For journalists: nightmares, sleep paralysis and the "death by nightmare" story

Halloween is the one week of the year when people talk about fear out loud, and every October the same three stories come round: why we have nightmares, what the figure on the chest is, and whether anyone has ever died of a dream. The honest answers are calmer than the headlines, and they are the ones a reader can use at three in the morning.

Somniary is an English-language dream library and AI dream reader made in Prague. It reads a dream through several lenses and says openly that science has no consensus on why we dream. Its pages on nightmares, sleep paralysis and the Hmong deaths were written with that boundary, so they can be quoted without adding fear to a frightened reader. Editor Gabriela Kurkova is available for questions at hello@somniary.com.

What is known, with sources

1. **Occasional nightmares are normal.** Frequent ones are tied to stress, trauma, anxiety and disrupted sleep, and there is no fixed meaning behind a nightmare's images. (Somniary, Nightmares: Why Your Brain Creates Terror.)
2. **The threat-simulation idea is a hypothesis, not a finding.** Antti Revonsuo proposed in 2000 that dreaming rehearses threats; it is one of several proposals about why we dream, and none of them has a consensus behind it. (Revonsuo, Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 2000.)
3. **Chronic nightmares are treatable.** In a randomized controlled trial published in JAMA in 2001, 168 women with post-traumatic stress disorder received three sessions of Imagery Rehearsal Therapy, rewriting the nightmare's ending while awake and rehearsing it; nights with nightmares and nightmares per week fell significantly, and sleep and PTSD symptoms improved. (Krakow et al., JAMA 286(5), 2001.)
4. **Sleep paralysis is the body's normal dream paralysis lasting into waking.** REM atonia, which stops you acting out dreams, overlaps with awareness for seconds to minutes. The presence, the weight on the chest and the shadowy figure are hallucinations of a brain between dreaming and waking. (Somniary, Sleep Paralysis Across Cultures.)
5. **About one person in thirteen has had it.** A systematic review of 36,533 people found that 7.6% of the general population had at least one episode in their lifetime; among students it was 28.3%. (Sharpless and Barber, Sleep Medicine Reviews, 2011.)
6. **The same experience has a name in almost every culture.** The Slavic Mora, the Japanese kanashibari, the Thai Phi Am, the Newfoundland Old Hag. Shelley Adler's research showed that the story a culture tells about the episode can make the same experience feel more or less dangerous. (Adler, Sleep Paralysis: Night-mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection, Rutgers University Press, 2011.)
7. **The Hmong deaths were real, and they were cardiac.** Between 1981 and 1988 the Centers for Disease Control received reports of 117 sudden unexplained nocturnal deaths among Southeast

Asian refugees in the United States, most of them young Hmong men. Later research links these deaths to inherited cardiac conditions such as Brugada syndrome. Fear of sleep made the nights worse; the nightmares themselves did not kill anyone. (CDC reports 1981 to 1988; Journal of the American Heart Association, 2018, "Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome: The Hundred Years' Enigma".)

Three myths, and what the science says

- **"A nightmare means something bad is going to happen."** There is no reliable evidence that dreams predict the future. People dream several times a night for a lifetime, and the rare match gets remembered while the thousands of misses do not.
- **"The figure on my chest was a demon, or a visitor."** It was a hallucination produced by a brain caught between REM sleep and waking. It is frightening, it is harmless, and it is usually over within a minute. The demon has a different name in every language because the experience is the same everywhere.
- **"People have died of nightmares."** The Hmong deaths are the case everyone means, and the cause is now understood to be cardiac. What the fear did was keep men awake, and sleep deprivation made the paralysis and the terror worse. The dream was never the killer.

Five sentences you may quote, from Gabriela Kurkova, editor of Somniary

1. **"The kindest thing anyone can tell you about a nightmare is also the truest one: it does not know the future."**
2. **"Sleep paralysis is your body's ordinary dream paralysis lasting a few seconds too long. The figure in the room is your brain finishing a dream with your eyes open."**
3. **"We read a nightmare the way we read any dream, through several lenses and with no verdict. Fear is a feeling, not a forecast."**
4. **"If a nightmare keeps coming back, or arrives after something that happened to you, take it to a person, not to an app. We say so on every page that touches the subject."**
5. **"The Hmong deaths were real and they were cardiac. Nobody has ever died of a dream."**

Pages, all free to read and link

- Nightmares, science and culture: https://somniary.com/dream-library/dream-phenomena/nightmares-science-culture
- Sleep paralysis across cultures: https://somniary.com/dream-library/dream-phenomena/sleep-paralysis-cultures-worldwide
- SUNDS and the Hmong nightmare deaths: https://somniary.com/dream-library/dream-phenomena/sunds-sudden-nocturnal-death-hmong
- Recurring dreams: https://somniary.com/dream-library/dream-phenomena/recurring-dreams-meaning
- Being chased, falling, teeth falling out (the common nightmare symbols): https://somniary.com/dream-library/symbols/being-chased, https://somniary.com/dream-library/symbols/falling, http

s://somniary.com/dream-library/symbols/teeth

- Every source the site cites: https://somniary.com/sources
- Nightmares: What They Are, and What Helps (the blog article, published 16 September 2026): https://somniary.com/blog/nightmares-what-helps

About Somniary

Somniary (somniary.com) is a dream library and an AI dream reader in English, made in Prague. A free reading needs no account and the dream is not stored. The library covers dream symbols, dream traditions of 34 cultures, sleep science and dream phenomena, each page with its sources named. The site reads dreams through several lenses, emotional regulation, threat simulation, continuity with waking life, Jungian psychology and cross-cultural context, and presents them as perspectives, never as verdicts, because there is no scientific consensus on why we dream. It is not therapy, and it says so.

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Somniary, somniary.com, Prague. Every figure above is either on the cited Somniary page with its source named, or verified against the publisher and year on 16 September 2026. Questions: hello@somniary.com.