

Tyler Gebauer
Xylophone Smile

In the monitor I see a second baby next to mine, now crawling circles around him, cartoonish, menacing in his play as he turns towards the camera and flashes a xylophone smile.

My father puts his hand on my shoulder and says “You’re probably hallucinating.”

But I have to go check I think as I run up the stairs, two at a time, desperately needing to be in my child’s nursery, and as my foot passes over the threshold a violent force pulls at the hood of my sweatshirt, the pressure on my Adams apple causing me to lose my balance, and I’m tumbling backwards down the stairs, the falling so unending it starts to feel like floating.

Upon impact with the bottom of the stairs I awake with a start on my couch in the living room, several feet from the baby monitor where I see my baby, alone, breathing slowly in his crib. The room is black save the glare of the screen, silent but for the ticking of the clock behind me. And the second baby? Where has he gone? The certainty of his presence doesn’t disappear with wakefulness. Beyond the monitor my eyes capture no other light in the room.

Yet a sound like the rattling of skeletons, at first nearly unnoticeable but increasingly hard to ignore, pierces the darkness like a blinding light. It’s the house, I tell myself, old houses are always making noises, it could be the furnace, or a pipe, or the creaking of wood expanding in the beams, the house’s ancient structure settling in on itself. But a rhythm emerges, a pattern too structured to be random.

As it grows louder, I start to recognize the unmistakable sounds of a waltz teetering towards me in drunken three-four time. I close my eyes and curl in on myself, hoping to fall asleep, praying the sound dissipates, but with each measure of music it only grows louder, winding its way through my house, past the kitchen, down the hall, approaching my place on the couch, when suddenly, as deftly as it started, it stops.

In my ears ring the rumble of the fridge and furnace, though the afterglow of the topsy-turvy tones still loop in my memory. Breath whistles out my nostrils. Blood thumps through the veins in my temples. Had it only been a dream, or a hallucination as my father had said? Both options are equally plausible at this point. Sleep deprivation had demolished the walls between wakefulness and sleep long ago.

With a deep breath, I steel my nerves and work up the courage to open my eyes. I wonder whether dreams reside only behind or eyelids, or if they exist beyond them as well. When I open my eyes I see, bathed in the light of the digital monitor, the horrible grin of the xylophone smile. I close my eyes and wait for the nightmare to end.