo taken outside a nightclub.

No flare.

Picture in the bedroom.

Lens flare.

From upstairs, Matti's voice filled the foyer, quick as ever and still hushed. "He's bleeding on the rug on the rug on the rug." Then, without breaking tempo, the refrain changed, causing Dane to spin and look up the stairs. "I shot him. I didn't mean to, the gun just went off. Please hurry, I love him. He's bleeding on the rug..."

The timbre was clearly Matti, but it sounded as if she were trying to mimic someone. She was good at mimicking people. She did it at parties sometimes. She could do Holly Go lightly like it was nobody's business. But this was not a game. This was something else.

What spread through Dane next was not terror, or fear, or panic, or even more confusion, as he would have expected, but disbelief. The sum of all the parts was falling into place, painting a picture he found hard to digest. After all, he did not believe in ghosts

The gun-shot man, seeing Dane's wheels spinning, began to nod approvingly. He closed his eyes as his smile perked up at the sides, his blood now hitting the hardwood floor of the foyer. And with the sadness in his eyes suddenly making sense to Dane, he put a hand to Dane's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

The touch was very faint, Dane noticed, like someone rubbing a feather on the spot. But it was frigidly cold, almost to the point of burning.

The old man followed this with a wave, a telltale wave that said, it's been a pleasure. And with that, turned and headed through the entryway into the living room.

The squeeze, the wave, the turn... it was an unmistakable universal gesture.

Saying goodbye, Dane realized. He's saying goodbye.

The lights flickered once and came on. Dane rushed into the living room, but the man was gone, just like that, taking the bloodstains with him. The carpet was as clean as it had been before he'd gone to bed.

Everything was silent.

Nothing was out of place. The boxes, the trash bags, the stacks of items waiting to be packed, all were exactly as they'd left them. He sat on a box of books he'd packed just a few hours earlier, full of Matti's horror novels, and looked around

him for answers. Did all that really just happen? He felt light headed, a little dizzy. Was what he'd just seen real, or was he imagining things?

He touched the box, thinking of the contents inside, and what he'd just experienced. Horror. The supernatural. Ghosts. Such bullshit. Matti joked that she read them for insurance—Ed Lee and Jack Ketchum and a bunch of other names that meant nothing to him—read them so she'd know what to do if she ever found herself staring down a demon. She once remarked she might be psychic. Said she was like a character in one of those books. Nonsense, he'd replied, that crap is warping your brain. Psychics are just frauds looking for money. It ain't real.

Right?

“Dane? Where are you?”

Oh God, he realized, Matti's awake!

He took the stairs two at a time, this time knocking over a box of knick knacks, and rushed into the bedroom. Matti was sitting up, rubbing her eyes, feeling the empty spot in the bed next to her. She was all right, her complexion back to normal.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “It's almost four in the damn morning. I told you we'll finish packing tomorrow. The truck isn't coming till noon. Stop freaking out about it.”

“Yeah, baby,” he said, kissing her head and rubbing her hair, feeling how much she was a necessary part of his life. “It's just... um... you were talking in your sleep.”

“Oh please, not that again. What'd I say this time?”

“Um... well... nothing. I'll tell you in the morning.”

“Good. I'm exhausted.” Matti rolled over and curled up in a fetal position, finding one of the small bears that kept residence around her pillow and pulling it toward her. “Come cuddle me,” she said.

“Hey, baby?” Dane put his arm around her and drew her into him, spooning.

Matti grunted.

“We never did get the history of this house before we moved in, did we?”

Another grunt.

“I love this house, you know. I always felt comfortable here for some reason. I mean, nothing ever went wrong here. Everything always worked, I always felt safe, I never really felt... alone here. You ever feel that?”

“Mmmm.”

A minute passed, Dane lightly rubbing his hand down his wife's warm back, rethinking his attitude toward the unknown. As her breathing shifted to the even rhythm of sleep, he asked quietly, as much for himself as for Matti or anyone else listening, “You ever think there are people in this world who are just happy to be around other people? Content to watch silently as things go on around them? Just staying out of the way. You think they get sad when people leave them?”

Matti managed a final comment before she began to snore. “I dunno, Dane. I'm tired. Does it matter?”

He let her drift into her dreams before answering: “Kinda. I think I just met one.”

Downstairs, the kitchen phone began to buzz as the line came back to life.

Looking at the clock, he thought, two hours until I have to get up.

