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CIRQUE DU **FREAK** A LIVING NIGHTMARE

“Fast-paced and
full of macabre touches.”
— J. K. Rowling

DARREN SHAN

Cirque Du Freak [A Living Nightmare]

(Saga of Darren Shan - 1)

Darren Shan

Darren goes to a banned freak show with his best mate Steve. It's the wonderfully gothic Cirque du Freak where weird, frightening half human/half animals appear who interact terrifyingly with the audience. Darren — a spider freak — 'falls in love' with Madam Octa — an enormous tarantala owned by the circus proprietor. Darren determines to steal the spider so that he can train it to perform amazing deeds. But his daring theft goes horrible wrong. The spider bites his best mate and Darren has to sell his soul to an evil vampire to get the antidote. Something out of the ordinary is set against the background of children's normal lives to chilling effect. Atmospheric, funny, realistic, moving and... terrifying.

Darren Shan

Cirque Du Freak

INTRODUCTION

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY spiders. I used to collect them when I was younger. I'd spend hours rooting through the dusty old shed at the bottom of our garden, hunting the cobwebs for lurking eight-legged predators. When I found one, I'd bring it in and let it loose in my bedroom.

It used to drive my mom crazy!

Usually, the spider would slip away after no more than a day or two, never to be seen again, but sometimes they hung around longer. I had one who made a cobweb above my bed and stood guard for almost a month. Going to sleep, I used to imagine the spider creeping down, crawling into my mouth, sliding down my throat, and laying loads of eggs in my belly. The baby spiders would hatch after a while and eat me alive, from the inside out.

I loved being scared when I was little.

When I was nine, my mom and dad gave me a small tarantula. It wasn't poisonous or very big, but it was the greatest gift I'd ever received. I played with that spider almost every waking hour of the day. Gave it all sorts of treats: flies and cockroaches and tiny worms. Spoiled it rotten.

Then, one day, I did something stupid. I'd been watching a cartoon in which one of the characters was sucked up by a vacuum cleaner. No harm came to him. He squeezed out of the bag, dusty and dirty and mad as hell. It was very funny.

So funny, I tried it myself. With the tarantula.

Needless to say, things didn't happen quite like they did in the cartoon. The spider was ripped to pieces. I cried a lot, but it was too late for tears. My pet was dead, it was my fault, and there was nothing I could do about it.

My parents practically hollered the roof down when they found out what I'd done — the tarantula had cost quite a lot of money. They said I was irresponsible, and from that day on they never again let me have a pet, not even an ordinary garden spider.



I started with that tale from the past for two reasons. One will become obvious as this book unfolds. The other reason is:

This is a true story.

I don't expect you to believe me — I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't lived it — but it is. Everything I describe in this book happened, just as I tell it.

The thing about real life is, when you do something stupid, it normally costs you. In books, the heroes can make as many mistakes as they like. It doesn't matter what they do, because everything works out in the end. They'll beat the bad guys and put things right and everything ends up cool.

In real life, vacuum cleaners kill spiders. If you cross a busy road without looking, you get whacked by a car. If you fall out of a tree, you break some bones.

Real life's nasty. It's cruel. It doesn't care about heroes and happy endings and the way things should be. In real life, bad things happen. People die. Fights are lost. Evil often wins.

I just wanted to make that clear before I began.



One more thing: my name isn't really Darren Shan. Everything's true in this book, *except* for names. I've had to change them because... well, by the time you get to the end, you'll understand.

I haven't used *any* real names, not mine, my sister's, my friends, or teachers. Nobody's. I'm not even going to tell you the name of my town or country. I don't dare.

Anyway, that's enough of an introduction. If you're ready, let's begin. If this were a made-up story, it would begin at night, with a storm blowing and owls hooting and rattling noises under the bed. But this is a real story, so I have to begin where it really started.

It started in a toilet.

CHAPTER ONE

I WAS IN THE BATHROOM at school, sitting down on the toilet, humming a song. I had my pants on. I'd come in near the end of English class, feeling sick. My teacher, Mr. Dalton, is great about things like that. He's smart and knows when you're faking and when you're being serious. He took one look at me when I raised my hand and said I was ill, then nodded his head and told me to go to the bathroom.

"Throw up whatever's making you sick, Darren," he said, "then get your behind back in here."

I wish every teacher was as understanding as Mr. Dalton.

In the end, I didn't get sick, but still felt queasy, so I stayed on the toilet. I heard the bell ring for the end of class and everybody came rushing out on their lunch break. I wanted to join them but knew Mr. Dalton would be angry if he saw me in the yard so soon. He doesn't get mad if you trick him but he goes quiet and won't speak to you for a while, and that's almost worse than being shouted at.

So, there I was, humming, watching my watch, waiting. Then I heard someone calling my name.

"Darren! Hey, Darren! Have you fallen in or what?"

I grinned. It was Steve Leopard, my best friend. Steve's real last name was Leonard, but everyone called him Steve Leopard. And not just because the names sound alike. Steve used to be what my mom calls "a wild child." He raised hell wherever he went, got into fights, stole from stores. One day — he was still in a stroller — he found a sharp stick and prodded passing women with it (no prizes for guessing where he stuck it!).

He was feared and despised everywhere he went. But not by me. I've been his best friend since kindergarten, when we first met. My mom says I was drawn to his wildness, but I just thought he was a great guy to be with. He had a fierce temper and threw scary tantrums when he lost it, but I simply ran away when that happened and came back again once he'd calmed down.

Steve's reputation had softened over the years — his mom took him to see a lot of good counselors who taught him how to control himself but he was still a minor legend in the schoolyard and not someone you messed with, even if you were bigger and older than him.

"Hey, Steve," I called back. "I'm in here." I hit the door so he'd know which one I was behind.

He hurried over and I opened the door. He smiled when he saw me sitting down with my pants on. "Did you puke?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Do you think you're gonna?"

"Maybe," I said. Then I leaned forward all of a sudden and made a sick noise. *Bluurgh!* But Steve Leopard knew me too well to be fooled.

"Give my boots a polish while you're down there," he said, and laughed when I pretended to spit on his shoes and rub them with a sheet of toilet paper.

"Did I miss anything in class?" I asked, sitting up.

"Nah," he said. "The usual crap."

"Did you do your history homework?" I asked.

"It doesn't have to be done until tomorrow, does it?" he asked, getting worried. Steve's always forgetting about homework.

"The day after tomorrow," I told him.

"Oh," he said, relaxing. "Even better. I thought..."

He stopped and frowned. "Hold on," he said. "Today's Thursday. The day after tomorrow would be..."

"Got you!" I yelled, punching him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" he shouted. "That hurt." He rubbed his arm but I could tell he wasn't really hurt. "Are you coming out?" he asked then.

"I thought I'd stay in here and admire the view," I said, leaning back on the toilet seat.

"Quit joking," he said. "We were down five-one when I came in. We're probably six or seven down now. We need you." He was talking about soccer. We play a game every lunchtime. My team normally wins but we'd lost a lot of our best players. Dave Morgan broke his leg. Sam White transferred to another school when his

family moved. And Danny Curtain had stopped playing soccer in order to spend lunch hanging out with Sheila Leigh, the girl he likes. Idiot!

I'm our best forward. There are better defenders and midfielders, and Tommy Jones is the best goalkeeper in the whole school. But I'm the only one who can stand up front and score four or five times a day without fail.

"Okay," I said, standing. "I'll save you. I've scored a hat trick every day this week. It would be a pity to stop now."

We passed the older guys smoking around the sinks as usual and hurried to my locker so I could change into my cleats. I used to have a great pair, which I won in a writing competition. But the laces snapped a few months ago and the rubber along the sides started to fall off. And then my feet grew! The pair I have now are okay, but they're not the same.

We were down eight-three when I got on the field. It wasn't a real field, just a long stretch of grass with painted goalposts at either end. Whoever painted them was a total idiot. He put the crossbar too high at one end and too low at the other!

"Never fear, Hotshot Shan is here!" I shouted as I ran onto the field. A lot of players laughed or groaned, but I could see my teammates picking up and our opponents growing worried.

I made a great start and scored two goals inside a minute. It looked like we might come back to draw or win. But time ran out. If I'd arrived earlier we'd have been okay, but the bell rang just as I was hitting my stride, so we lost nine-seven.

As we were leaving the field, Alan Morris ran toward us, panting and red-faced. They're my three best friends: Steve Leopard, Tommy Jones, and Alan Morris. We must be the weirdest four people in the whole world, because only one of us Steve has a nickname.

"Look what I found!" Alan yelled, waving a soggy piece of paper around under our noses.

"What is it?" Tommy asked, trying to grab it.

"It's..." Alan began, but stopped when Mr. Dalton shouted at us.

"You four! Inside!" he roared.

"We're coming, Mr. Dalton!" Steve roared back. Steve is Mr. Dalton's favorite and gets away with stuff that the rest of us couldn't do. Like when he uses

swearwords sometimes in his stories. If I put in some of the words Steve has, I'd have been kicked out long ago.

But Mr. Dalton has a soft spot for Steve, because he's special. Sometimes he's brilliant in class and gets everything right, while other times he can't even spell his own name. Mr. Dalton says he's somewhat of an *idiot savant*, which mean he's a stupid genius!

Anyway, even though he's Mr. Dalton's pet, not even Steve can get away with showing up late for class. So whatever Alan had, it would have to wait. We trudged back to class, sweaty and tired after the game, and began our next lesson.

Little did I know that Alan's mysterious piece of paper was to change my life forever. For the worse!

CHAPTER TWO

WE HAD MR. DALTON again after lunch, for history. We were studying World War II. I wasn't too excited about it, but Steve thought it was great. He loved anything to do with killing and war. He often said he wanted to be a soldier of fortune one who fights for money when he grew up. And he meant it!

We had math after history, and incredibly Mr. Dalton for a third time! Our usual math teacher was out sick, so others had been filling in for him as best they could all day.

Steve was in seventh heaven. His favorite teacher, three classes in a row! It was the first time we'd had Mr. Dalton for math, so Steve started showing off, telling him where we were in the book, explaining some of the trickier problems as though speaking to a child. Mr. Dalton didn't mind. He was used to Steve and knew exactly how to handle him.

Normally Mr. Dalton runs a tight ship his classes are fun but we always come out of them having learned something but he wasn't very good at math. He tried hard but we could tell he was in over his head, and while he was busy trying to come to grips with things his head buried in the math book, Steve by his side making «helpful» suggestions the rest of us began to fidget and whisper to each other and pass notes around.

I sent a note to Alan, asking to see the mysterious piece of paper he'd brought in. He refused at first to pass it around, but I kept sending notes and finally he gave in. Tommy sits just two seats over from him, so he got it first. He opened it up and began studying it. His face lit up while he was reading and his jaw slowly dropped. When he passed it on to me having read it three times I soon saw why.

It was a flyer, an advertising pamphlet for some sort of traveling circus. There was a picture of a wolf's head at the top. The wolf had its mouth open and saliva was dripping from its teeth. At the bottom were pictures of a spider and a snake, and they looked vicious, too.

Just beneath the wolf, in big red capital letters, were the words:

CIRQUE DU FREAK

Underneath that, in smaller writing:

FOR ONE WEEK ONLY CIRQUE DU FREAK!!

SEE:

SIVE AND SEERSA THE TWISTING TWINS!

THE SNAKE-BOY! THE WOLF-MAN! GERTHA TEETH!

LARTEN CREPSLEY AND HIS PERFORMING SPIDER

MADAM OCTA! ALEXANDER RIBS! THE BEARDED LADY!

HANS HANDS! RHAMUS TWOBELLIES WORLD'S FATTEST MAN!

Beneath all that was an address where you could buy tickets and find out where the show was playing. And right at the bottom, just above the pictures of the snake and spider:

NOT FOR THE FAINTHEARTED! SOME RESTRICTIONS APPLY!

"Cirque Du Freak?" I muttered softly to myself. Cirque was French for circus... Circus of Freaks! Was this a *freak show*?! It looked like it.

I began reading the flyer again, immersed in the drawings and descriptions of the performers. In fact, I was so immersed, I forgot about Mr. Dalton. I only remembered him when I realized the room was silent. I looked up and saw Steve standing alone at the head of the class. He stuck out his tongue at me and grinned. Feeling the hairs on the back of my neck prickle, I stared over my shoulder and there was Mr. Dalton, standing behind me, reading the flyer, lips tight.

"What is this?" he snapped, snatching the paper from my hands.

"It's an advertisement, sir," I answered.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked. He looked really angry. I'd never seen him this worked up. "Where'd you get it?" he asked again.

I licked my lips nervously. I didn't know how to answer. I wasn't going to tell on Alan and I knew he wouldn't own up by himself: even Alan's best friends know he's not the bravest in the world but my mind was stuck in low gear and I couldn't think of a reasonable lie. Luckily, Steve stepped in.

"Mr. Dalton, it's mine," he said.

"Yours?" Mr. Dalton blinked slowly.

"I found it near the bus stop, sir," Steve said. "Some old guy threw it away. I thought it looked interesting, so I picked it up. I was going to ask you about it later, at the end of class."

"Oh." Mr. Dalton tried not to look flattered but I could tell he was. "That's different. Nothing wrong with an inquisitive mind. Sit down, Steve." Steve sat. Mr. Dalton stuck a thumbtack on the flyer and pinned it to the bulletin board.

"Long ago," he said, tapping the flyer, "there used to be real freak shows. Greedy con men crammed malformed people in cages and..."

"Sir, what's *malformed* mean?" somebody asked.

"Someone who doesn't look ordinary," Mr. Dalton said. "A person with three arms or two noses; somebody with no legs; somebody very short or very tall. The con men put these poor people who were no different from you or me, except in looks on display and called them freaks. They charged the public to stare at them, and invited them to laugh and tease. They treated the so-called freaks like animals. Paid them little, beat them, dressed them in rags, never allowed them to wash."

"That's cruel," Delaina Price a girl near the front said.

"Yes," he agreed. "Freak shows were cruel, monstrous creations. That's why I got angry when I saw this." He tore down the flyer. "They were banned years ago, but every so often you'll hear a rumor that they're still going strong."

"Do you think the Cirque Du Freak is a real freak show?" I asked.

Mr. Dalton studied the flyer again, then shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said. "Probably just a cruel hoax. Still," he added, "if it *was* real, I hope nobody here would dream of going."

"Oh, no, sir," we all said quickly.

"Because freak shows were terrible," he said. "They pretended to be like proper circuses but they were cesspits of evil. Anybody who went to one would be just as bad as the people running it."

"You'd have to be really twisted to want to go to one of those," Steve agreed. And then he looked at me, winked, and mouthed the words: "We're going!"

CHAPTER THREE

STEVE PERSUADED MR. DALTON to let him keep the flyer. He said he wanted it for his bedroom wall. Mr. Dalton wasn't going to give it to him but then changed his mind. He cut off the address at the bottom before handing it over.

After school, the four of us me, Steve, Alan Morris, and Tommy Jones met outside and studied the glossy flyer.

"It's got to be a fake," I said.

"Why?" Alan asked.

"They don't allow freak shows anymore," I told him. "Wolf-men and snake-boys were outlawed years ago. Mr. Dalton said so."

"It's not a fake," Alan insisted.

"Where'd you get it?" Tommy asked.

"I stole it," Alan said softly. "It belongs to my big brother." Alan's big brother was Tony Morris, who used to be the school's biggest bully until he got thrown out. He's huge and mean and ugly.

"You *stole* from *Tony*?!?" I gasped. "Have you got a death wish?"

"He won't know it was me," Alan said. "He had it in a pair of pants that my mother threw in the washing machine. I stuck a blank piece of paper in when I took this out. He'll think the ink got washed off."

"Smart," Steve said.

"Where did Tony get it?" I asked.

"There was a guy passing them out in an alley," Alan said. "One of the circus performers, a Mr. Crepsley."

"The one with the spider?" Tommy asked.

"Yeah," Alan answered, "only he didn't have the spider with him. It was night and Tony was on his way back from a bar." Tony's not old enough to get served in bars, but hangs around with older guys who buy drinks for him. "Mr. Crepsley handed the paper to Tony and told him they're a traveling freak show who put on secret performances in towns and cities across the world. He said you had to have a

flyer to buy tickets and they only give them to people they trust. You're not supposed to tell anyone else about the show. I only found out because Tony was in high spirits the way he gets when he drinks and couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"How much are the tickets?" Steve asked.

"Twenty-three dollars each," Alan said.

"Twenty-three dollars!" we all shouted.

"Nobody's going to pay twenty-three bucks to see a bunch of freaks!" Steve snorted.

"I would," I said.

"Me, too," Tommy agreed.

"And me," Alan added.

"Sure," Steve said, "but we don't have twenty-three bucks to throw away. So it's academic, isn't it?"

"What does *academic* mean?" Alan asked.

"It means we can't afford the tickets, so it doesn't matter if we would buy them or not," Steve explained. "It's easy to say you *would* buy something if you know you *can't*."

"I'd love to go," Tommy said sadly. "It sounds great." He studied the picture again.

"Mr. Dalton didn't think too much of it," Alan said.

"That's what I mean," Tommy said. "If Dalton doesn't like it, it must be super. Anything that adults hate is normally awesome."

"Are we sure we don't have enough?" I asked. "Maybe they have discounts for children."

"I don't think children are allowed in," Alan said, but he told me how much he had anyway. "Eight-fifty."

"I've got eighteen dollars exactly," Steve said.

"I have ten dollars and forty cents," Tommy said.

"And I have twelve dollars and thirty cents," I told them. "That's more than forty-nine dollars in all," I said, adding it up in my head. "We get our allowance tomorrow. If we pool our..."

"But the tickets are nearly sold out," Alan interrupted. "The first show was yesterday. It finishes Tuesday. If we go, it'll have to be tomorrow night or Saturday, because our parents won't let us out any other night. The guy who gave Tony the flyer said the tickets for both those nights were almost gone. We'd have to buy them tonight."

"Well, so much for that," I said, putting on a brave face.

"Maybe not," Steve said. "My mom keeps a wad of money in a jar at home. I could borrow some and put it back when we get our allowance..."

"You mean steal?" I asked.

"I mean *borrow*," he snapped. "It's only stealing if you don't put it back. What do you say?"

"How would we get the tickets?" Tommy asked. "It's a school night. We wouldn't be let out."

"I can sneak out," Steve said. "I'll buy them."

"But Mr. Dalton snipped off the address," I reminded him. "How will you know where to go?"

"I memorized it." He grinned. "Now, are we gonna stand here all night making up excuses, or are we gonna go for it?"

We looked at each other, then one by one nodded silently.

"Right," Steve said. "We hurry home, grab our money, and meet back here. Tell your parents you forgot a book or something. We'll lump the money together and I'll add the rest from the pot at home."

"What if you can't steal I mean, 'borrow, the money?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Then the deal's off. But we won't know unless we try. Now hurry!"

With that, he sprinted away. Moments later, making up our minds, Tommy, Alan, and I ran, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FREAK SHOW WAS all I could think about that night. I tried forgetting it but couldn't, not even when I was watching my favorite TV shows. It sounded so weird: a snake-boy, a wolf-man, a performing spider. I was especially excited by the spider.

Mom and Dad didn't notice anything was up, but Annie did. Annie is my younger sister. She can be sort of annoying but most of the time she's cool. She doesn't run to Mom telling on me if I misbehave, and she knows how to keep a secret.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked after dinner. We were alone in the kitchen, washing the dishes.

"Nothing's wrong," I said.

"Yes there is," she said. "You've been acting weird all night."

I knew she'd keep asking until she got the truth, so I told her about the freak show.

"It sounds great," she agreed, "but there's no way you'd get in."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I bet they don't let children in. It sounds like a grown-up kind of show."

"They probably wouldn't let a brat like *you* in," I said nastily, "but me and the others would be okay." That upset her, so I apologized. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that. I'm just annoyed because you're probably right. Annie, I'd give anything to go!"

"I've got a makeup kit I could lend you," she said. "You can draw on wrinkles and stuff. It'd make you look older."

I smiled and gave her a big hug, which is something I don't do very often. "Thanks, sis," I said, "but it's okay. If we get in, we get in. If we don't, we don't."

We didn't say much after that. We finished drying and hurried into the TV room. Dad got home a few minutes later. He works on building sites all over the place, so

he's often late. He's grumpy sometimes but was in a good mood that night and swung Annie around in a circle.

"Anything exciting happen today?" he asked, after he'd said hello to Mom and given her a kiss.

"I scored another hat trick at lunch," I told him.

"Really?" he said. "That's great. Well done."

We turned the TV down while Dad was eating. He likes peace and quiet when he eats, and often asks us questions or tells us about his day at work.

Later, Mom went to her room to work on her stamp albums. She's a serious stamp collector. I used to collect, too, when I was younger and more easily amused.

I popped up to see if she had any new stamps with exotic animals or spiders on them. She didn't. While I was there, I asked her about freak shows.

"Mom," I said, "have you ever been to a freak show?"

"A what?" she asked, concentrating on the stamps.

"A freak show," I repeated. "With bearded ladies and wolf-men and snake-boys."

She looked up at me and blinked. "A snake-boy?" she asked. "What on Earth is a snake-boy?"

"It's a..." I stopped when I realized I didn't know. "Well, that doesn't matter," I said. "Have you ever been to one?"

She shook her head. "No. They're illegal."

"If they weren't," I said, "and one came to town, would you go?"

"No," she said, shivering. "Those sorts of things frighten me. Besides, I don't think it would be fair to the people in the show."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"How would *you* like it," she said, "if you were stuck in a cage for people to look at?"

"I'm not a freak!" I said huffily.

"I know." She laughed and kissed my forehead. "You're my little angel."

"Mom, don't!" I grumbled, wiping my forehead with my hand.

"Silly." She smiled. "But imagine you had two heads or four arms, and somebody stuck you on display for people to make fun of. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"No," I said, shuffling my feet.

"Anyway, what's all this about a freak show?" she asked. "Have you been staying up late, watching horror films?"

"No," I said.

"Because you know your dad doesn't like you watching..."

"I wasn't staying up late, okay?" I shouted. It's really annoying when parents don't listen.

"Okay, Mister Grumpy," she said. "No need to shout. If you don't like my company, go downstairs and help your father weed the garden."

I didn't want to go, but Mom was upset that I'd shouted at her, so I left and went down to the kitchen. Dad was coming in from the back and spotted me.

"So this is where you've been hiding." He chuckled. "Too busy to help the old man tonight?"

"I was on my way," I told him.

"Too late," he said, taking off his workboots. "I'm finished."

I watched him putting on his slippers. He has huge feet. He wears size twelve shoes! When I was younger, he used to stand me on his feet and walk me around. It was like being on two long skateboards.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"Writing," he said. My dad has pen pals all over the world, in America, Australia, Russia, and China. He says he likes to keep in touch with his global neighbors, though I think it's just an excuse to go into his study for a nap!

Annie was playing with dolls and stuff. I asked if she wanted to come to my room for a game of tennis using a sock for a ball and shoes for rackets, but she was too busy arranging her dolls for a pretend picnic.

I went to my room and dragged down my comic books. I have a bunch of cool comic books *Superman*, *Batman*, *Spiderman*, and *Spawn*. *Spawn*'s my favorite. He's a superhero who used to be a demon in hell. Some of the *Spawn* comics are pretty scary, but that's why I love them.

I spent the rest of the night reading comic books and putting them in order. I used to swap with Tommy, who has a huge collection, but he kept spilling drinks on the covers and crumbs between the pages, so I stopped.

Most nights I go to bed by ten, but Mom and Dad forgot about me, and I stayed up until nearly ten-thirty. Then Dad saw the light in my room and came up. He pretended to be angry but he wasn't really. Dad doesn't mind too much if I stay up late. Mom's the one who nags me about that.

"Bed," he said, "or I'll never be able to wake you in the morning."

"Just a minute, Dad," I told him, "while I put my comics away and brush my teeth."

"Okay," he said, "but make it quick."

I stuck the comics into their box and stuffed it back up on the shelf over my bed.

I put on my pajamas and went to brush my teeth. I took my time, brushing slowly, and it was almost eleven when I got into bed. I lay back, smiling. I felt very tired and knew I'd fall asleep in a couple of seconds. The last thing I thought about was the Cirque Du Freak. I wondered what a snake-boy looked like, and how long the bearded lady's beard was, and what Hans Hands and Gertha Teeth did. Most of all, I dreamed about the spider.