

Night Sweats

By Frederick William Schroeder IV

I had the wildest dream last night. You were in it! C'mon, it's a good one, I promise. I just gotta tell somebody, you know? Man, I don't know what it is, but once you reach a certain age, no one wants to listen to you talk about your dreams anymore. Like, since I was eight, I just can't generate any interest in these stories. It's crazy, I mean, this is quality stuff. None of it happened, technically, but I sure couldn't tell that while I was asleep. Ha!

Seriously though, sometimes these dreams just seem so real. I wake up laying in bed, covered in sweat. I just have to lay there and soak in it until I can calm myself down so I don't have an anxiety attack. It's kind of gross, actually.

My bad, I'm rambling. I'll get right into the action. You know my high school track coach I've told you about? Ol' Dave Ascitutto, the Italian Stallion himself. I'll tell you something, that guy must have really fucked me up psychologically. I mean, I'm STILL having nightmares about the guy, and I haven't seen him in, what, four, five, years? That's some real deep emotional scarring, man, for sure.

Anyway, in my dream I'm taking an exam, for like, a math class or some shit. It's like I was back in high school. Actually, I was, right back in the Valley. So I'm chugging away at this exam, plugging numbers into my trusty TI-84 Silver Edition calculator and jotting down the answers with my number 2 pencil. But I just couldn't get 'em down fast enough! I knew I wasn't going to finish in time, and sure enough, the bell rang before I finished the first page of the exam. I look up, and everyone was gone from the classroom.

Where were you? Oh, well, I guess you were in the classroom too at some point taking the exam. Not anymore, though. It was just me, the exam, and the teacher. And do you want to take a stab at who that teacher was? That's right, the man of the hour, Mr. Dave Ascitutto. Crazy! He's not even a

math teacher. I had him for Honors World History my freshman year. Man, that class was rough. He just wouldn't give me a break. I got the only C of my life in that class.

So, it's me and the Italian Stallion, spending a little one-on-one time together while I finish my exam. I'm already stressing out at this point, thinking the worst. It didn't help that Asciutto was screaming right in my ear while I worked. He was saying something about how I was given this great opportunity, blah, blah, blah. He was really throwing me off my game. I couldn't even see the words on the page anymore. I'd imagine it was right around that time that I started sweating profusely in my bed. I blame Asciutto for causing me to have to do laundry when I woke up.

I had to clear my head somehow, so I excused myself to use the men's room. Asciutto gave me shit for that, of course, but what else was new? The man gave me shit for everything, whether it was in class, on the track, or in the weight room. There was never anything I could do to please him. Still, I managed to leave the classroom to follow the call of the wild. The halls at this time were empty, except for these massive television screens lining the walls. I don't know why, but just the sight of these filled me with terror, and I started to run, faster than I ever did at track practice.

Just as I was about to reach the end of the hallway, though, every one of those damn screens turned on, and what they displayed was just about the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen. I froze in my tracks, looking into the angry, red face of Dave Asciutto, flickering on dozens of LCD screens. The veins on his red forehead bulged and rippled with the screen's static. Why was he so angry? He didn't say anything. He just looked at me with those illuminating eyes, the eyes that always seemed to know when I was off causing trouble.

So that was last night's dream. Spooked me right out. Had old Dave turned into Big Brother?

I've had a few dreams like that. With Big Dave, I mean. Usually it's just him yelling at me while I'm doing something: lifting, running, whatever. Sometimes he's in these dreams I have about class reunions, yelling at me just as he always did. I'm sure most people probably dread going to class

reunions, but I'd imagine that only becomes an issue as one approaches the ten, twenty, thirty, or fifty-year marks. I, on the other hand, have dreams about these reunions in some form or the other almost every single week.

Now, I haven't yet been to any kind of class reunion in real life, but I don't think that they typically include having to go to all of the classes you took in school. As illogical as it sounds, I dream that I'm a middle-aged man, dressed in my coolest kicks, a backpack slung over my shoulder, and I'm shuffling down to first-period Spanish with Señor Lewis. Now, the guy was probably in his sixties when I had him for Español, so what the hell is he doing still teaching nearly thirty years later? What about that mountain house you were always telling us you dreamed of buying, Señor? Don't tell me that even you failed to follow your dreams.

Of course, I can't understand a word that the good Señor is saying, because after thirty or so years on hiatus, my Spanish isn't all there. As far as I knew, he could have told us in this class that he bought the mountain house decades ago and only chooses to continue teaching out of sheer passion and enjoyment. Yeah, right.

You'd think the worst part about these dreams would be seeing my former teachers all washed up, trying to review subjects with us that were erased shortly after graduation, through years of concentrated alcohol and drug abuse. It was even worse to see my actual classmates. Not that I ever did (most of) them any wrong, but the simple fact that I haven't seen or heard from them in so many years always makes me feel guilty. Why, in this age of hyper-connectedness, is it so hard for me to keep in touch with the people I used to consider my very best friends? Why have I dropped the ball on so many relationships? Sure, the fiasco that was After-Prom Weekend our senior year may have burned a boardwalk or two. I can accept the blame for a lot of that. But the rest?

Was there ever a major dramatic moment where I realized my friendships were no longer? For the most part, no. It was all gradual. That first Thanksgiving break back from freshman year of college,

I was still naïve enough to think everything would be the same. My friends and I could get together to drink and reminisce about the old days from six months prior. We'd catch each other up on what we'd been up to in our post-high school lives. We'd realize we no longer had anything in common besides a dependence on cheap alcohol to keep relationships interesting. Still, this was enough to make plans to do the same thing that winter break, and of course in the summer we'd get to hang out every day. Unless we got jobs, which of course almost all of us did. By the next year of college, those of us who were bound to drop out had already done so and had started their lucrative careers working at a Walgreens or local landscaping company while the rest of us built new friendships and connections elsewhere.

Should I have put more effort into maintaining these friendships? Were they ever worth holding onto in the first place? When I'm awake, it's easy to tell myself, no, they weren't worth crap. Let 'em fade. But they never do. These past friends just keep popping up in my reunion dreams, as vividly dull I remember. Hey Dan, how's it going? Long time no see. It's great catching up with all of you again, it's really been too long. Well, I better keep making the rounds, I'm going to go binge eat and hoard cookies from the cafeteria. I'll see you at the next reunion, probably sometime next weekend! Hey, Sarah! Great to see you again.

You know how I've got that whole OCD thing going on? You've seen my room; it's fucking immaculate. Clothes are organized by color and style in my wardrobe. There's never a speck of dust on the shelves, nor a single crumb on the rug. Girls love it when they come over. I guess they're expecting me to be all over the place. I can't imagine why, but it's nice to surprise them with the cleanliness of my room. I take pride in that. I really do.

I must not be getting enough cleaning action in my life though, because even in my dreams, I'm constantly cleaning. Like, who does that? I can't tell you how many times I've dreamed I'm in my house

back in Jersey, doing my thing, when suddenly I notice something in disorder. Of course, what do I do? Captain Clean has to jump into action and make things right.

I'll start with something simple, like folding a pile of clothes that was crumpled without care on the floor. After I've done that, I'll notice the carpet could use a quick once-over with the ol' Hoover. Next thing I know, I'm sorting shoe boxes full of junk in the closet, and deciding that while I'm at it, I might as well head up into the attic to go through the Halloween and Christmas decorations. You know, to make sure all is in order for when we need to take them out in another six months.

Doesn't sound too awful, does it? Just wait. While I'm doing my part in keeping things tidy, I'll notice things around the house are starting to fall apart. Not like Ikea-furniture-kind-of-falling-apart, but like entire ceilings caving in and floorboards splintering up. Windows will start to shatter as if a boulder was hurled through them, painted walls will peel and curl up into twisted claws, curtains will spontaneously combust, and all I can ever find myself thinking is that it's just another mess for me to clean up. The job is just never complete. How is that fair?

It's actually kind of embarrassing to admit this, but I tend to wake up more stressed out (and sweaty, naturally) from these nightmares than from the ones starring the Italian Stallion and the rest of the high school crew. Many times, I'll wake up with a jolt during these cleaning spree nightmares, thinking that a mouse or some other disgusting pest just crawled over my stomach. I now own several mouse traps, though I've never actually seen the mouse. Even when I'm at school, I wake up in the morning so shaken that I have to call my mom to make sure our house hasn't fallen into disrepair overnight. It hasn't. Yet.

Speaking of the home life, whenever I'm away at school I tend to miss my dogs more than my actual human family members. That's normal, right? I often have dreams about my dogs, thinking they're in some kind of trouble. I have this one recurring nightmare that someone's poisoned them by tampering with their food. I never know who did it, let alone why, I just come home to my dogs deathly

ill, coughing up blood and barely moving on our kitchen floor. Then I wake up.

There's another recurring nightmare I have where my dogs have run away. It starts with me or one of my siblings letting them outside to take care of their business. Usually it's someone like my younger sister that messes it all up. She never watches the dogs close enough, and instead of leading them right to the fenced in portion of the backyard (known as the Doggie Garden) she lets them roam free. It wouldn't be so hard to keep an eye on all of them if there was only one or two dogs, but we happen to have four. Three mini schnauzers (Rolf, Trixie, and Kiwi) and a short-haired chiweenie (Tootsie). All very small, quick dogs, who, once they reach the busy avenue at the bottom of our driveway, become no different from a squirrel or opossum to the comparatively massive SUVs and trucks driving by at forty miles an hour.

Conveniently, as soon as they are free in these nightmares, the dogs' first thought is to run full speed to the bottom of the driveway, right into the avenue. It's as if they want to get hit! Are they suicidal or something? I like to think that I'm a pretty awesome dog owner. I give them more love and attention than most people in my life. I let them sit on my lap while I eat at the kitchen table and sneak them bites of whatever it is I'm eating. I never yell at them for jumping on the couches or beds. Hell, I invite them to. One of my favorite things to do when I'm home is sit on my couch in the den, reading or watching a movie, surrounded by all four of my dogs, each acting as a furry, breathing blanket. I dress them up in adorable sweaters, to make sure they're warm at all times, especially Tootsie, because I hate to see her shivering.

Why then, do they run? There have been times when I haven't been able to catch them on their sudden surge for the avenue. I can only run so fast, especially when I wasn't even the one who let them outside in the first place. I do my best to stop them, but the truth is, a lot of these dreams end up with one or all of my dogs getting hit by a car, leaving me sobbing in my sleep.

The worst part is, it's happened in real life before. Bob the Dog was so fat that the classification

of “mini schnauzer” was hardly appropriate. He was still able to break from his leash with astounding speed. This time it was my fault. I guess I didn't secure the leash properly, and before I could react, Bob the Dog was halfway down the driveway, knowingly or unknowingly about to meet his fate with a gray Cadillac Escalade that had just turned the corner. I witnessed his pudgy little body get smacked by the front bumper of the Escalade. Even more than the sickening thud, I remember the horrified look of a preteen girl pressing her face against the passenger window, like a real life version of that Edvard Munch painting. Bob the Dog is no longer with us.

Motor vehicles definitely don't have a cherished place in my dreamscape, I'll tell you that much. Between these Escalades gunning for my poor, defenseless doggies, and my own experiences driving them, I can't seem to catch a break. I've been in a few car accidents in real life, sure, but you'd think I'd be safe from that kind of thing in my own dreams. Aren't we supposed to do anything we want in dreams? People tell me all the time that they fly in dreams, produce sexual partners at the flick of a wrist, hell, they can eat all they want without ever getting full or fat! And yet, instead of experiencing those miracles, I'm stuck with pretty mundane chores, like the aforementioned cleaning, or driving without an end in sight. Plenty of my dreams are just me dropped onto an endless stretch of highway, driving an unfamiliar vehicle, with a never ending feeling that *I really need to be somewhere, at this very moment*. And yet, the chances of me getting to this *wherever* are extremely slim, because in my dreams I can't drive for the life of me. I can go from cleaning my entire house with a clear mind to sitting behind the wheel of a car, feeling like I've polished off a fifth of Jack all on my own. The roads merge and split without warning, looping up and around for the exit I probably should have gotten off on, and I'm having trouble even locating the brakes. Needless to say, I end a lot of these dreams in a horrible car accident, where I always die. My soul, coated in a ghostly cold sweat, exits the vehicle, as if it were being pulled away by some heavenly force. I float away, staring at my limp, drunken body crunched between the driver's seat and the steering wheel.

I don't know if I've ever told you this, but I'm a black belt in karate. That's right, if it came down to it, I could kick your ass in a flurry of crescent kicks, uppercuts, and leg sweeps, courtesy of the Isshin-Ryu style. All in self-defense, of course.

Actually, I'm not a black belt. I never got past high brown belt, which is literally half a step away. Don't get me wrong, I *could've* gotten my black belt anytime I wanted. I was the star student at my dojo. Sometimes I dream that I'm in the sparring ring, throwing everything I have at my opponents. I was an exceptional fighter at my age, from nine to fourteen years old. They called me “The Tasmanian Devil”.

I still like to relive my very first sparring match. I had just gotten my brand new gear, including a helmet, mouth guard, gloves, and kick pads. I was beyond ready to step in the ring. I'd been training in the dojo for about two months, going over boring fundamentals. At this point I was ready for action. I'd watched from the sidelines for the last few weeks, imagining how my debut would go. I didn't really care. I just wanted it to happen already.

When the time came for us to gather around the ring, Sensei went over the basic rules: no headshots, no hitting below the belt, two ring-outs end the match, two-minute time limit. Whatever. Rules weren't on my mind, if I'm being honest.

Sensei called a student into the ring, the biggest kid in the class. He was about my age, nine years old or so, and was known as Big Joey. He was big, all right. He looked like a fat, pink pumpkin with a shock of bleached-blond hair where his stem should have been. Sensei asked the rest of the class, an assortment of eight-to eleven-year-olds who were built like twigs, who wanted to spar Big Joey. I, a twig in my own right, stood up.

I don't know if Sensei was testing our heart or bravery or what have you, but I didn't hesitate at taking my first opportunity to spar in my first real match. Big Joey didn't scare me. The rest of the class

looked shocked, as if I were signing my own death warrant. I mean, jeez, I might have been. Big Joey was nearly twice my weight. Sensei, I like to think, was impressed by my gumption. Big Joey just smiled, thinking he'd get another easy match out of the way. Sensei asked if I was sure I was ready; it was my first match after all. I put my mouthguard in and nodded. Big Joey and I stood opposite of each other in the ring. As was tradition, we bowed to Sensei, bowed to each other, and took our fighting stances. I have a clear memory of Big Joey's fighting stance. He stood, legs shoulder width apart, shoulders hunched over like a golem. He also left his chest, a rather large target, wide open. As soon as Sensei yelled, "Haijime!" to start the match, I leaped into the air at Big Joey, my right leg extending fully as I did. I nailed him right in the chest with a flying jump kick before he could even flinch.

He must not have been expecting to be hit so hard, so quickly, because he immediately toppled over backwards from the ring. "Ush!" my Sensei yelled as Big Joey fell, his fat ass plopping onto the blue mats. He looked stunned. I returned to the starting position for the next round. Sensei helped my opponent up. As Big Joey returned to his starting position I noticed a new, wary look in his eyes.

Again, Sensei yelled, "Haijime!" and I came flying at Big Joey with the same exact kick as before. He let his guard down even more this time, not expecting me to repeat opening strikes. That was his downfall, as again he toppled backwards out of the ring, this time falling into the wall. A decorative tiger tapestry that was hanging there went down with him. Two ring-outs. The match was over.

I noticed a sly smile form on Sensei's face as he helped Big Joey up for the second time. Had he found a future black belt in me, The Tasmanian Devil? As it turns out, no, because I quit just before I tested for my black belt. Why? Performance anxiety? To this day I'm not sure. I always loved the sparring and freestyle wrestling aspects of Isshin-Ryu, but as I got older and was put in the more advanced classes, there was more and more emphasis on discipline. I wasn't as interested in that, I guess, and ended up quitting karate to pursue high school football and track.

It may seem strange, but I still have many dreams reliving the highpoints of my karate career, such as that first shocking fight against Big Joey (fun fact: he refused to fight me again after that). The dreams that really bother me, however, are when I return to my old dojo, pretending like I never left. I go in there, wearing my high brown belt, and pick up where my training left off. I pretend that I'm still my Sensei's golden boy, ignoring the hurt I left him when I never returned to the dojo once I started high school. But in these dreams, they all remember. They strip me of the brown belt that I fought so hard for over the course of five years, a belt for which I suffered countless bloody noses, sprained ankles and wrists, and concussions that I'm still seeing long-term effects from. They take my high brown belt that should be a black belt and give me a new one: bleach white and full of shame. I have to start at the bottom, where I was before I was even allowed to spar in the ring. I am no longer the golden boy. I am a nothing, and I know it is because I have disappointed my Sensei.

You're probably thinking that a lot these recurring dreams are pretty lame. You wouldn't be freaked out by them, would you? I mean, dreams about cleaning and high school reunions and a preteen's karate career? Those things are nothing compared to the real nightmares, of monsters under the bed, killer clowns, and teeth falling out one by one. But to tell you the truth, I've had dreams like that too. I've woken up in the middle of the night, sweaty and utterly unable to move. There is some kind of androgynous figure in bed with me. They are demonic forms, with no eyes, no identifiable facial features besides an open, gaping mouth. They whisper to me aggressively. I don't have the slightest idea what they say, but if I don't at least pretend to listen, they start screaming a scream unlike any other I've heard. Then there's a sucking sound, as if they are sucking every last bit of oxygen from my lungs. As I lay paralyzed, I start choking. I can't breathe. I fight to break away from these night terrors, but my body is not fully awake yet. All I can do is wait for the demon to release me. One time, when they finally released me, and I was able to move and breathe again, I fell out of bed in shock. I

nearly broke my arm and had to go to the hospital for X-rays the next day, not knowing what to tell the doctors. Another time there was actually someone in bed with me, a girl I had been seeing at the time. I woke up next to her, unable to move and thoroughly convinced that someone was watching us from the shadows across her room. She was sound asleep. I tried to whisper to her, hoping she'd wake up and do something about the intruder, until I realized that we were both laying in a pool of sweat. My sweat. How the hell was I going to explain that one?

When I was finally able to move again, I quietly left the room to go to the bathroom and calm myself down. Should I wake my lady friend up and tell her about about my nightmare? Probably not, we didn't have that kind of relationship yet. We were still getting comfortable on the physical level; I didn't need to bring in my psychological demons.

There was still the matter of the sweat-stained bed. I couldn't go back, it was too shameful. I left her dorm building at 3 am, the chilly autumn wind snapping me into total wakefulness. What was I supposed to tell the girl? That I, a 21 year old man, still broke out into night sweats every time I was confronted with vivid nightmares? That I have the same ones, over and over and over again, repeating in vicious cycle that I just can't seem to escape? Would I tell her about what I saw in the shadows? Would she even believe me?

Do you believe me? To tell you the truth I've had reservations about sleeping with any girl ever since. No, I don't mean fucking them. I'll still do that, and did I mention I'm really great at it? Ask anyone here. I'm a great fuck. But how can I ever be anything more than that? After I get my breath back from what I hope was-as-good-for-her-as-it-was-for-me, after we avoid eye contact while cleaning ourselves up, I'm out. I don't stick around for any post-game pillow talk. I have no time for cuddling and content sighs and I'm-glad-I-met-you's. I leave because I know that the second I let my mind relax, and I approach the realm of sleep, *they'll* get me. I'm not afraid of getting into a serious relationship like everyone else here seems to be. No, I'm just afraid that if I stay too long, my past relationships will

come back to haunt me, one by one. They'll lurk in the shadows of the bedroom, tormenting me, daring me to come up with yet another excuse to run away.