
15-19 Age Group Runner Up

Only Us

Ethan P.

“For the last time, there’s no one here! Only us!”

Instantly, I regret yelling. Tears start to well up in the corner of Huey’s eyes held up by bags of sleepless nights. He doesn’t cry, but the tragic exhaustion that’s been dancing across his face increases, like a balloon blown so full that you’re worried any second it will pop. I am scared that soon he will burst. “You don’t see them because you don’t want to see them.”

Despite being on the verge of his 27th year, his voice and demeanor is that of one 10 years younger. His hair is frayed in every direction, covering the skull in which paranoid and frantic thoughts hide. I reach a shaking hand out to tuck a piece of stray hair back into the mess. I mean for it to be comforting, but based on the look that dashes across his face, it comes across as condescending. Snatching my hand back, I turn away from my husband, leaving him alone.

It’s 3 minutes till midnight when I look up from my book, and I realize I haven’t heard a peep for 2 hours. Next to me the fire roars. As I stand, the light illuminates my shadow on the wall, lengthening my height, morphing me into some kind of monster. A flame flickers and the light draws my eyes to a singular picture on the wall. Taking a step forward, I examine the photo with tired eyes. I know it well, although I haven’t thought of it in quite some time. The image depicts a young couple, only about 22 years old, one wears a black suit and a huge smile, the other a conventionally attractive blond woman in a flowing white dress. Of course, it’s Huey and I, 5ish years ago, the day vows were said and forever promised. As I inspect the framed photo, I wonder what went wrong. When did these shadows grow into meaningful shapes? When did every little noise mean the end? When did nightmares seep into reality? I figure that I’ll never know.

I climb the dark stairs to the bedroom we share, assuming Huey must have finally crashed and is sleeping. But as I push open the big creaky door, I hear not only a squeal from its hinges, but a screech from inside the room as well. Soon I’m able to see the source of the noise; panic fills the creature’s face and eyes, blankets cover the hunched form, and another pitiful wail escapes from it. Of course, this creature is just Huey, poor desperate Huey. With every day that passes, I realize he looks less and less like the man I married, and more and more like a wounded baby animal. And yet, I am too tired to feel

pity.

“It’s only me.”

To this, he doesn't relax, his frame is still tense and his eyes still wild, the only difference is he sinks deeper into the bed. As if he's been defeated to the core of his being. With a sigh, I cross to my side of the bed. I slip into the one blanket he left behind for me, and despite his frantic twitching shaking the bed, I manage to drift off into a dreamless sleep.

I'm jolted awake at what I would guess is three hours later, although I can't see the clock to be sure. At first, I suspect that I was awoken by something Huey must have done, but much to my surprise, his breath is calm and slow, meaning he must have finally fallen asleep. But now I'm left curious about what could have waken me in such a way. The room is eerily still, and the absence of noise is beyond deafening, yet I don't feel alone. There's something here. I attempt to convince myself that it's my brain being foggy from sleep, but I can't shake the feeling of a million eyes on me.

And then the most horrifying thought crosses my mind.

“Maybe Huey's right.”

Instantly I push those worries out of my head, but something lingers. Obviously, it's preposterous. How could I actually let myself believe it? And yet...

Huey stirs in his sleep sending me jumping and instantly I feel ridiculous. I sink back into the mattress and flip onto my side. I watch Huey slowly breathe, not a single noise emitting from his sleeping form. Sleepily my eyes blink shut, lulling me into the stage that comes right before sleep. Feeling the wave of sleep about to pull me out to sea, my eyes slowly open one last time, in one last glance around the room.

Suddenly my eyes peel open, the air stuck in my throat, and yet I can't move. At the foot of the bed, facing Huey's sleeping form, a lanky figure stood, watching. It had eyes where there shouldn't be eyes. Teeth where there shouldn't be teeth. And all I could do was sit there in horror, a strange admiration for the grotesque creature bubbling in me. With eyes wide and mouth agape, I sat for what must have been hours, for slowly in the corner of the room the sun began to shine through.

The first rays of the glorious morning sun hit this other being, and it begins to slink away, into the few remaining shadows. Beside my awestruck figure, Huey stirs as he is lulled out of sleep. And my first thought of the morning is

“I can’t let him know.”

My eyes are dry from the hours of unblinking silence. My mouth is dry as if I had swallowed dirt in my sleep. My limbs are stiff and ache a dull and dying pain. And I realize this is how one must feel while in their coffin.

Huey mumbles a morning greeting and asks how I am. I say nothing. I stare ahead.

“You saw them. Didn’t you?”

This question feels lightyears away, his voice is distant and echoing.

“No. There’s only us.”