

To Sleep With Robert

by

Maura Devereux

“You want to get off me, Robert?”

“Uh...no.”

Robert is my HHE, my Hypnagogic and Hypnopompic Experience. I know he’s not real. He’s a night paralysis. He’s a fairly common and basically benign neurological phenomenon. But right now, he’s sitting on my chest and I can’t really breathe.

“Trying to breathe, here.”

“Uh...no.”

Robert looks like a bear. He can be a bear of any color or breed, variably a white polar type or a black grizzly type. Either way, he’s always got just the biggest butt. He makes a pyramidal shape when he sits on top of me.

“Oh, come on. Move your fat ass.”

“Let me think...nope.”

I can’t really talk to Robert, of course. That’s part of the deal, the paralysis. We do ESP. We’re used to communicating like this, Robert and me. We have complicity. That’s unusual.

“How’d you get a reasonable one?” they ask me in Group. I do therapy with other people who have a lot of HHEs. Robert sounds better than most of theirs. People in the group have things that look like demons and Darth Vaders. Their ones are mean. Robert is just obstinate.

“Robert’s not that reasonable,” I told them. “He doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to do. But he’s not witchy. It’s true.”

“I wish I had one like that.” Julie gets a Vague Presence HHE.

“Naw, don’t,” I said. “He’s not that good.”

I’ve been seeing a lot of Robert lately. He’s a much more advanced form of sleep paralysis than I used to have as a little kid. What I used to get then was just hands gripping me, shaking me awake. I thought it was devils, because I went to Catholic school. I think I stayed Catholic longer than my classmates because I believed in the devils. But they went away when I was a teenager and started drinking beer a lot.

“Are you planning to get off me sometime tonight?”

“Dunno.”

“This is longer than usual.”

“Is it?”

My cat Muffin used to sleep with me. Maybe she’s where Robert came from. All of a sudden, out of the blue one day, Muffin became huge and not Muffin. This big furry thing sleeping on me got very weighted and smothering. I couldn’t move at all and I freaked. The not-Muffin went away pretty quickly, but I was scared shitless for a while. I locked Muffin out of the bedroom and she meowed all night. I didn’t much sleep anyway, but I was afraid that thing would come and sit on me again. The heavy thing didn’t come back for a few days. I

started going to the gym to make my torso thick and muscular. It came back after a while. I'm the one who called it Robert.

Robert comes pretty capriciously, but he knows the best time to come is when the last thing I need is Robert. He never tips me off on how he knows this.

“What’s the problem?” I ask him. “Why are you here? What do you know?”

“Don’t you know?” he always answers, dull and pompous as ever.

He’s a pain.

Nedra is the reasonable woman who started the group. She put up a posting at the health food store when she was doing research for her article. She’d had HHEs and decided to write a book when she saw the statistics. “Almost 40% of the population have been affected,” she said. “And it’s the single most logical explanation for virtually all paranormal phenomenon. Think about it – all the stories of ghosts and demons and alien abductions can basically be attributed to this one neurological glitch.”

“Interesting,” I told her.

“You don’t believe that, do you?” Robert answered me. I thought if I educated him, he’d go away. “You know I’m here.”

“It’s pretty simple. When you dream, your body goes into this atonic state, so that your muscles aren’t always doing the motor activities you do in your dreams. It’s one component of the complex process of dreaming. The most basic way I can think of to explain the whole effect of sleep paralysis is that all parts of your body’s dreaming mechanisms don’t kick on at the same time. You just get certain pieces. So you think you’re awake, your brain’s conscious, but your body’s not moving, and the weird stuff in your imagination keeps happening.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“You know better,” Robert said.

I think for a second that I’ll really be in trouble when a burglar comes in during the night. He can sit on me, do all kinds of crimes, if he wishes, and I’ll do nothing because I’ll think it’s just Robert. I have this thought while Robert sits, inert as usual. Thinking of the burglar makes me want to test him, just in case it’s not Robert and I’m really going to get hurt. I try to move my leg by bringing my knee up sharply, as would combat a burglar. It doesn’t work. Robert looks perturbed. He finds a lead anvil from nowhere. He never takes things that are really in my room. He always seems to bring his own. He picks up the anvil and makes evident its weight. He embraces it like a toy and starts to rock back and forth.

“Ow, Robert!” I say. “Damn it.”

But he doesn’t move. He’s mad at me now.

Much of group revolves around how to make the HHEs stop. Many of the participants are now taking SSRIs. They would have anyway, probably. They have bigger problems than the HHEs. But they seem to help. Still, I don’t need that. I’m sane. I just get irritated with him. He makes it hard for me to have dates stay over. You’d think that, statistically, I’d be able to find someone who has the same problem, but so far, that hasn’t been the case. Some of the people in the group aren’t ready to give up their fears yet. I think they like spooky things. Nedra doesn’t seem to like spooky things at all. She claims she hasn’t had SP for 10 years. She’s very scientific. She’s seen herself dreaming on EEG.

“Did you try moving your finger?” she asks Mayberry. Mayberry isn’t the participant’s real name, but we’re allowed anonymity if we need it.

“Yes,” Mayberry says. “It didn’t work.”

“How about your tongue?”

“Didn’t work.”

“Did you astral project?”

“I can’t do that,” Mayberry says. “It doesn’t exist.”

“Of course it does,” Nedra counsels. “How many people here have done it?” Several hands raise. Mine does not. Julie’s does. She is more advanced in her combat of her HHE. Then again, she has one of the milder ones.

“Once I learned astral projection techniques, I was able to completely vanquish my terror,” Nedra says. “And I wish I could tell you how to do it, but I can’t. Can anyone explain it to Mayberry?”

Julie has something to say about everything, so hers is the first hand to go up. “You just tell yourself you’re going to roll out of your body, and then you do. It’s great. I can’t use it on every Presence, but it works great with a Dread.”

“For me, it’s more of a peeling than a rolling,” Nedra said. “But you do essentially just will yourself out of your body. Then maybe you go for a walk. I went to Joshua Tree last time.”

“You’re not even scary,” I tell him. “You’re furry. You’re too cute to be scary.”

Tonight, he’s dark and grizzly. He grows some scales on his paw/hands and they do make him look uglier. He still does not aggress. I wish he’d just move. I wonder if it would be possible for him to crack my ribcage.

“A joke’s a joke, Robert. Get the fuck off me.”

He does not.

“I didn’t mean what I said. You’re scary. I’m terrified. I feel like I’m going to die.

Blah blah blah. Now just freaking move.”

He doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. He’s really pissed this time. He puts the anvil down in front of him, which leaves it on my collarbone. I think the collarbone might snap. He picks up a warhead and holds it in front of me. I wonder where he got it. But then I hear the news coming out of my clock radio, and I can reach up and turn on the light, and he’s gone.

The next night, I might be having a heart attack. Instead, it’s Robert. He’s a panda form tonight. He’s like other Roberts melted up. He looks more empty and cadaverous in the dark.

“Oh, it’s you,” I say. “Sure seeing a lot of you lately.”

But he doesn’t answer. I don’t know when he became such a spoiled child.

“If you won’t go away, you could at least talk to me,” I say.

But he doesn’t.

“Are you still mad about what I said last night? About how you’re not that terrifying? It was just a coping mechanism. You know that. I really am terrified of you sitting on me. I really do think you’re the most bizarre thing. And the breathing is getting really bad.”

He still doesn’t answer me. Instead, he balances on his tailbone and spreads his stumpy legs out. He grabs each foot in the corresponding hand, as though he had these appendages; then, he starts to rock back and forth. Apparently feeling gymnastic, he rocks himself around in a circle, then attempts to somersault. The somersault doesn’t work. If it did, he’d probably fall off me, and that would be great. I’d laugh. He knows that.

This manifestation of musculature is something new, and for a second I think this structure might relieve some of the massive weight from me. But Robert seems to catch on to this, and he puddles again.

“Thanks a lot,” I say, because he knows what I’m thinking. But he doesn’t respond. Jerk. It’s not like he’d do anything to make me comfortable, but still. We used to be civil. “We used to be civil,” I now remind him.

At this point, he would traditionally sit lazy and distracted. He’s never been an attacking one. But he starts doing something new. He assembles the musculature again and raises himself to all fours. His bulk somehow remains balanced above four now sturdy legs, which leave the massive weight to concentrate on his four amorphous, not bear-like feet. Two of them are on my shoulder girdle and the other two are on the soft of my abdomen and I really feel like he’s going to crush me through the bed.

“What the hell?” I try to ESP-scream. “This isn’t funny, Robert! This really kills! You win!”

He doesn’t sit down again. Instead, he picks one of the front feet up off my shoulder and puts it in the center of my chest. Very un-Robertlike, this determined activity. Maybe this is a Robert substitute, I think, but then I look at his panda face. It is impassive. It’s Robert, all right. Slowly, and with the dull Robert Zen, he raises his bulk circus-style until he is balanced one-handed on my sternum. To have his entirety amassed directly over my heart is more than I can stand. I can’t believe it doesn’t punch through my bones. I cannot remember any Nedra tricks, and I begin to panic.

Fortunately, there is suddenly outside one of those gunshots that I sometimes hear at night. It disrupts Robert's balance, and he thuds back on top of me. Even his smothering bulk is preferable to the piercing sharp of a second ago.

"Look, what do I have to do?" I ask him. "To be friends again? That was like you were really trying to hurt me. I don't know where this rage is coming from with you."

But it's too late to talk. Robert has disappeared. It's still dark, and there's shooting outside, but I get up anyway, and go get coffee.

The next day, I call Nedra from work, but I just get her machine. She must be busy, and I feel bad for bothering her. I consider calling my way through the whole phone tree, but then I think, nah. I've got a punk HHE. I should take the lessons I've learned from group before breaking down for them. I figure I've got all the tools I need. While I'm at work, I list the Nedra tricks. I'm sick of this Robert. That guy's been hanging around too long.

He comes the next night. I'm ready for him. I'm more wakeful than usual, so instead of feeling woken by him, I see him climbing onto the bed over the edge by the wall. He's panda again. I don't know what he's trying to prove. If he notices that I'm awake and watching, he doesn't show it. He just climbs on me and makes himself comfortable.

"I'm sick of this, Robert," I say. "I'm seeing way too much of you and I'm telling you, I just don't need it. I hate to break it to you, but you're just getting out of control. I think we really have to part ways now."

He sits and shifts, but doesn't say anything. Then, about 20 seconds into the appropriate conversational interval, he says, "Nope."

"Ha! Gotcha! You are listening to me! We're in it together, man!"

Robert says, “Nope.” His voice is bulky, too. He gains 30 pounds sitting there.

Breathing difficult. “I got you now, though. I know how to astral project. See if I won’t get out.”

Old Robert says, “Nope.”

So here I go. Julie said roll and Nedra says peel. Peeling makes more sense, but sounds a little more tentative than what I need right now. So I roll. I twist to the side like the firemen taught me and I’m out. Easy! Let him sit on that bag of bones! Ha! I can’t get off the floor at first, so I taunt him from there. “Yoo hoo,” I say. “Check me out.” I feel almost as heavy and formless as him as I try to get off the floor, but after a few stumbles I’m there. It’s great! I’m free! I can go anywhere. Robert’s still sitting on me on the bed. I wave him off. “See ya, sucker!”

I slip myself through the wall and go wandering. I decide to take advantage of this heightened awareness to revisit some of my common dream sites. I discount trips to the old schools and to the scenes of particular romantic triumphs, and decide instead to go to that one district I dream about, from a city I can’t determine. It’s a nice place, this district. I always find it in a Christmas-shopping dusk, and it’s always gray stone and shops selling watches. I can never figure out where it is. It might be Montreal, or Amsterdam, or Edinburgh, or Boston. I’m never sure. So I walk around and look for street signs, but I get distracted by a flower shop. It has exotics. I go in. It’s very pretty. The place is familiar from dreams, but it occurs to me that maybe that’s the only reason it’s familiar. Maybe it is true that this particular wedge-shaped intersection is one that doesn’t exist. One whose only visitor is me. I consider that.

After a little walk, I realize that I should not get too used to being out of my body and I decide to go back. Robert must be plenty confused already and maybe he’s split. I wonder if I’ll

miss him, now that I've banished him. It will be strange for me if I am potent in these matters. But even as I'm out of my body, I'm on a city street, and I will put myself back into my own bedroom. It's very mundane, really. You'd think it would be more fabulous. I will talk about it with Nedra, but I wonder if that will illuminate anything.

Still, I remind myself that it's all about Robert.

When I slip myself back through my window, I fully expect to see my body sleeping peacefully in my bed. I will check myself out, to see if I look cute when I sleep. As I get closer, I realize I don't have a clear plan to get back in my body, but it should be pretty easy. I can just lay on me and simulate, maybe. Then I can just dissolve into me.

But when I get back, he's still there. And he's in my spot.

On my pillow, specifically. He's doubled in size and has stretched out on his stomach, such that his chin is resting on my pillow. He has completely engulfed my supine, cataleptic, unoccupied body. His chest rests on my face. God, that looks agonizing. He's gotta move before I get back in there.

I stand by the bed, and I know he sees me. "Robert..." I say. He doesn't answer. I try to push him from the outside, but I don't have a body. He yawns. He has foul breath. I stand by and tap my foot. When he still doesn't move, I go to the rocking chair by the window. I sit and wait. He stays where he is.

"I hate you, Robert."

He yawns. It ends in something that looks like a panda smirk.

"Yep."