

The Man in the Mirror

by

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As Paul stared at the mirror, droplets of water dripped languidly from his brow into the sink. He eyed the weary face exhausted from lack of sleep and skin that showed a pale sickly tint. Dark circles surrounded his eyes---circles absent just two weeks ago---before the nightmares began.

A look of frightened concern stared back at him, as he wondered how much longer the nightmares would continue. And why...why were they happening? He didn't do drugs and he wasn't on any medication. Hell, even the coffee he drank was decaffeinated. So what was doing this to him?

His nightmare this night had been especially horrifying. Paul dreamt that insects bored tiny holes into the back of his hand and crawled in. He could see their movements just beneath the skin as they progressed slowly but steadily up his arm. Then, from a corner of his bedroom, he heard laughter---an insidious, grotesque laughter that chortled out a warning. "They will move slowly, but you'd better get to a hospital, because they will be relentless. They will crawl below the surface of the skin, up your arm, across the top of your shoulder to your neck, and up into your skull. If you don't stop them before they get to your skull, they will eat your brain!" The man laughed in grotesque pleasure at Paul's horror.

The Man in the Mirror-2

It was then Paul jumped from his bed awakening in a cold sweat, his face dripping with perspiration from yet another nightmare in the succession of bad dreams that had occurred over the past two weeks. He went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face.

“Why?” asked Paul, as he again stared into the mirror, but there was no answer, only the same question repeated back to him as instantly as it was asked. “Why?”

As Paul wiped the cold water from his face with a towel, he wondered if he were hallucinating. Two weeks without sleep might do that. After all, isn't sleep-deprivation one of the tactics used in torture?

Paul switched off the bathroom light and headed back to bed where the clock on the nightstand showed 3:30 a.m. He hoped he could get a few hours sleep, though he never slept well after one of his hideous late night ordeals, and inevitably another nightmare followed, and another, until morning came.

As he lay down in bed, Paul glanced warily around the room for the source of the grotesque laughter from his latest dream. Yes, tomorrow for sure he would call his doctor to see if they could squeeze him in. He would insist; he would tell the receptionist it was an emergency, and it was. He couldn't take any more of this. Whether nightmares or hallucinations, Paul must find out the cause and what could be done to stop them. Paul closed his eyes, and, as he lay on his back, he moved his head from side to side getting comfortable on his pillow.

Suddenly, Paul felt something moving on the bed. Frightened, he cautiously raised his head and looked down toward his feet. At first, he saw nothing, but again felt the steady ripples of movement. Then, in the darkness, he saw the faint outline of something moving on the bedspread. His heart pounded, as perspiration once again beaded upon his face. He tried to

The Man in the Mirror-3

swallow, but his throat was too dry. My God! Moving toward him up the length of the bed was a severed hand.

Paul tried to scream, but frozen in fear he couldn't utter a sound. The hand moved closer, inching its way up the bed powered only by its fingers. It crawled closer and closer until it was no more than two feet from his face.

Suddenly the hand opened wide, sprang toward him, and closed around his throat in a vice-like grip. Paul jumped from his bed, as he desperately tried to loosen the hand that pressed against his windpipe. When he lost his balance and fell to the floor, the impact awakened Paul in a jolt. Soaked in sweat and breathing heavily, he quickly realized what had happened---yet again.

Like all of those that preceded it, this nightmare was as frightening because no matter how bizarre it may have seemed, it felt very real to Paul's senses, and he trembled as he staggered to the bathroom. He switched on the light, went to the sink, and once again looked at the man in the mirror. He stared at his reflection and saw a man he almost didn't recognize. Fear filled his eyes and with every nightmare he appeared to age a little bit more.

Paul turned on the tap, splashed some water on his face, and reached for a towel. It was a ritual that had become much too common. Every night, several times a night, he would endure a nightmare, try to compose himself with some cool water, experience yet another terrifying dream, then back to the bathroom. Paul began to sob into the towel, but he jumped, startled, when he heard laughter. He turned quickly and looked around the bathroom. Nothing!

Paul looked back into the mirror and wiped his eyes. As he lowered his hands from his face, a feeling of terror overwhelmed him, as he stared at the man in the mirror. Slowly, he raised a hand to his face, but the hands of the image in the mirror did not move.

The Man in the Mirror-4

Paul was horrified as the man in the mirror began to laugh---that same insidious laughter he had heard in his bedroom. Slowly, Paul began to back away from the mirror. Suddenly, two arms jumped from the mirror, as two hands clutched at Paul's throat. He lurched backward clumsily, slammed his head and slumped to the floor.

It was two days before the body was found. Lieutenant Barton was the last to arrive on the scene, and he immediately asked the uniformed policeman, "What have you got?"

"Coroner thinks he's been dead for maybe a couple days. There's no sign of forced entry, and it doesn't look like a robbery. The guy's wallet was on the nightstand and there was a hundred bucks worth of twenties in it."

"Who discovered the body?"

"Landlord. Says he was just going into the apartment to check on the plumbing because there was a problem with an adjacent unit. Swears he didn't touch a thing."

The officer then hesitated.

"What? Is there something else?"

"Well, sir. It's...uh..."

"Spit it out," demanded Lieutenant Barton.

"It's the body, Lieutenant. I mean, the way we found the body. It's in the bathroom. The coroner's in there now."

"Well, let's have a look," said Barton.

The officer nodded and led the Lieutenant through the apartment. Lieutenant Barton stopped in the doorway to the bathroom, as the coroner, Brad Langley, was crouched over the body. When the lieutenant appeared, the coroner acknowledged him with a nod. The body was on its back, and when the Lieutenant gazed at it, a look of disbelief crossed Barton's face.

The Man in the Mirror-5

“What do you make of it, Brad?”

The coroner arose. “Looks like he hit his head on the towel rack, here,” Brad pointed. “There’s blood on it and it’s consistent with the gash in the back of the victim’s head. Also, you can see the blood on the wall as he slumped to the floor. Looks like an accident to me, Lieutenant. Probably slipped backwards, hit his head, and fell. Simple as that.”

Lieutenant Barton looked back in puzzlement at the position of the body. “What do you make of that? Someone’s idea of a sick joke?”

The coroner shook his head. “I’m leaving that for you to investigate Lieutenant, but one thing’s for sure.”

“What?”

“The look on his face...this man died frightened. Something, or someone, horrified him before he died.”

Lieutenant Barton nodded in agreement as he once again peered at the body on the bathroom floor. He pondered the grotesque look on the face, and contemplated the body---the body of a man whose hands were firmly clasped around his own throat.

The End