

Hyenas, wrestling demons, serpent kings and screaming corpses all in a night's bed-time story

Written by Natnael Yebio W.

In our culture we do not have Halloween, but we do have horror stories. Frankly speaking they are not official horror stories like the ones they have in the West. We do not have, for example, the equivalents of Dracula or Adam's family nor do we have special horror actors like Vincent Price, Sir Christopher Lee or writers like Sir Alfred Hitchcock or Stephen King who dominated the horror market in the past.

It is strange that there are as many people who want to have a laugh or cry. The market is there to deliver. It is like give them what they want and count your green bucks.

In our tradition, horror stories are not for sale. They are told to excite the imagination or just because they were there and they have somehow to be narrated. Some children like to listen to them. Most restrain their pee as they turn on their imagination and fight to keep a straight face. Others just bawl and run to mama. Sometimes it is the very adult who tells the horror story that keeps struggling with recurrent nightmares.

The most common traditional horror story always has the hyena as a protagonist. Imagine a hyena laughing. What on earth can make a horrendous, man-eating creature like hyena want to laugh? Yeah, he eats little children and giggles as if precious human lives were expendable.

How about the one about the young man who, walking across his wheat field, one day met the devil face to face. As if by reflex action, the frightened young man invoked the name of God, his son and the Holy Ghost. Upon hearing the man uttering these words the devil echoed them in a very scornful manner changing his voice from that of a man to that of a woman. There upon the young man fell to the ground and lost not only his consciousness but also his reason. People had to rub his body with human and animal excrement and tell him to sit in the sun till his reason was restored. That was, as far as they were concerned, the prescription for a devil-induced shock.

Housemaids who had a hard day with recalcitrant children resorted to horror stories as some sort of revenge. You won't sleep, will you? So I will make you curl up and sleep like a frightened dog. Okay, get this one: once upon a time there was a young monkey which had the notion to marry. His mother found him a bride, prepared food and drinks and invited kith and kin. But there was shortage of drums in the village of the apes. So all the monkeys went out and made a foray into the village of humans to kill livestock and craft drums out of the skins of the sheep and

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goats.

Not able to get their plan achieved, the monkeys looked around for innocent children playing in the field. They spotted one, got him and skinned him and fashioned a beautiful drum out of the soft and spongy human hide.

If that didn't scare the shit out of the little fellow, then there were tales of wolves that roamed the narrow streets at night. In our tradition, it is the hyena, which the devil uses as horse that turns into a human being for some urgent mission and hides behind trees to ambush unwary night wayfarers with special emphasis on priests. The hyena-cum-person likes to fight with the last mentioned and laughs at all kinds of invocation to incantation to drive him off, including vade retro satana or pater noster.

Let me give you a little food for thought. I think it was H.P. Lovecraft who said "from even t h e greatest of horrors irony is seldom absent". The most famous of traditional horror stories is about a Serpent King that ruled his country about 3,000 years ago. Under the reign of this beastly king, terror was the order of the day, for the slithering tyrant liked to eat damsels every month or so.

Almost all the young girls of the kingdom were thought expendable except one beautiful maiden with whom a prince valiant fell in love. As everybody knows, it is love that makes the world go round, and this intrepid lover decided to kill the python. Finally he did just that and saved his beloved, and you guessed it right, they lived happily ever after.

So what was so horrifying about the story? It was the way the serpent king crunched the young lasses and the way he died in the end. He was burned alive and his groaning shook the earth.

There were also horror stories that made the rounds and caused the heart of every listener to throb out of beat. It was some kind of 'The Revenge of the Mummy'. It was about a premature burial and the harrowing cry that the corpse emitted during nights from within his coffin. The story went like this: Once upon a t i m e there was a w o m a n who lived in proud loneliness. Nights were followed by days and days by nights and the day arrived when she had to depart this mortal world. The news of her death was immediately transmitted to the neighborhood by the maidservant who, for some reason, wanted to have her mistress buried as soon as possible.

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Maybe she was after the property.

When the funeral was over and every drooping soul went back home, with some deeming it proper to accompany the maidservant to the deceased woman's house, an evil wind began to blow from the direction of the graveyard. That night, the maidservant could not sleep. She saw her mistress in a dream screaming to get out of the grave. It was premature burial.

After laughing hyenas, wrestling demons, serpent kings and screaming corpses, we pass the man eating giants, and lastly to the Yajuj-Majuj (the biblical Gog and Magog) who one day would descend upon the earth with the sacred mission of destroying the earth and all those who live therein.

Kids of Yore, upon hearing the scary stories, thought Yajuj-Majuj were swarms of flies that came from the east with divine mission to feast on decaying human flesh after an apocalyptic war.

"No"

"They are fierce horsemen that will eventually destroy a third of the world's population."

"Why?"

"They will come to teach us a lesson."

"What lesson?"

"To love one another and to be kind to the poor,"

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Horror stories are a thing of beauty. In my opinion, no live organism can continue to exist with sanity for long under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. In the words of the great Stephen King, I leave you to be, "The 3 types of terror: The Gross-out: the sight of a severed head tumbling down a flight of stairs, it's when the lights go out and something green and slimy splatters against your arm.

The Horror: the unnatural, spiders the size of bears, the dead waking up and walking around, it's when the lights go out and something with claws grabs you by the arm. And the last and worse one: Terror, when you come home and notice everything you own had been taken away and replaced by an exact substitute. It's when the lights go out and you feel something behind you, you hear it, you feel its breath against your ear, but when you turn around, there's nothing there..."