

NightMary

By: Noah Regan

The nightmare began exactly one month ago after the death of my wife's great uncle, Oliver. Oliver was an elderly man who constantly had a stern, stoic expression. He always wore a thick, gray three-piece suit, with a tarnished pocket watch tucked into the tiny pocket of the vest. Oliver went through life with an erect, undefeated posture. I use the word undefeated because Uncle Oliver had constant challenges in his personal life. You see, Oliver spent the majority of his adult life taking care of his wife, Mary.

No one knows quite for certain what happened to Mary. Many, many years ago Mary went blank. Cata-tonic is the correct term for it. She no longer responded to anyone or anything. Most of my wife's family are too young to know what Mary was like before this happened. And being that she was always like this, they never thought very hard about how it came to be.

Oliver was a man of means. He amassed his great fortune at a young age. After his wife became a shell of what she was, he spent all of his time taking care of her. He could do that. There comes a time when you have so much money, that your money makes you money.

So that's how Oliver lived his life. Feeding, cleaning, and doting over what used to be his wife in their large, empty mansion.

That is until Uncle Oliver died.

It was at the funeral that my wife Anna got the fresh idea to take in Aunt Mary. I never liked Aunt Mary. But it's not like I hated her. Aunt Mary was like a piece of furniture. She was at all of the holidays, birthday parties for young nieces and nephews and so on. She would sit emotionless in the corner of the room. You could almost step on her toes without realizing it—that is if Uncle Oliver wasn't constantly by her side. Pictures from long ago, Aunt Mary was always there. A blotchy, orange tinted photograph from thirty years before shows my wife—a small child then—unwrapping a pair of roller skates that she had been wishing for. In the background is Aunt Mary, looking like a propped corpse, sitting off in the corner behind the happy onlookers with Uncle Oliver by her side... always by her side. The only difference between then and now is that back then her hair was a little darker, but beneath it was the same empty expression.

At the wake, Mary sat in the corner, not knowing why she was there. She sat staring forward blankly as if she were in a waiting room. I guess for her she was in a waiting room of sorts. Oliver still had the same stern face even after death. Even though his soul had passed, his unyielding spirit still remained. I imagined that was the way he looked while sleeping.

My wife Anna floated the idea of taking care of Aunt Mary while on the car ride home from Uncle Oliver's wake. I said that it would be too great of a burden, that it would be best if Aunt Mary were placed in a nursing care facility.

In the back of my mind I was terrified of the notion of that strange woman living in my home, sitting across the table from me, meal after meal, with pureed green beans dribbling down her chin like an infant. My wife began to cry. She used to cry all the time, but she's been better the past couple years. You see, she always wanted to be a mother. We tried, but after her third miscarriage our doctor told us no more—that we were now putting her health at risk—and that it just simply wasn't meant to be. Anna went into a deep depression after that. She quit her job and stopped talking to and visiting with her friends and their happy children. Anything I said, anything I did would send her spiraling into tears.

She blamed her hormones for the mood swings.

I blamed her dashed dreams of being a mother.

Alright, I said to her, we can take care of Aunt Mary. She was overjoyed. I'd hadn't seen her so happy in years. She was a mother without a child. Now she would be the proud mother of a perpetual newborn who was two-and-a-half times her age.

It would be the last time my wife would ever be that happy.

Aunt Mary arrived on a Wednesday. My wife's brothers helped move Aunt Mary's stuff, as well as her. She

was placed in the corner of what would have been our nursery and there she sat as her furniture was put into place all around her. Aunt Mary's various cotton nightgowns—the only thing she ever wore—were neatly folded and placed into her dresser drawers.

I didn't want to go home after work that night. I didn't want to be greeted by the appearance of that woman, that drooling mannequin. I ate my dinner trying not to glance up from my plate. My wife, cradling one elbow of Aunt Mary, shuffled her over to a seat at our table across from me. She then proceeded to spoon-feed cream of mushroom soup into Mary's mouth. Mary, mechanically slurping the chunky liquid off of the large metal spoon. My wife, sycophantically praising her as she did, while wiping the excess away with Mary's stained bib. Mary never responded while she ate. She looked straight ahead into the middle distance slurping her swill. That is until one spoonful went down the wrong pipe and Aunt Mary began to cough. Her sickly, sallow flesh turned red as a ripe tomato. Blue and violet veins worked their way to the surface of her neck. I could see the sinewy muscles just beneath her paper thin skin begin to flex and quiver. Her eyes grew wide. Her clouded eyes—surrounded by dark bags, blue and black, the color of dog gums—looked toward the heavens.

My wife leaped up from her spot, and not knowing what to do, began slapping her open palm against Aunt Mary's protruding, jagged spine. After a handful of hollow hits, a mouthful of half-chewed mushroom soup, streaked with brown blood, splattered across the table and onto my plate of food.

Anna removed the bowl from under Aunt Mary and wiped the blood and dull gray cream from around her mouth until she realized that she was spreading the spit-up from her bib onto Aunt Mary's face. Still fretting, Anna got up from the table to moisten a washcloth. I looked down at my salmon and potatoes that were now freshly marinated with an old woman's blood and bile.

I looked up from what used to be my dinner to see Mary looking at me, smiling. I shock of icy blood coursed through my veins. Her milky white irises fixed their trained stare at me—her brown and yellow rotting teeth shown between her bloodied chapped lips. A woman who hasn't been cognizant in decades was not only taking pleasure, but was about to laugh at my disgust for her. Mary's body began to quake as she displayed her listless, pale tongue.

Aren't you going to do something? screamed my wife from the kitchen.

The faucet turned off as well as Aunt Mary's demonic grin. Her focus died and went back to its usual passive gaze. My wife entered the dining room. As I sat there looking at the woman who was just looking at me. My wife spoke to Aunt Mary saying that she gave us quite a scare.

That was an understatement.

I stood up from the table, my eyes never leaving Mary's. I picked up my plate and walked over to the garbage. As I crossed Aunt Mary's path, her eyes softly drifted up to mine, and followed me as I left.

That night my wife tucked Mary tightly beneath the clean, pressed sheets, sang her a soft lullaby, and then wished her pleasant dreams in the downstairs room that should have been the nursery. I wanted to tell her what happened at the dinner table that evening. I wanted to tell her how her great aunt sprang to life and terrified me. I wanted to tell her, but I didn't. I don't know why I didn't. Perhaps I figured that she wouldn't believe it. After all, I didn't want to believe it myself.

I was sound asleep when I heard a door open from the downstairs. It was as quiet as a graveyard that night. You could hear cat paws on pavement. All of my focus was directed to the other side of my bedroom door. After what felt like an eternity, I could hear the first creak from a wooden step, then another. *Creak, creak, creak... creak, creak... creak.* I tried to remember how many steps there were on the staircase—seven, eight?

How many steps has she already climbed? *Creak.* She was getting closer. The creaking noises were getting louder. A woman who wasn't able to walk without assistance was now almost to the top of my steps. Then came a muffled sound as she stepped onto the soft carpeting of the upstairs landing. This was followed by the shuffling of feet on carpet.

The footsteps made their way down the narrow hallway. The sound of fingertips lightly scratching the wall faintly echoed from the other side. Three steps—then stop... two steps—then stop. The final stop was just outside of our bedroom door.

There was a faint metallic rattle while a hand rested upon our bedroom door handle. I didn't know what to do. I softly, but quickly, threw the covers off me and tip-toed over to the door just as the handle began to turn. I grabbed the door handle from my side and held fast to it like a vice-grip. The handle continued to turn. I grabbed the little brass knob with my other hand and held on as tight as I could. Still the handle slipped beneath my palms. A powerful force was turning that handle—a force that I couldn't stop. I removed my right hand and pressed the lock in the center of the door. As soon as the tinny click sounded from the brass lock the turning stopped.

Just leave, just go—leave us alone, I whispered beneath my breath.

No, murmured small voice from the other side.

I wanted to hide from her. I wanted to slip beneath the covers and wish her away like a child haunted by the bogeyman, but I couldn't leave my place beside the door.

I could hear her sticky hands remove themselves from the handle on the other side. I drew a sigh of relief and collapsed against the door. The sound of fingernails gliding along the wood grain of the door sent shivers up my back, causing me to sit straight up as if the very nails were tracing my spine. Long delicate scraps from brittle, broken nails echoed through the hollow door, breaking and morphing in sound as they passed across the embossed panels. The delicate scrapes stopped midway down the door as each finger folded and fell away one at a time.

After listening intently to the blank air, I eventually abandoned my post next to our door. I had to wake up before my wife. I couldn't let her find out that the bedroom door was locked. But I couldn't unlock it until I knew it was safe.

It wasn't a problem waking up before my wife. I never fell back to sleep. I spent my time vacantly looking into dead air much like Mary did, waiting, and listening for any sound—listening for her return.

After the sun had risen, transforming my surrounding from a nightmare cellar back into a cozy bedroom situated in a modest home, I felt that it was safe to get out of bed. I pressed my ear up to the door and listened intently for any sign of her. I slowly twisted the handle, unlocking the door. After peeking through the crack of the door, I made my way to the bathroom—jerking my head around in all directions looking for Mary, expecting to see her in every dark corner, behind every door.

I stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind me only after checking behind the shower curtain. Once safely locked inside, I noticed a putrid smell emanating from the toilet. I looked down to see bloody, black bile and shimmering puss balloons that looked like cat guts floating stagnate in the bottom of the toilet bowl. I stepped back in shock. Peering once again, I caught another whiff. It was the stench of death. I tried with my entire will not to vomit. With my nose pointed as far away from the atrocity, I reached over and flushed the rotting decay away.

The toilet chugged and chocked on the fetid waste before swallowing it whole. I at first kicked myself for doing it. I should have shown my wife. Then I would be able to convince her that Mary couldn't stay here. That she was sick and needed to go to a hospital. I still could have shown her. There was still proof stained on the side of the toilet bowl. Crimson streaks clung to the porcelain walls. I grabbed the toilet bowl cleaner and brush and went to work removing it. I decided that I didn't want my wife to see it. Aunt Mary was dying. If we were to bring Mary to the hospital, my wife would only move her back in with us once she was better. I wanted Mary dead. I wanted her out of my life for good. I scrubbed the evidence off the side of the bowl. I gagged when the scent would find its way into my nostrils. I sprayed bleach across the inside. I hoped it would be the last time I would ever have to do that.

I immediately dressed for work and left the house. I couldn't imagine sitting across from that vile woman at the breakfast table. I avoided her at all cost. I phoned my wife that evening and said I would be working late and to eat without me. I asked how Aunt Mary was doing. My wife said, fantastic. Anna didn't allude to any decline in health. I figured it was a good thing. Just die, no warning signs for my wife. Just stop breathing, fall over and plant your face into your cream soup and stay like that until the bubbles stop coming to the surface. Or die in your bed. I don't care. I'll burn the damn thing after they remove your lifeless body.

I wanted her buried beneath six feet of dirt, never to lay eyes upon her again. I'd get Anna a puppy to cuddle and I wouldn't have to sit across from that decrepit pile of bones ever again.

I came home late that night and every night after that. Anna was concerned that I was avoiding Aunt Mary. I lied and assured her I wasn't. I had just slipped under the covers one night after my wife had just put Aunt Mary to bed. I hardly slept in a week. Anna was in a great mood that night. She enjoyed taking care of Aunt Mary. Aunt Mary seemed to fill the void within her. I fell asleep while she was blathering on about it. In the small hours I awoke to hear the sound of breathing from the corner of my bedroom. I silenced my own breath—shallow to a muted level. Between the rhythmic sounds of Anna breathing beside me, I heard another. The sound of course air filtering through a constricted throat taunted me, breathing the same air as me. I slowly lifted my head. The impenetrable darkness made it impossible to see any figure. But the sound, the sound of the breathing continued. I gently grabbed my wife's shoulder and began to squeeze it. With no response from her, I proceeded to squeeze it tighter until Anna said, not now, in a sleepy, perturbed tone. My bare feet stuck out from beneath the covers. My toes curled in the chilled air. I pulled them beneath the covers ever so slowly as to not cause an obvious restless shift for her to see. I lied there as if I were dead, listening to the slow breaths just past the edge of my bed. Sometimes the breaths were in sync with mine. Other times I could easily hear them between my shallow pants.

I couldn't speak. I didn't want Mary to hear me. I leaned in close. The guttural gasps continued just feet away. *She's here*, I whispered into my wife's ear. *She's in our room*, I pleaded once more. Finally Anna sat up and said *what?*

Still with the covers pulled tightly under my chin, I said with eyes wide open, *Mary's in the corner of the room*. My wife assured me in a sleepy tone that Mary can't walk on her own.

Listen! I scowled.

There was nothing. No sound in that room except my horrified voice. She turned on her bedside lamp which illuminated a blank corner. *Go back to sleep, honey*, she said while turning the lamp back off. That was easier said than done. Anna falling fast to sleep left me alone in silence, my eyes never leaving the dark corner, I waited for any sign of movement. Anything at all.

I stayed staring until the sun rose and the bleak bedroom was familiar once again.

I was exhausted. I couldn't fathom working that day. But the thought of spending it at home with that monster was much less desirable. I collected my fatigued frame and got out of bed. I walked to the very corner where the breathing originated. There in the thick white carpet were two bare footprints—two feet that had stood there next to my closet. Two feet that were pointed at me and Anna sleeping in our bed. I looked to the closet not knowing what to expect. I slowly grasped the handles then flung open the doors. Inside the closet hung clothes on wooden hangers, shoe boxes at my feet and nothing more.

The nightmare continued day after day. I demanded that we put Mary into a care facility, that it was too great of an obligation. Anna took offense. She wouldn't hear of it. She said that it shouldn't matter to me anyway since I'm never home. I told her Aunt Mary was sick. Desperate, I told her of the bloody mess I had found in the toilet. Anna said I was lying. I told her I wasn't. She asked why I hadn't told her about it sooner, and I was speechless.

The repulsive old woman drove a wedge between us over the coming days. I spent most of my day at the office, and most of the night awake in bed. Anna was becoming distant. There was a vacant, look beneath her once spirited eyes. There were times I tried to call her attention, only to be met with remote confusion. We soon didn't speak to each other at all. I remained as busy as possible on the weekdays as well as weekends. We were like two ships passing in the night. I still wasn't sleeping in the evenings, and was exhausted throughout my days. The constant drudgery was taking its toll. I needed out. I needed Mary gone for good. One night I came home particularly late. All of the lights were off in the house. I decided to make a quick sandwich before I went to bed. I opened the fridge and poked my head inside. There was a flash of movement to my right. Someone had quickly passed just behind me. I jolted up and looked around the kitchen. Seeing nothing, I

crept to the threshold that led into the dining room.

Standing in the center of the room was Mary. Her back turned to me, her gray hair matted like a bird's nest, her arms resting at her side. The window was open. She was illuminated by the moon as a chilly breeze waved her threadbare nightgown.

Mary? I said with a quiver. The figure slowly turned around and our eyes met. Mary looked at me with lifeless eyes and mouth agape. Her rotting teeth were covered with blood. Her shaking, weathered body lifted her spindly arms. In the penetrating moonlight I could see the bony corpse beneath her thin gown. She took two steps advancing toward me spewing vitriol, with hate in her eyes. I stepped back from her. She stepped closer, croaking chants and incantations as if resuscitating her own departed soul.

I screamed for Anna. I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Mary grabbed my shirt, with blood pouring from her mouth while she spoke in a dead tongue. Her frosty fingers forced against my chest. Her once dormant eyes came to life. The irises now glowed with burnt orange fires resting in cloudy pools of yellow. Each syllable from her primordial hymn spat blood onto my face as Mary pulled me close. The convulsing old woman wrenched every muscle in her body at once. Her back instantly arched and twisted. I could hear bones breaking beneath her thin flesh. Then came the tortured scream of a little girl buried beneath fractured cries.

I pushed her away sending her frail frame to the floor. Anna raced down the steps to see her aunt cowering as I towered over her. Anna screamed at me, calling me a monster. I yelled that she was attacking me. The feeble old woman lay lifeless in my wife's arms. Piss and blood streaked from her stained, white gown. Anna looked at me with a look of terror at what I had done.

Mary died that night. I killed her. At least that's what my wife said. That night two people died. The wretched Aunt Mary and the woman I used to love. She agreed not to say what had happened to the authorities. When her body was removed, Aunt Mary looked more alive in death than she had ever appeared while living. She looked like a sweet old woman who was now at peace. Anna told them that Mary died naturally. They believed the lie, but Anna could never convince herself.

It wasn't long after my wife changed. First she stopped speaking to me. Then she spoke to no one else. She sat blankly and refused to eat. I took her to multiple doctors, but no one could help. She soon began to wither into a fragile, bony frame. I quit my job and lived solely off the inheritance we received from Uncle Oliver. I spoon fed each meal to what used to be my young vibrant wife. I bathed the body that I once adored. I witnessed the life slowly escaping from her. I noticed the black bags that look like serrated, dead flesh form under her eyes. I observed her ribs press against her taught skin as if trying to hatch from her abdomen. I witnessed firsthand the woman I loved become the thing I loathed.

I take her to the park every once in a while so she can feel the fresh breeze upon her face. I noticed the children afraid to come anywhere near us. I heard the rumors blaming me for her state. I shrugged them off and presented the monster of my creation at every family gathering.

I put in place a stoic façade to conceal the hatred I have for both her and me. I hold out the vain hope that she will return to the woman she once was. But I know that I will forever be taking care of my Anna.

...that is until the day I die. Until she will become someone else's burden.