

Night Terrors

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Kara turned away from the TV and glanced at the glowing wall clock. 2:56. She had now passed her previous record for staying up watching *Night Terrors*, which was 2:37. It was Saturday, or now technically Sunday morning, so she wouldn't have to deal with Mrs. Vervaline scolding her for repeatedly nodding off during Language Arts and then lecturing her and the rest of the fifth grade how important it was for their young, developing selves to get their proper rest.

"You'll end up stunting your growth!" Mrs. Vervaline said on Friday, her stringy hair flinging bits of dried hairspray as she nodded righteously. Mrs. Vervaline was very short, and Kara was tall for her age, so it didn't really make any sense. Plus, Mrs. Vervaline probably slept in a bundle with her bony husband and the ugly tabby cats whose photos were all over the classroom, warm and farting together peacefully. Mrs. Vervaline didn't have to worry about footsteps thumping back and forth in the hallway all night as her parents played defense with her older sister Rikki, trying to coax her into her bed and pleading with her to please close her eyes for just a little while, using voices that scared Kara with how small they sounded. Her sister's voice was different too, a hiss like a punctured gas tank in an action movie. Out of this hiss came arguments and threats that made no sense and that Kara's parents told her to always ignore because they weren't real, even though they could hurt like a real threat and made Kara hate her sister. She knew that hating Rikki was breaking the rules, but after the most recent time, this past evening, she didn't feel like pretending otherwise anymore.

Kara reached for the remote, which was thick with electrical tape for keeping the broken battery compartment closed, and turned up the volume, trying hard not to think about Rikki's latest episode. A flash of pixilated oranges and charcoal blacks swirled around the television screen before settling into a deep crimson, lighting up the room with the gruesome sort of red that Kara would see when she pressed the lit end of her father's

gleaming Maglite hard against her palm. A skeleton's index finger reached up and traced an "N" in the crimson. The rest of the script gradually glowed to life after the "N" was formed: "Night Terrors." The opening of the late-night horror movie program always gave her a prickly run of goose bumps up her back, no matter how bad of a mood she was in.

Kara thought about her parents. Her dad was supposed to be across the country in Trenton this week, servicing a group of industrial boilers. The week before, he'd been helping set up a new boiler system in a recently constructed high school in distant Maryland when he got the call from her mother about Rikki's latest hypomanic episode, one that would have landed her in the hospital if not for her parents watching her constantly, day and night. Her mother had been home for nearly two weeks, beyond where the sheet metal plant she worked at could tolerate, something she heard her parents speak about in the basement while they ran the laundry, their voices streaming through the vents easier than the heat.

Tonight's movie was *Castle Blood*, one of her cheesy favorites. It was something the eerie, disembodied voice of the host called a mid-80s cult thrill ride. Kara shifted to the side of the chair that she normally sat in, and she stuck a few strands of her dark hair into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Rikki had taught her how to translate the late-night movie descriptions a couple of years ago, when *Night Terrors* used to start at 10 PM.

"Cult hit," Rikki had said, "That just means that the movie had been a box office flop, if it even showed up at the box office to begin with. No money." The age gap between the two of them – 10 years – made Rikki seem grown up, but in the coolest way possible.

"Oh, 'thrill ride.' You hear them say that? Means that the bad actors were trying too hard to cover up the even worse script. 'Graphic depictions?' Like a slit throat that was kinda shocking back when Mom and Dad were in high school? You would probably think it was funny." She slapped her forehead in mock resignation. "Ah, what else?"

"Hurry up, the movie will be back on," said Kara.

"Just one more, Miss Pushy. 'Shameful display.' A classic. That's just a ploy to get sixteen-year-old dudes to stay tuned in the hopes of seeing someone's tits during the movie."

“Rikki!” said Kara, giggling.

“It’s the truth. Partial nudity guarantees at least some viewership.”

“Gross!” she said so loud that they both began to laugh and shush each other at the same time, afraid to wake up their parents.

There were others. Even “mid-80s” had its own connotations: starring either an old actor or actress trying to jumpstart a career, a popular young actor or actress that would grow obscure following this movie, and someone old or young getting killed with an eating utensil. Rikki would list them, lightly bending back her left index finger with her right every time she named another one for Kara. She liked noticing how comfortable Rikki always was, slumping over the sides of chairs and couches, at least one arm or leg constantly touching the ground. Their dad liked to say that Rikki spilled instead of sat.

The host, an older man with a shrunken head necklace, cackled, snapping Kara out of her memory, before he finally stopped trying to build up the movie, and it began with a crash of synth percussion that marched it through the title credits.

So eighties, thought Kara, spitting out her strand of hair she was chewing in her mouth.

She had seen it at least three other times with Rikki. It was about a family whose house’s interior morphed inexplicably into that of a vampire’s castle. First the walls began to sweat and drip like old stonework might. Then, after the family dismissed the bewildered plumber, cobwebs that were immune to vacuums started to pop up, followed by the shades drawing themselves shut every sunrise and opening at every sunset. Then, pale, red-eyed people started to appear in the hallway, beckoning before disappearing in flashes of lightning. Kara sat back down and inched herself forward in the chair, still very awake.

Kara wished Rikki, the old Rikki, was able to watch it with her; she would’ve been proud to know how many clichés Kara remembered, from the “new move, fresh meat” opener to the square parents to the fact that the main character hated his family and wanted out. Instead, she had the new Rikki, the Rikki that had to leave college “for a while,” the one who, when she wasn’t rearranging her room for the seventh time in a day or standing in her closet and screaming at nothing, laid, not spilled, on the couch, arms

crossed in a classic mummy pose, rigid and staring at Kara as if she was something she needed to discard but hadn't the energy to yet, her mouth resting open. She had always been a nose breather before; Kara hated how her sister's slightly crisscrossed bottom teeth would turn foamy with spittle when she now left her mouth open too long. It reminded her of the choking foam that appeared whenever somebody in a Night Terrors movie was dying of being poisoned by cyanide or a toxic mushroom hidden in ravioli.

Tonight, though, she would've been thrilled with Rikki only lying rigidly on the couch. Instead, Rikki spent most of the night kicking her door or the walls around the house, wearing the last pair of Doc Martens she owned; at one time, before she threw them all away in a fit of manic cleanliness, she collected them. She marched back and forth in the hallway, their parents following her like servants, pleading with her to calm down, to at least sit down for a change, maybe watch a little TV, muttering to one another in between their begging, wondering why the medicine that was supposed to help her relax wasn't working faster. Kara buried herself under all of her pillows and comforter, which caused her to sweat heavily, but it was better than hearing all of the details. Once, she came up for air and heard her mother calling Rikki her nickname for her, String Cheese, in such a shaky way that Kara dove back under and wedged herself between the mattress and her wall until she felt like a headboard, hating her parents for being unable to do anything.

Suddenly, the sleepiness that eluded her earlier rolled onto Kara, but she wanted to finish the movie. She moved herself closer to the edge of the seat and lightly slapped her cheeks, right hand, left hand, right hand, left hand. Even if she lingered on an eye blink for too long, she was risking sleep. That mistake had almost been made on Friday, this time during Vocabulary, when Kara had taken too much time to stare at the word "illustrious" on the board and had closed her dry eyes to clear them. Luckily, Becky Strom had kicked her calf before Mrs. Vervaline could turn around.

No good. Even sitting was too tempting. Kara stood up again, did a few jumping jacks, and began to pace slowly in a crooked oval around the living room furniture. Watching the movie was getting too difficult because her eyes were only fixed in one place; she had to

keep twitching and twisting her neck back and forth like the Bride of Frankenstein, one of the few films on Night Terrors that had been legitimately good.

Kara tried to use her frustration to stay awake as she sat herself back down on the easy chair. She allowed herself the blanket that her father used and leaned a little bit backwards on the cushion. If she could stay a little angry for the rest of the movie, she'd be all right. There were plenty of things to be mad about. Mrs. Vervaline. Her well-rested classmates. Her parents and their begging and bags under their eyes. Her sister, a bad drawing of who she used to be.

Her eyelids suddenly shut for a few seconds on their own. She wedged them open with her fingers. A new strategy formed in her head: maybe if she just closed them for even a little bit, they would stop forcing themselves down for a while. She stopped fighting them momentarily. This worked for longer than she thought, as she was able to develop a sort of rhythm: eyes shut for ten seconds, then open for about twenty.

Kara managed this for a couple of minutes before snapping her eyelids open mid-rhythm. It felt too tempting to slip off into sleep with her eyes closed even for a little while. She could feel the dreams reaching for her even in that brief period.

The television screen flickered back to the Night Terrors host. Kara squinted at the screen.

“We’ll be returning to Castle Blood soon, brother and sister ghouls! Keep your bones chilled!”

Kara picked up the remote and began tossing it to herself over and over again. Immediately, it was clear that the concentration that it took to catch it was the best strategy for staying awake yet, so she continued to throw it higher, catching it with two hands, than one hand at a time, left and right. Then she made a game of trying to throw it so that it would nearly touch the ceiling in the space between the still ceiling fan. This was successful for a couple of tosses, but Kara hung onto the remote too long on one toss, and it went flying backwards too far for her to reach, far enough that it entered the kitchen behind her and clipped the edge of the dinner table, which caused the batteries to fly out. The empty remote and batteries all clattered loudly in the silent house.

Kara froze, feeling ashamed. She was less concerned about the remote – her dad dropped it at least once a week – and more worried about waking her parents up. The two of them had been averaging less than four hours of sleep a night trying to watch over Rikki, whispering in the toughest moments the hated word, “Hospital.”

That seemed like a good time to end the night. Walking over to pick up the remote, which was miraculously unbroken, she stuck the batteries back inside and turned the TV off and tiptoed over to the couch to set the remote back down when she heard a soft step from the hallway.

The dim light of the table lamp showed the hair plastered to the right side of Rikki’s head where she had been laying as she lurched into the living room. Kara remembered hearing her parents beg Rikki to take a shower earlier that evening. The hair covered up one eye, and the other focused on Kara with what looked like anger to anyone else but what Kara knew had no real name. She even stood differently, with one foot turned sharply inwards and both shoulders resting slightly lower than usual.

There was a heavy gasp that made Kara brace herself for a yell, but none came. Instead, Rikki took another couple of steps into the living room, blinking slowly, looking around, appearing both rigid and on the verge of tipping over as her mind battled the medicine meant to help her drift off.

“The lights are on, and you are awake, and you are making noise,” came the hiss from Rikki’s mouth.

“Please go to bed, Rikki,” Kara whispered.

“No.” Rikki wavered briefly.

Rushing over to her, Kara threw an arm around Rikki’s torso to steady her, feeling her sister’s ribs poke her through her thin t-shirt. Rikki smelled like the hand towels in the bathroom they shared. “Here, it’ll be easier if we go together.”

“No,” Rikki repeated, but turned easily as Kara steered her back towards the hallway, holding her breath as they passed their parents’ bedroom. She realized that this was the first time she’d touched her in weeks. “No,” Rikki continued to say softly. “No.”

The nightlight was on in Rikki's room. Kara hung onto Rikki's forearm before she tucked her into the bed, bringing the sheets up to her neck just as her parents always did with her. "Just close your eyes for a few seconds."

"No."

"Just like five seconds. Then you can open them back up again, okay?" She reached again for Rikki's forearm, clutching it outside of the sheets as Rikki closed her eyes and immediately fell asleep just as she was starting to form the word 'No,' too exhausted to resist Kara like she did their parents earlier. Kara stood there a minute longer to be sure, then went back into the living room to turn the lamp off.

It was starting to get light outside, bright enough that Kara could see, through the living room window, that the misty figures of the bushes at the edge of their backyard and the lines that their lawnmower left in the grass were beginning to reveal themselves. She remembered herself and Rikki sitting out on the lawn, back when she was very young and Rikki was still in high school. On days like those, the sky was so blue that she always felt the need to grasp the neatly trimmed grass of their lawn if she bent her head back too far, afraid some force would draw her right into the center of that unthinkable sky. Kara and Rikki would sit out there for over an hour at a time, rolling in the thick summer grass and pointing at each plane that flew overhead on those June afternoons while saying to each other "There goes Dad's plane. There goes Dad's plane," sure that one of them contained their father, always on his way out of the state to service another boiler. Every jumbo jet, single propeller Cessna, and occasional cargo plane from the nearby naval base had its progress traced by two index fingers and labeled in similar fashion.

Sometimes there would be a plane that was flying closer to the ground, usually on a descent into the airport just twenty miles away, and Kara would jump up and down until Rikki held her up so that she could frantically wave at its silver belly, shouting as it flew out of sight. "Daddy!" Kara would shout so loud that the blue jays would flee from their hiding places in the dying oak on their front lawn. "Daddy! We're down here!" Kara believed that when her sister held her up, their father could more easily see her. Rikki never told her otherwise. □