

If I Should Die Before I Wake

Featured in the collection of short stories

“Your Worst Nightmare”

By Lynn Bohart

A noise from somewhere in the bowels of the old house woke her. It wasn't a thud, or the house settling on its foundation. It sounded more like a low growl, a rumbling in the back of the throat. And it chilled her to the bone.

She sat up in bed, shivering, but not from the cold. The thing was here, and it would come for her tonight.

She had to run.

In a flash, she was out of bed and heading for the door. No time to get dressed. No time for shoes. No time to wake anyone else in the house. She had to get away from the thing that stalked her.

Scrambling into the hallway, she heard the noise again and slid to a halt. It was closer this time—a raspy, wheezing sound coming from the basement. Quickly, she turned and ran for the back staircase. She hurried to the first floor, bursting into the kitchen, gulping for air. The kitchen was cool and dark, with the faintest odor of fried chicken still hanging in the air from dinner. She glanced down the hallway to where a shadow shifted, as if something large was coming up the stairs. Her body flinched, fear oozing like sweat from every pore.

Could the thing hear her? See her?

She didn't think so. It never had before. But surely it could smell her. How could she escape?

She glanced through the kitchen windows to the darkness beyond. Outside there was nothing. No lights anywhere. There was nowhere to go. She was isolated in

upstate New York, in a farmhouse surrounded by open fields, miles from another building or help of any kind. She had only one option.

She had to run.

Without another thought, she dashed for the back door, throwing it open. She raced through the rickety screen door and down the back steps, heading for the fence that partitioned the yard from the fields beyond. She had just swung the garden gate open when something grabbed her foot, twisting it like a pretzel.

She lurched forward in agony before falling and landing on the damp grass. A few feet away, a tangled root had emerged from a blackened hole to snag her. *How could she be so careless?* She pulled up her left pants leg, wincing from the screaming pain in her ankle.

Tears wet her cheeks, filling the corners of her mouth with a salty reminder of how human she was. *Animals didn't cry*, she thought. *Neither would whatever it was that was chasing her.* With a strength that surprised her, she hefted herself off the ground and turned to limp away.

Damn! How could she run now?

If she could make it into the forest at the south end of the property, she could hide. Still sobbing from the pain, she hurried toward the first few trees, gasping every time she put weight on her injured ankle. She grabbed an old hoe leaning against a shed and used it as a crutch, hobbling into the relative safety of the grove of evergreens.

Stones and twigs dug into her bare feet, while branches grabbed her night dress and caught her hair. She rebounded from one prickly bush to another, ripping clumps of hair out by the follicles as she hurried past. She stumbled further and further into the dense underbrush, finally toppling over a short fence that encircled the family graveyard, landing face down.

Her ankle throbbed with pain, and she turned over to lay on her back. She was surrounded by decrepit wooden crosses and ivy-covered headstones that rose from the leaf-strewn ground at haphazard angles.

With a hefty grunt, she struggled to her knees and gazed around. The air was warm, and yet a chill raised goose bumps across her skin. Death surrounded her. In fact, the Angel of Death sat atop a stone monument at the center of the small graveyard with a provocative grin spread across its granite face.

Dazed, she slumped forward and began to sob. Blood from a deep gash on her cheek ran into her mouth, blotting out for a moment the pain in her ankle. She dabbed the metallic taste of the blood away with the thin fabric of her night dress.

A minute went by. Then another.

She began to hope she'd lost the thing, but the sound of the screen door creaking open caused her to suck up a sob and go still. In the distance, the back stairs of the house groaned under the weight of something big. Squelching a scream, she pulled herself up again.

She had to run.

Her hands and feet stung from the bleeding cuts and bruises, and her night dress was torn and now smeared with blood. Grit and dirt filled her mouth, and she could hardly breathe.

Like a zombie, she stumbled and lurched to the back of the graveyard, pushing through a wooden gate into the underbrush, where shadows from the dark underbelly of the forest enveloped her. She found a narrow path barely visible in the dark and moved further and further away from the house. Finally, she paused, her senses reaching out for sounds she might recognize. The rustle of leaves in the trees above her. The chirp of a cricket. The snap of a twig.

She froze.

Another snap, but lower this time, as bushes were pushed aside. And then a heavy footfall.

Her heart nearly burst from her chest. The thing was close—too close. How could it move so quickly?

With a deep breath, she turned and hobbled as fast as she could around a thicket of blackberry bushes, barely catching herself before she went over the edge of a deep ravine. With a gasp, she stopped, her toes hanging over the cliff, her hand stopping her fall by grasping the branch of a nearby tree.

This was as far as she could go. *God, why was always like this? Why did it always have to be like this?* With adrenalin buzzing in her ears, the anxiety began to build into a full-blown panic attack.

This was the end. There was nowhere left to go.

A shuffling sound behind her made her body go rigid, as a putrid odor swirled around her, burning her eyes and nose. She began to shake, her muscles twitching uncontrollably. The ground beneath her moved as the thing inched its way towards her, sniffing as it came. When she felt its fetid breath upon her neck, she turned, knowing what she would find.

A hulking, stinking shadow loomed behind her. The thing reached for her in the darkness, and she stepped back. When her foot came off the ledge, her mouth opened in a yawning scream.

She grabbed for support, but her fingers merely snagged a tuft of the thing's hair just before both she dropped into empty space, the image of burning red eyes and teeth the size of scissors indelibly imprinted on her brain.

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“Is she dead?” Andrew whispered.

Emily stood over her friend, tears running down her cheeks.

“Yes,” she replied. “For several hours, I think.”

“What in the world happened to her?” Andrew pointed to the scrapes and cuts on her arms and feet. “I mean, it looks like someone beat her up.”

“I think she must have run through the forest,” Emily replied, looking through the window towards a large pine tree at the edge of the property.

“But why?”

Emily turned her brown eyes toward her husband. “Perhaps something was chasing her.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Emily wrapped her arms around herself for warmth and then turned back to the battered and bruised body of her best friend.

“I’m not sure what I believe.”

“But how did she end up back here looking like this? Why wouldn’t she have come to us? I mean, we didn’t hear anything.”

“I don’t know. She was troubled. That’s why I suggested she visit. I thought getting her out in the country would be a good thing. I never thought something like this would happen.”

Andrew picked up a prescription bottle that sat on the nightstand. It had Maddie Renfrew’s name on it.

“You said the doctor put her on medication. Maybe she didn’t take it tonight,” he said, shaking the bottle.

“Perhaps,” Emily replied, pushing an errant wisp of hair away from her face. “We may never know what really happened.”

Andrew leaned down to touch a large bruise on the side of the young woman’s head and pointed to other injuries on the young woman’s body.

“Emily, she didn’t die of natural causes. She might have been attacked, or maybe she fell down the stairs or down a hill, but this isn’t normal.”

Emily turned toward her husband. “What did you say?”

“I said she must have been attacked.”

“No, the other thing.”

Andrew’s eyes betrayed his confusion. “That she fell? I mean, look at the cuts and bruises. And her ankle is swollen.”

“Fell,” Emily murmured. She shivered and hugged her arms more closely around her. “I wonder.”

“What?”

“Maddie’s mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and killed herself by jumping from a fourth-floor window when we were in junior high. Maddie started having the dreams shortly after that. They were always the same. Something horrible would chase her to the edge of a cliff, and then she’d fall.”

“You’re kidding? Then, what happened?”

“She’d wake up. My brother used to tease her about it. He said you always wake up before you hit bottom, unless...”

“Unless what?”

Emily looked at her husband again, feeling a knot in her stomach. “He said that if you don’t wake up before you hit bottom... you die.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” Emily said, keeping her thoughts to herself. “But I think it’s time we call the police.”

She reached out and pulled something from between Maddie’s tightened fingers before the couple retreated to the hallway, where Emily paused at the door. She glanced at the substance in her hand, and then back at the once lovely young girl who had been her friend. The lifeless body was sprawled across the bed, her nightdress torn and bloody, eyes staring wide, and her mouth drawn open as if suspended in a horrifying scream.

“What’s that?” her husband asked.

Emily glanced down at her fingers and then turned to him.

“Fur,” she whispered. “Dirty fur. Maddie had it between her fingers.”

The couple stared at each other for an awkward moment before a low groan from somewhere in the house startled them both. They froze.

“It’s just the house settling,” Andrew finally said with a laugh. “Don't go getting spooked on me.”

Emily looked down again at the filthy brown hair between her fingers and then back at the body on the bed.

“Yeah... maybe it’s just the house,” she said quietly.

As she stepped away from the door, her shoe caught on the carpet runner. She looked down to where her foot had smeared a string of muddy saliva across the hardwood floor and onto the carpet where it got lost amongst the fibers.

“But—maybe not.”

THE END

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