

Night Shift

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pareidolia

[pair-ahy-**doh-lee-uh**]

noun

the illusory perception of meaningful patterns or images of familiar things in random or amorphous data, as a face seen on the moon.

[dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)

Night shift working from home tonight. As a human collective, we haven't learned nor improved much as people during the pandemic of Covid-19. Except for the home office, the ever so feared by CEOs request, the telework.

Never a useless middle manager favorite, working from home became more a necessity than a choice a few years ago. Many of us were suddenly stuck on a myriad of tiny face tiles on a computer screen in never ending Zooms or Teams. Most people, including the useless middle manager aforementioned, dislike the lack of personal touch and interaction from working from home and miss micromanaging workers, despite not wanting to say so. As social animals, we need to be with our peers and exchange shiny happy moments at the water cooler, recounting tales of how we spent our weekends walking our golden retrievers or trekking through a dewy meadow.

I, on the other hand, am not most people, and I love the chance to ditch my long bus commute to work and the phony exchanges with colleagues I don't care for over cheap reheated coffee under a perpetually blinking light in the break room. I'd much rather do my work in the peace of my home. Especially for the night shift, the peacefulness and simplicity of the nighttime.

What is great about the night shift and working from home is that I can delegate a lot for the day shift people; there is so much I can do overnight to fix things in a world that is made of day dwellers. I have never been a day person myself, but usually everything works in the classic 9 to 5 window. I know we have hospitals, night schools, and police stations and even markets running at my ungodly hours of service, many of them actually my clients, but also many things that I need to access to help them fix their

problems, like banks, law offices, and embassies, for example, run during the opposite time of my shift. So, I tend to fix the emergencies that can't wait and delegate the small stuff for the other team of sunshine lovers. It helps my case working from home because I don't have to see anyone: I just drop my delegation bombs and run.

But nothing is perfect. Am I right? There is precisely one thing I do miss from the office that I do not possess: air conditioning. My apartment, besides being very old, is also very hot. I love the summertime, but not when I have to be stuck at my desk to work. Therefore, I miss the meat-locker temperature feeling that I was greeted with when I opened the door to the company office. We even needed to have a hoodie or a thin sweater on hand because the cold would, at times, feel too much. Well, no more. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. Every place has its perks and faults, and working from home beats the perks of the office every time, at least for me.

Today I have a little anomaly in my home office, a very small colleague to break my patterns and most of my quietness: my niece Johanna's cat, Milo. She had an impromptu trip to London, and I agreed to take care of the little mister over the weekend, much to her relief. The moment is less than ideal because, like I moaned about before, the weather has been hotter than usual and my windows are not netted for his protection. When I shut the windows on a tryout, the result is even more scalding than last night; no more evening cool breeze blazing through the curtains cooling me down. It has gotten so hot that when I sat down on my desk, I felt sweat trickling down my back, my t-shirt clinging onto my skin, and my patience wearing thinner and thinner. How can I make this better for Milo and me? I went out and got a powerful tower fan. It has to be better than nothing.

Milo has been hiding under the bed since he got here this afternoon, but he seems to be curious when I set up my computer and get my things to start my night shift. I can see his head peeking through the office's doorframe, a curious face and inquisitive eyes on what I must be doing so late awake; after all, all the humans he knows are day people, and he is the nightcrawler. I just ignore him, as instructed by my niece before; when he feels comfortable enough, he'll come around. It seems to work because I know that he is making himself comfortable in my reading armchair. Paws up in the air, having his midnight bath session, it seems. I have heard before that cats feel energies and react to them accordingly, even when we humans don't feel anything. My energies are somewhat ok, since I barely started working, and I gave him a bunch of treats, both of us feeling happy to see each other in good moods.

I remember to bring the fan to the office space, since Milo seems to be sticking around and I need to cool down the room for both of our sakes. He doesn't seem to mind the fan and the white noise it makes, and also I have the wind straight towards my desk. He remains unbothered on the armchair, cleaning himself. I consider this night shift will be a success if it remains the same and I have good odds; usually Fridays tend to be quiet most times.

I leave music on at a low volume, mostly for Milo's benefit rather than mine. I usually work with noise-cancelling headphones but I choose to go without them today, as I think I need to be more aware of the feline guest. What if he meows for a treat or to drink fresh water from the kitchen faucet and I miss it because I am in my music isolation chamber? Better not to risk it; I don't want to make him feel stressed to call my attention for so little. To be honest, the music is getting on my nerves, and I just decide to shut it

off, and just talk to the cat every now and then, as he was my little intern, asking his opinion and answering myself in a baby voice so sickly that it might cause diabetes. He meows and stares at me, either in contempt of my voice or at the fact that he misses his master and he is stuck with me.

I never noticed the weird quietness of the night shift when you don't have music or a TV on; it is kind of unsettling now, to be honest. Maybe it is nice and quiet with some white noise, but maybe the fan is the wrong white noise for me. I swear I can still hear some faint music, although I shut it down. Maybe there is someone else listening to some? It is Friday after all, and since I usually have the noise-cancelling headphones most nights, maybe it never called my attention before. To be sure where it's coming from, I turn off the fan and try to follow the sound. Nothing. The only thing that is being followed is me by the cat; I guess now he is shadowing me. I give him some rubs on his head and boop his nose, telling him that he seems like a very hard working intern on his first day, and I chuckle to myself at the expense of my own silliness.

I come back to the office and put the fan back on, and as I sit down, I can hear a mumbling of voices, not music anymore. I see the cat is back in the armchair, so I open the window and poke my head out a tad; no one can be heard outside. I close the window, and I can still hear the voices; that is odd, to say the least. I have heard that sometimes fans can pick up radio signals, it must be something like that? I don't know. I can't make out what they are saying, it must be things from my head then. What do you call the thing that makes you try to make sense of sounds, like they are something familiar?. Work is pretty slow, so I check online for that. Bingo, I found a Reddit thread exactly about that: people listening to voices and music in the wind and on fans. Ha! I

am not crazy after all. Someone is also saying it is a phenomenon called pareidolia. Just what I thought; I remembered the word from a TV show, when the hosts were trying to find the source of voices a person was hearing, and it was just electricity humming from a nearby electrical plant, and she also ended up having tinnitus, all those things together making up for the so-called ghost sounds she was hearing. In my case, it must be the fan then. So be it, I need to stop waffling and go back to work.

The sounds from the fan oscillate between human murmurs and some sort of music, and I try to just not pay attention to it, but somehow it gets loud every now and then. I wish it wasn't this hot and I could turn the damn thing off. Funny enough, the cat seems to get closer as the sounds grow louder, and now he is suddenly propped on my desk. I get a bit scared because cats can be so silent and limber, like a little ninja in the still of the night. Maybe he wants a treat, but now he is rubbing himself on my right arm, and as I am touched by his showing of affection, I also tell him slightly off, as I need both my hands to type on the computer. He then looks right into my eyes, like he is looking for something, and as I give him a kiss on the nose, I finally clearly hear the sounds on the wind: "*Listen!*"

The voice is actually angry, and it calls my name, loud and clear: "*Gemma, listen!*"

To say that I got scared is an understatement. So much so, that I dropped my keyboard on the floor and it made Milo jump to the roof. How much of a coincidence can it be that there is some sort of radio wave signal being caught by the wind that also has my name on it? This is madness. I think we have to turn the fan off because I am starting to hallucinate, this pareidolia is getting out of control. I am trying to find my own

name in the wind, for crying out loud. I sat back on my chair, trying to make sense of what just happened, and Milo now jumps onto my lap, purring and kneeling on my thighs, trying to make himself comfortable. Maybe he is trying to soothe me? Or soothe himself? He was scared too, or maybe he is protecting me? I am losing my grip on reality, I must need some well-deserved rest after this shift. Most likely the closed windows plus the heat are making my brain turn into mush. Any option is better than hearing voices over the fan. I should shut it off, by the way; at least the radio signals cannot come down through it if I shut it. The extra heat is just something I am willing to suffer through if it means the sounds or voices will stop.

But they did not. I keep hearing them, I cannot escape that because, for reasons unknown, the fan is back on. I almost throw Milo on the floor, and he lands on his feet, like the cat he is, and keeps getting tangled on my legs. How is this fan working? It was off! I am at the end of the rope here and most likely losing grip of reality, trying to distinguish what is fantasy and what is real. I frantically look for the electric plug and rip off the wire from the socket. Lo and behold, the fan still runs and the voice still speaks: *“Gemma, listen to us.”*

Horrified, I collapse on the floor, and I cry. Hands on my face to muffle a loud sob. I know that this is not normal, and yet I can hear them now, loud and clear. If I call anyone, they will think I am either stoned or crazy enough to be committed. Will these voices ever leave me alone?

“No, we won’t leave you alone. Listen to us!”

The voice could listen to me as well, listen to my inner voice. Was I the only one who could hear them? I think Milo kept coming close because he could hear them too, and he was as confused as me because we could hear them but not see anyone. It was a voice like I have never heard before, a voice that was first female and then male; I could not tell what it was. But it was somewhat human, and it knew my name. It said “we” and “us”, so it could be many of them? Before it spoke to me directly, it sounded like a mix of voices and songs, so it is more than one of whatever they are. My thoughts are interrupted by the cat now, Milo is hissing towards the fan. I get closer to the wind to make sense of the cacophony of sounds that are coming out, like a broken record that keeps playing or a radio that is out of tune.

“We are coming through, listen now.”

I know it sounds even crazier, but I feel that I don't have a choice but to listen, and I, for the first time, talk back willingly to them: “If I listen, will you leave this place and not come through?” I manage to say that through tears and lips that shake from fear. Milo is almost roaring like a lion, the poor thing is doing the best he can to keep me protected.

Silence ensued, you could just hear the wind from the fan blowing on my face as I anxiously waited for an answer. Suddenly, instead of an answer, the lights go out. I can feel my whole body shaking, my teeth clattering, and even Milo is trembling as I clutch him with all my might. The only source of light comes from my computer monitor, my task alarms blaring on the screen from work that has been left unattended for too long. The queues pile up on one another, the red alarm lights blinking in the darkness of the room. Every time they blink, they illuminate the room, and I can see a huge shadow

coming closer and closer. Milo hisses louder and louder as the red lights blink and the shadow comes closer and closer. I feel cold air around me, and I know something is wrong. The wind of the fan gets stronger. The computer monitor goes off. All there is is the wind and darkness. My face feels cold, and my body goes numb. Suddenly the voice speaks; only now it's followed by more than one voice at the same time.

"No."

"No."

"Never."

"Gemma, you did not listen to us soon enough."

I can smell them in the room, their cold breath, a pungent odor like rotten eggs. No wonder Milo won't stop hissing. There is a part of me that feels gratitude to this small animal, that even in this dark hour of fear, he is not leaving my side. I can feel that I grip his soft fur tighter in between my frightened fingers. The room feels progressively colder, and it feels like I am outside somewhere in winter, not in my scalding apartment of a few moments ago. The odor that fills the space is so strong that it makes me gag. Smells of death and decay, of despair and sadness. I think this is it for me, that my last night is tonight. As the thought crosses my head, just one of the shadows talks again, it is so close to me, and yet the voice comes through the wind once more.

"Gemma, you did not listen; I will have to show you."

I felt the creature grabbing my forearm, not without Milo protesting, as his hisses turn into a sad meow, almost like a cry for help in the night. The other shadows scream in

unison, I can hear their voices in my head. Like a symphony of sadness and mourning for something that I am about to see. Into the darkness I cannot see the shadows nor the blinking red light from my computer. It is pitch black. I can still feel Milo in my hands, I can smell the disgusting rotten odor, and I feel the cold in my face, and yet, I see nothing. I can feel my forearm burning like a cold fire from the shadow's grip that keeps tightening. Suddenly, my eyes awaken, and I see it clearly, a vision from the street. It is my street, and I see myself outside of my body in the twilight of a day like any other. While everyone else seems to be going back home, I go in the opposite direction, coming into my work, back then, pre-pandemic, when it used to be in the Black Tower.

The voices are still screaming in my head, or what I thought was my head here. I see them following my double, flying and screaming on her face instead, sometimes chanting what sounded like music before, as she takes no notice of what happens around her. I try to move, to shout, to say something, to give her a warning, but I am paralyzed, and I scream anyways, and it comes out voiceless. I feel the pain of being rendered useless by whatever these entities are.

I am forced to see a sped-up version of my life, from the dark halls of the Black Tower during the night, and out in the sunlight and sleeping all day in a darkened room in my place. Again and again, day after day, the voices chant, then scream, and I keep my ins and outs of the workplace: nights are long and full, and days and sunshine are nonexistent. It is like I am stuck in some sort of loop as I watch in a trance I cannot break out from until an event breaks the chains of the endless repetition. As I get close to the Black Tower, once again when people are out in the rest of the twilight sun and I am going into the darkness of my existence, I see a car coming by, out of control. I hear

a loud thud and my double's body flying into the air. I can hear the sound of shattered glass and bent metal, then her body hits the hard asphalt in a loud thud. The smell of iron-rich blood pooling on the road and around her body. Somehow I get a bird's-eye view of my double, and I see that this is not some scene from the past, as I thought. I see she has a strand of silver hair on her temples; they look like violin strings, gently framing her face. Once silver, now they are slowly being tinted in bright red from the puddle of blood that grows around her head. This is my future. I watch it all through time: my body going into the ground and decaying slowly, the seasons in and out, nothing changing but the leaves, the snow, and the sun. Suddenly, I see there is someone over my grave. It is my niece, Johanna, and she leaves a white flower on my grave. She puts her bag onto the cold ground, and from it, comes out sweet Milo the cat. He sits on my grave and stares at my picture and then turns at me, like he could see me through this vision. As I choke with my tears and my voiceless scream, the shadows stop shouting and the one that was gripping at my arm lets me free.

I am in the dark void again, and I hear the shadows, speaking as one, loud and clear. Milo remains in my tight grip, I can feel his heart beating so fast.

“Gemma, you never listened to life calling you to live. You never listened to us before, now and then. This is the story of you. Life will not wait for you, every second of all your days that you waste away will come back to you as nothingness in return...”

Now the voices stop, and then one speaks, it comes out as a deep growl that is reminiscent of something that once was a woman. She comes even closer than the

other shadows did before, and I can see a hint of a silhouette underneath the darkness of my nightmare fantasy. She went on.

“...There is no twist, but yet, there is fate, and what you choose to do today will impact tomorrow. We will be back eventually, as you cannot change what it was but only what it will be. How long it will take for us to be back is your decision. Listen to life and you will not need to hear from us again.”

As she leans closer and closer, I can see parts of her face. Her face has missing parts on her cheeks; I can see hollow spaces with bone fragments, some leftover ligaments, and parts of her hanging in there by a thread. The smell is the most foul so far, almost making me pass out from revulsion. That used to be a face, but now it's mostly shadow and death. As she moves slowly away to join her fleet of shadows, I see that on her other side, she still has one sort of good eye left, instead of another empty socket. It is partly worm-eaten and drying out. What it shows me is not a lie, and I know why: I read once that the eyes show the soul of the person, and whatever soul she has left lives in that eye. What I realize gives a shock deep down to my core: I know that soul belongs to me. She is me; she was me once. Not like the double from the vision, which I could see plain and clear was me in another time; this is something formerly human, and yet it is me. It feels like I am looking at myself in a mirror, and I need to come to terms with the fact that the reflection I see belongs to me. Before I have a chance to react, I am back to where I started, when I was just in front of my computer. Pushed back to my place, as it was not too long ago.

No time has elapsed, my alarms are not blasting, work is not piling up, and yet Milo is on my lap, not in the armchair as before. I see the cold burn in my arm, the cold grasp of the dark shadow that came by tonight. It is, maybe, proof of what happened? Am I out of my mind? Am I losing my senses? I think I only made it out alive because Milo never left me. Through all this madness, a cat kept me tethered to reality and guarded my heart and my soul.

As the night moves on, I must finish my night shift so work moves on. I work on autopilot, reminiscing and pondering on the things that I was shown and told. How does one move on from such a thing? I keep asking myself that again and again and no good answer comes.

When the clock hits 6 in the morning, I log off my system and then turn off my computer. Instead of going straight to bed and collapsing until midday with my clothes on, as I do most days, I take a shower, put on clean clothes and pick up Milo's leash. I remember Johanna said that, strangely enough, he liked going on walks on grassy places in the early morning. When she told me that, I thought to myself, there was no chance of that happening and that he would be fine without his morning walks just over a weekend. I see Milo staring at me with his sparkly green eyes, going around my legs as if thanking me for picking up the leash. As I put his harness on, I tell him: Let's go to see the sun rising, Milo. Because life won't wait for me again.