

I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to sleep with one eye open. 'I'll be sleeping with one eye open' is a much-used saying, the idea of which is that if you are scared of something bad happening to you while you sleep, you can keep one eye open to look out for any danger.

This, of course, is nonsense. You cannot do both things at once. If you fall asleep, your eyes will close. If you want to keep one eye open, you will have to stay awake. Spending your nights in such a manner is not 'sleeping with one eye open'; it is 'being awake with one eye shut'.

'Being awake with one eye shut' is definitely possible, and I have found that it can be useful in many situations, such as being outside on a very sunny day, preparing for a winking contest, or pretending to be a pirate.

As a result of my research into this matter, my physician tells me that I may have acquired a permanent squint. It is a measure of how hard it is to write stories that I have given my right eye for a good prologue.

*Here, then, is a rather scary story that involves
'being awake with one eye shut'...*

HENRY'S CAGE

Iris Ventolin squirmed sleepily against her seatbelt and wrestled herself over onto her side. Time to swap eyes; Left's turn now.

It had been a very long car ride to Granddad's and Iris was trying desperately hard not to fall asleep. For the last hour, she had been staying awake with one eye shut, swapping every five minutes between her left eye and her right to give them each a little rest without ever dozing off completely. It was a good idea because, as everybody knows, it is impossible to fall asleep with one eye open.

Despite such clever tactics, it hadn't been easy for Iris to stay awake. It hadn't helped that her Mother and Father hadn't said a word for the last forty minutes. It hadn't helped that the radio was too quiet to be heard from the back seat. And it hadn't helped that out here in these wooded country lanes the night was impossibly dark, and the only thing to see out of the window was the never-ending

thatch of dead white trees in the headlights.

Iris wobbled her loose front tooth idly back and forth with the tip of her tongue. Gradually, she let her left eye droop to match her right, and nuzzled her hot face into the padding of the seat.

All of a sudden, Iris' Father trod his foot to the brakes and the car lurched forward. Iris woke with a start and looked up in time to see an extraordinarily tall, spaghetti-haired old man in a moth-eaten blue raincoat run out into the road ahead, chasing after a terrified wild rabbit.

Fortunately, the car had excellent brakes and steering, and with a simple swerve Iris' Father was able to avoid hitting the old man. Without stopping, they drove round him and on down the road.

'What an idiot!' cried Iris' Mother, looking back over her shoulder. Iris' Father fixed his eyes on the road ahead, gripped the steering wheel tightly and said nothing.

The rabbit scampered away into the tree

line. Iris had felt the old man's desperate, shark-black eyes following her as they passed, and she turned to watch him out of the rear window as they drove away. By the red glow of the taillights she saw him begin to lope after the car on his dreadful bony legs...

'I'm telling you, it was him! It was Henry Shade!' whispered Iris' Father anxiously.

'Maybe it was, but it's nothing to worry about,' said Granddad calmly. He doesn't come here anymore. Nobody's seen him in the village for years.'

'Your Father's right, Jack. Did you see the way he was wheezing when he ran after the car? I doubt he could have made it to the end of the road, let alone all the way down to the village,' added Iris' Mother reassuringly.

'Well, maybe you're right... ' shrugged Iris' Father.

Iris lay on the sofa, listening to the grown-ups. She had fallen asleep in the car, but

had secretly woken up when her Father had carried her into the house. Nobody knew that rather than being asleep, she was actually awake with both eyes shut, and could hear everything that they were saying.

Later, when Granddad was tucking her into bed and Inky the cat had kneaded out a nice comfy sleeping place at her side, Iris opened her eyes and asked, 'Who's Henry Shade?'

'Ah,' said Granddad, sitting down on the bed beside her and scratching the nape of his neck. 'Someone's been listening in, then... Been sleeping with one ear open, have you? That Henry Shade's just a funny old man who lives out in the woods,' said Granddad, soothingly. 'Don't you worry about him.'

'Why does he live in the woods? Why was he chasing that rabbit?' asked Iris, sitting up. 'I'm not going to sleep until you tell me all about him,' she added, crossing her arms to prove her intent. Granddad looked hesitantly towards the bedroom door to check that no one was listening, licked his lips, and leaned

in close. Iris knew that he could never resist the chance to tell a story.

‘Well, if you insist,’ he whispered with an eager grin. ‘It is a good story.’

Granddad stroked at his big thick eyebrows with his fingertip and sucked deliciously on his dentures.

‘So, Henry of the Morning Shade... Where shall I start...?’

So Granddad told the story of Henry Shade. I shall sum it up for you, because Granddad lives on his own and tends to ramble on a bit when you ask him a question. I certainly won’t bother telling you where he eventually did start his story because it was teeth-grindingly irrelevant.

Also, the child I am having type out this story for me has to start cooking my dinner soon, so I don’t want to keep him chained to the typewriter for too much longer.

Here, then, are the important parts:

Out in the woods on the edge of the village lives a thirteen-foot tall moth-eaten old man called Henry Shade. The locals believe that he has been in those woods for centuries. There's even an old rhyme about him:

*In the woods beyond the village,
Where strange things' homes are made,
Lives the loathsome, lanky, lungless old man
That folk call Henry Shade.*

*He'll be coming a-lurking 'fore dawn
Looking to snatch and to thief
The beasts from your yard and your hearth
And steal off the air that they breathe.*

*So lock up your barns good and tight,
And bolt all your windows and doors.
And sleep with one eye open in case,
The next house he calls on is yours...*

Years ago, Henry would creep out of the woods and down to the village. He would come in the early hours of the morning, in the

half-light before dawn. He stalked the streets and yards looking for animals left out at night, and he would go back and forth, scratching and rattling at windows and doors, trying to find ways into people's houses to steal their pets.

What did he do with the animals? Well, you see...

...Henry Shade has no lungs.

That's right. He has no lungs, no ribs- not even a proper chest. He has only a cage, like a big, bleached, bony white birdcage, where his torso should be. Because he has no lungs, Henry Shade must trap small animals, lock them in his chest-cage and use them to breathe for him.

He keeps a damp, foul-smelling handkerchief in the pocket of his long blue coat, which gives off a nasty fume to tranquillize his victims and keep them from waking up. He then locks the sleeping animal in his chest-cage, and his gilled windpipe

forces its way into the poor creature's mouth like some infernal eel, leeching off of the air that it breathes.

The captive animals have to breathe twice as hard, and do not last very long. When they finally die of exhaustion, Henry puts them in his pot and boils them up for his supper.

No one has seen the old man in the village for nigh-on twenty years. The rise of such modern things as double-glazed windows, triple-locking security doors, and intruder alarm systems has forced Henry away from the town. These days he stays in the deep of the woods, chasing foxes and wild rabbits for the air in their lungs.

‘...Which is why the lady in the Post Office won’t talk to me anymore,’ finished Granddad, as irrelevantly as he had started. Unfortunately, by the time he had done with all his unnecessary footnotes and sub-plots, Iris had fallen fast asleep. She had heard almost all of his story- the important parts at least- but her eyes were tired and she could not keep even one of them open any longer. She lay curled up on her side, gently pushing at her loose front tooth as she sucked on her thumb.

It was a stuffy summer’s night in the spare bedroom. When Granddad decided to leave the window open a crack, it unfortunately did not occur to him that he might let in more than just the cool air.

In the small grey hours before dawn’s first blush, the crooked old fingers of Henry Shade once more came a-scratching and a-rattling at the town’s windows and doors.

Henry was sick; he was growing too weak and too slow to catch wild animals in the woods. He had not taken a breath of air for a month. He remembered the easy pickings he had found here in the old days, and hoped that in his long absence the townsfolk had grown complacent enough to leave themselves unprotected again. His withered fingers tested every house he came to, looking for windows ajar, or doors unbolted. It was not long before his long, rangy arms found the open upstairs window of Iris' room. With a crooked grin, he gripped the widow ledge and heaved himself up.

A cloud of moths fluttered out of Henry's coat as he climbed in. He was so tall that even hunched over, his white flaky head touched the ceiling. He paused for a moment to study the sleeping forms of the little girl and the cat. The room was silent, but for the seething beat of insect wings, and the soft rasp of his dry, breathless throat. He watched the gentle rise and fall of their bodies and dreamed of his very own set of lungs, fresh-filling with air.

His fingers twitched for the little girl, but... perhaps that was one step more than he was willing to take. It was one thing to steal sleeping animals, but taking sleeping children was too much. He was desperate enough to come back to the village after all these years, but he would not stoop to snatching little girls. The cat would suffice.

Henry pulled his flea-bitten handkerchief from his coat pocket and stroked it over Inky's sleeping face. The fumes from the cloth ensured that the cat did not wake as he scooped her limp little body up and shut her in his bleached and bony white chest-cage.

As he turned back towards the open window to leave, Iris- who had been lying awake for the last few minutes, watching Henry through one open eye- sat up in bed and called after him.

'Henry Shade!' she cried. 'Please don't take my Granddad's cat away!'

Startled by the unexpected outburst, Henry Shade turned and looked at the little girl. Even if he could remember how to talk,

he hadn't the breath to do so, so he simply blinked his shark-black eyes and cocked his head quizzically to one side.

'I bet a little cat like Inky doesn't last very long having to breathe for two eh, Henry?' asked Iris, boldly.

Henry creased his brow in puzzlement and slowly shook his head no.

'I bet I could last much longer than Inky. I'm only small, but I have very strong, healthy lungs. I could last for days and days,' offered the little girl.

Henry leaned in close enough to feel Iris' healthy young breath on his face. Moths fluttered in her face. She could see the purple veins throbbing sluggishly in his temples.

'I'll make you a deal, Henry Shade,' said Iris, bravely staring straight back into his lifeless eyes. 'If you let Inky go, I'll take her place and breathe for you, for...' Iris quickly thought up a convincing length of time, '... four days. But you have to promise to let me go afterwards, and to never come back to this house again.'

The old giant looked down at the little black cat lying unconscious in his chest-cage, and then looked Iris up and down. He bit on his crumbly bottom lip with his fractured teeth. The breath of a healthy little girl certainly was tempting. Perhaps if he really did let her go afterwards, it would be okay...

Iris held her breath for his decision, nervously working at her loose tooth with her tongue. Finally, Henry nodded his agreement.

The crooked old man placed the sleeping cat gently back on the bed, and held open the door to his bleached, bony white chest-cage. Crouching down, he beckoned the little girl inside with a gnarly finger. Iris climbed in and sat herself down in the bottom of the cage.

But clever Iris had a plan. Once out of Henry's view, she began tugging urgently at her loose front tooth with her fingers. As Henry's eely windpipe snaked down towards her, hungry for her young breath, she took one last wrench on her tooth and pulled it

free from its gums. When the eager airway reached her lips she blew with all her might, spitting the pointy little tooth up into Henry's throat.

Henry choked and gagged with shock as Iris' tooth lodged in his windpipe. Normally he might have survived such a blockage- he could go for several weeks without breathing, after all- but in his weakened and air-starved state, the surprise was just... too much to swallow.

The man-with-no-lungs' heart gave out, and frail old Henry Shade gurgled, spluttered, and died. He toppled to the bedroom floor in a moth-ridden, blue-coated, spaghetti-haired old heap.

The next day, Iris Ventolin went with her Granddad to the pet shop. She spent the rest of the afternoon catching up on her sleep in a big cosy armchair in the conservatory, with Inky the cat curled up snugly in her lap. Inky purred softly, and lay with one eye open to watch Granddad's new pet budgerigar chirp contentedly in its bleached, bony white cage.

THE END