

Trinity Slocum

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Saginaw Arts & Sciences Academy, Saginaw, MI

Educator: Karen Horwath

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Panic Attack

Every night my routine starts out the same. I get up after lying on the lumpy couch for what seems like several hours, slump my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth a little bit too hard, and wash my face until my cheeks feel dry and start peeling. Then, since my parents go to bed earlier than me, I say goodnight by tucking them into bed and kiss my dogs like it's the last time I'll ever see them. Next, I start the journey climbing up a flight of creaky wooden stairs and tiptoeing down a claustrophobic hallway with tilted walls until I reach my bedroom. I close my door and immediately lock it, afraid of intruders in the night, then turn the lights off with the exception of the yellow night light behind my TV and purple string lights on my wall. I quickly close my black semi-sheer curtains and crawl into my warm memory foam bed to eventually fall asleep.

Tonight, however, is a little bit different. I still rise up off the couch, wash my face and brush my teeth, and say goodnight to my parents. I am about to run upstairs when suddenly, for no reason, my heart pounds in my stomach. I decide to walk to the front door and double check that it is locked, but I stop for a second to stare out the window into the menacing darkness of night. Then I do the same with the backdoor, except I don't stop this time. I shoot up my stairs and breathlessly race down the gloomy hallway to shut my door quickly and silently, locking it as always. Turning out the lights, I spring into bed making sure my feet are inside the boundaries of the mattress. As I scroll through my phone, the shady ghosts in the corners of my room and the slimy ghouls under my bed aren't as noticeable. I lie in my bed staring into the phone screen for about three hours before I decide that no matter how much I don't want to fall asleep, my body is shutting itself down.

There's nothing to be afraid of I say to myself like a broken record *If there was someone in the house, you would know. The dogs would bark their heads off.*

I try to reassure myself that the faces on my walls and the creaky footsteps downstairs are merely childish fears and that no one is going to murder me in my sleep because it's never happened before. I try to slow my heart rate by doing a breathing exercise I learned online called box-breathing, but to no avail. My heart keeps burning a hole in my chest from the friction and my blood is warming with each beat, and when slowing my heart with calming thoughts isn't working, I turn to statistics.

No one has ever broken into your house before, and the likeliness that someone is in this house without the dogs or your parents knowing is almost zero percent. There is no reason you should be acting like this because you know this old house makes lots of settling sounds.

With these thoughts, I realize I am being a little bit over dramatic and taking a statistical route helps with the throbbing in my chest. I am grateful to begin falling asleep, with a sense of security in my thoughts. Then suddenly I begin hearing heavy footsteps downstairs that make the hardwood floors groan. My ears perk up and my eyes spring open to see the blackness in my room and the somber white wall opposite me staring back at me.

I begin playing out scenarios in my head of what is happening downstairs: *A man dressed as black as the night creeps through the house looking at all the valuables around him to take. He picks the multiple locks on my backdoor, then steps silently inside without alerting anybody in the house, except me. The black wool ski-mask over his head begins to annoy his skin; he scratches his face with his grimy fingers and continues moving through the house, trying to avoid making noise. He grabs anything small worth a lot of money he can get his hands on and for some odd reason, decides he wants to see what's on the second floor. He walks up the flight of old stairs, but for the first time, they don't make any sound.*

I feel a flame growing in my stomach that sings my heart. *It's not real. Stop doing this to yourself. None of this is real!*

I lay petrified, staring at the intimidating white wall. My lungs feel heavy as I attempt to do my box-breathing and calm down. I try to stop my thoughts from spiraling out of control, but through the adrenaline and fear, they continue without my permission like the creaking footsteps downstairs.

What if it's another man, dressed in dark clothes, who picks the lock on the back door, the same as the robber, and makes his way silently inside? This time, the intruder doesn't care to glance at the valuables in the house; instead, he takes the dirty knife out of his black denim pocket and springs it open with the flick of his finger. He doesn't care about the forty-eight inch TV or PS4, but only about taking the serrated steel and ending the lives of everyone in the house because he feels like it. He continues through the house to my parents' bedroom, where the dogs are coincidentally fast asleep and not waking up. It's as if they are drugged and have fallen into a sleep-like-death, like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty.

My heart pounds in my chest trying to escape, and my body shakes from the adrenaline in my mind. *Those are fairy tales, they're not real, just like this man in your house. You need to calm down.* Tears stream from my eyes in terror of what could be making the noises coming from downstairs.

My hair stands on end as I grab the corner of my sheets and throw them off me. The cold air freezes my skin as I sit up and look directly at the doorknob through the pools of water gathering under my eyes. The noises continue as I swing my feet off the bed and stand on the dry carpeted floor, then I walk slowly to the door to avoid making noise and grab the doorknob. I twist it and peek out of the small gap I have created to see nothing but my normal hallway. Reaching my arm out of the gap, I flip the light switch, open the door all the way, and step into the hall. Peering over the railing down the stairs, I see the door at the bottom is open and the light is on.

No intruder would turn the hallway light on, right? They would have a flashlight of some kind. I creep down the stairs, still shaking, but not as afraid of the outcome anymore. When I reach the bottom, I see my mother and dogs are in the living room.

"Hey, why are you still awake? It's like 2 am. Did you hear the floors creaking when your puppy was walking around our bedroom?" my mom asks. "I just let the dogs outside for a bit. Go back to bed though, everything's fine."

After my mom explains this to me, I drowsily trip back to my bedroom, lock the door (just in case) and bounce into bed. As I sink into my mattress, the tears on my cheeks are wiped away by the pillow. The darkness of my room looks less threatening now as the white wall looks at me and winks.

See, I told you everything was fine. I fall straight asleep, peacefully.