

Sleep Paralysis
By Alex Bengzon

It was an old lady this time.

Usually the looming figure standing in the corner of the bedroom was a child, or an animal much too big to fit in such a small space. It didn't matter which one appeared, they would still take a step or two towards the bed every time he blinked, eyes wide and bright with that small dot in the center that served as their pupil, staring at him until he could feel the sensation in his jaw allowing him to scream. His partner would wake up at his side, stroking his head and repeating the same soothing words until he fell into another deep slumber.

The old lady was different though. Her eyes weren't bright or large, they were tiny and dark, almost dark enough to be nonexistent. She didn't move forward every time he blinked, instead she moved towards the ceiling, nonexistent eyes glancing at him every so often accompanied by a smile. If her eyes weren't wide, then her grin could make up for the lack of eeriness. The moment her figure was hung over the bed, her grin faltered, and her eyes suddenly appeared, staring at him with swollen red eyes and dark pupils. Immediately, his jaw clenched, giving him the opportunity to let out another one of his blood curling screams.

But he was alone tonight.

She disappeared after a moment, like dust and snow would on a windy day, but he was still alone.

His partner came home a few minutes later, opening the bedroom door only to find him sitting up with his hands on his ears, continuously screaming at the top of his lungs about how he couldn't fall asleep.

He stopped once he felt a pair of hands wrapping around his cheeks, swiping his tears with the pad of his thumb and soothingly calming him down with words and movements. They laid their heads on the pillows until the sun rose, sunlight streaming through the cracks in the curtains and greeting each other good morning with a sad smile.

His partner thought maybe it would be better if he stopped taking night shifts, and he agreed because it would help him sleep better at night if he was by his side, his words accompanied by another fabricated smile.

It worked for a few nights, but it seemed the old lady was much too eager to return. So he screamed once he was able to, waking the body next to him in surprise as he tried his best to block out the lady with his voice. It hasn't been working for a few months, and yet he stayed, tolerating screams and shouts almost every night until he was calm enough to fall back asleep, the old lady repressed to the back of his unconscious mind.

He eventually got used to it, knowing that his partner was by his side as the old lady grew closer each time he blinked.

"They probably got bored of you." His partner replied with a cheeky grin when he told him that nothing haunted him the night before. He was fine with that.

And then there was death.

A terrible accident swallowed his partner's soul, leaving the man with nothing but the empty right side of the bed and a letter full of apologies and promises, now broken. The funeral was a week after. He didn't want to attend knowing there was nothing he could do to undo such a tragedy.

And every night, it wasn't the child, nor the giant beast, and not even the old lady that stared at him from the corner of the bedroom.

It was him, with that smile of his.