

I Always Wake Up

A kaleidoscope of red shapes painted the back of my eyelids. They shrank, then expanded, turning, and circling. I watched their random display, letting myself relax while I drifted off into the blackness of sleep.

I was hiding behind the sofa. A man was there. His icy hand grabbed my foot to pull me out, but only succeeded in ripping off my black, patent-leather shoe. He was drunk and mad. The space was too small. I was on my side and couldn't turn. I wormed my way further in, wedging myself between the wall and the heavy sleeper-sofa. Curses filled the space outside. Fingers of ice closed on my sock-clad foot. I kicked as hard as I could within my confines. It was enough to win momentary freedom. I had escaped. I breathed in the dusty air.

That's it. This dream will end now. I'll wake up.

The sofa lifted, tilting forward away from the wall. The man's face was there, outlined in the red-hued light. I covered my eyes, hiding behind my forearms and waited.

Yesss, a voice hissed. More.

The dusty smells filling my nose were replaced with the scent of urine-soiled hay. I was in the barn, in the stall with a pony. "Call him Shetland and know that you love him," the hissing voice coached.

I was on the floor of the stall, hidden in the shadows. A different man, the stranger I knew to stay away from, was there. He was standing just outside the half-door. I didn't dare stand up.

Shetland didn't like him. I watched, looking up as the man reached out to pat the animal's nose. The pony jerked back with flared nostrils. The man drew back his fist and punched the small animal in the face.

My skin felt hot.

The man's voice, cold and distant, called out, "Come out here you. Ain't nothing to be afraid of."

Shetland snorted, then neighed loudly, shaking his head. His fear belied the man's coaxing. There was definitely something to be afraid of.

I jumped up to run but something caught around my legs.

Not yet. I heard, as I fell face-first onto the stall floor.

The pony snorted. I heard his sharp inhale as he reared. His hooves scraped on the concrete floor as he landed and jumped back.

I rolled, trying to free my legs, but it didn't work. The stall was too dark. My legs were too entangled.

I heard the voices of three people in the barn. One sounded young and familiar, a boy's. Another was a man's drunken slur. They were accompanied by the calls of the stranger. "We were just getting started. Come on back," he pleaded.

I always wake up.

I had to be still, but all of me wanted to run.

You can't run.

He was coming for me. The man I knew to stay away from was coming. I could feel him getting closer.

My heart is pounding.

I kept my eyes shut firmly, hiding behind their thin veil.

In the darkness, I heard the latch click and the complaining squeal of rusty hinges as someone opened the stall door. Shetland lifted his head and snorted, backing away. I dug in my heels and tried to push myself away, but failed. The floor was too slippery. I held my breath, expecting frozen hands to grab me. He was close. Any moment now he would be on me. I was trapped. There was no more room.

You can't hide behind a sofa and you can't hide here. He'll find you, a voice inside my head stated matter-of-factly. *You can't hide.*

“No!” I heard the boy yell. “No, you won’t.”

I breathed in the stench of the stall floor, not caring that the ammonia burned my nose.

I'll wake up now. This will end and I'll wake up.

The outline of the boy slowly came into focus. He stood in the hallway outside Shetland's stall with one hand on his hip, the other holding up his toy sword. He posed like a cartoon hero in the spotlight. *The savior has arrived!* my mind captioned his silhouette. I saw a flash of a scene where he and I were both dressed as knights. We were charging at full gallop, riding battle stallions, waving our swords, ready to defeat all foes. I could feel the warmth of the sun as it shone on my face. We were going into glorious, bloody battle.

I'll wake up smiling.

“Get away from her,” I heard the boy say. I lay on the floor and watched him rush toward the man. He held his gleaming sword aloft, ready to be brought down with full, righteous vengeance.

I heard the whack as his blow found its mark. The man’s knee collapsed and he fell to the side.

Yay! Well done sir knight! Finish him.

The boy spun, letting the momentum of his charge carry him around in a graceful pirouette. He raised his sword for what I knew would be the killing strike. I inhaled, holding my breath and waited. But his weapon did not descend. Instead, the boy himself was lifted off the ground. I saw the confused look on his face as the drunken man held him by his upraised arm.

I rolled, trying to keep them in sight as the man dragged the boy away, but the wall blocked my view. I didn’t see the boy’s fate, but the sounds told me enough. Boots clunked on the hard floor as someone big made a quick movement. A small voice cried out in an agonized, near-scream of pain.

I crawled in the darkness. The slick, excrement-fouled straw bunched up in front of me. I propelled myself forward on my elbows trying to climb over the heap. Everywhere was darkness, so black that it threatened to smother me.

I always wake up.

The boy’s sword appeared next to me on the barn floor. I grabbed it, but when I looked again, it had changed into a piece of rusty pipe in my hands.

From somewhere in the distance I heard the sound of a fist hitting flesh. I had to get my legs free. If I could, then I would run.

You can't run, but I can dance, a familiar, non-human voice bragged.

Quiet!

You know it's true, the growling, hiss of a voice insisted.

What I know is that I always wake up.

Always? the voice questioned.

The drunken man's face, browned and leathery from a lifetime in the sun, floated into my thoughts. I saw him sitting on the concrete floor, his back resting against the wall. He stared up at me. "You won't do it," he challenged.

The rusty piece of pipe was in my hands as I stood over him. It felt substantial.

It feels right, the voice growled in my head.

I swung.

Everything was red and then... it went still. There was no sound as I looked into his unblinking eyes.

That's better, the growl-voice whispered.

Stop joining in. You'll wake up.

The boy and I both were running. He sped past me, holding his toy sword high, as he left me behind. When I arrived in the front yard, out of breath and panting, he was already going up the steps to the porch. The stranger I knew to stay away from was there too. He was walking slowly, favoring his knee as he made his way toward the front door.

I'll wake up. I always wake up.

"I'm a knight," The boy was saying. "I fight the evil-doers," he told the man.

He isn't going to save you.

“No, it’s true, I’m a knight, I will save the maiden.” The boy argued, somehow replying to thoughts he couldn’t have heard.

His armor was so shiny, I had to raise my arm to dim the glare as it reflected the sun. He raised his right arm in a salute and tapped the hilt of his sword to his helm before turning his attention back to the stranger. With a leap, he closed in, his gleaming, jewel-encrusted sword at the ready.

Part of me watched from a distance. I could see myself standing in the yard. The stranger was down. He sat on the grey-painted floorboards of the porch and shielded his face with his arm. The boy was standing over him, a triumphant knight guarding his prisoner.

I saw the door open. A woman was there. She stepped out and grabbed the boy by the ear. I saw that he was no longer a knight, just a child in faded jeans, stretching up on tippy-toes, trying to lessen the agony.

“What’s going on here!” the woman demanded.

The stranger looked up. His eyes were round and soft like an innocent puppy’s. “He’s gone crazy. He hit me with that pipe.”

The woman released the boy’s ear with a shove. He stumbled back, but found his balance quickly. The woman stepped forward and slapped him full in the face. The blow knocked him into the porch railing.

I ached to slap her.

“And what’s with you?” she said, looking out at me. “What have you got all over you? Is that straw in your hair?” She waved her hands in disgust. “I’ve had it. May the devil take you both.”

The Devil? I could feel the corners of my mouth draw up into an evil grin.

“They just need a little... discipline,” the stranger quickly said.

The woman smiled at him.

They have a secret, the growl-voice whispered to me.

“Do with them what you will then,” said the woman as she turned away.

The stranger kicked the boy in the stomach. The blow sent him tumbling backwards, over the rail.

“Stop it,” I called as I ran up the steps.

The man was on his feet by the time I arrived. Still, I charged at him, swinging my fists as hard as I could.

He caught me by the shoulders. His cold hands held me at arm’s length. I could smell the stench of his sweat and his putrid breath.

“*I will* do what I will,” he proclaimed.

What I will, a growling voice, boomed in my head. I could feel the heat of it in my bones.

“No! *I will* do what I will,” the voice, my voice declared.

I planted my feet and pushed him. His knee gave way and he fell.

“*I will* do what I will,” I yelled down at him. He pushed himself backward, using his good leg and dragging the other.

I picked up the pipe-sword and swung it at his head. The shock of the impact was a sweet reward. I licked my lips.

That’s it.

Each blow was feast of red desire. I swung again and again, until I’d had my fill.

It's not over.

The pipe felt sticky in my hand as I carried it inside. The woman was there. She worked her mouth, but no words came out as she pointed and stared at me.

My first swing caught her in the arm. The second was a complete miss as she ducked low, dropping to the floor. I smiled and began to close the distance. She managed an awkward, backward crawl favoring her injured arm. Waving the pipe, I herded her to the space behind the large sofa and watched as she wormed herself into the dark confines.

“May the devil take you,” I cursed at her.

I grabbed her foot with my burning-hot hands. She kicked hard, gaining her freedom as her shoe came off.

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The sofa lit on fire. The flames curled forward, away from the wall. The woman's face was there, outlined in the red-hued light.

I began to laugh.

My laughter changed into the crackling sounds of a roaring fire. Acrid smoke filled my lungs.

“It's time to wake up. Come on,” an important voice urged, cutting through the haze of my sleep.

No, I'm still wrestling, my mind replied. Just a little longer.

“Wake up little one,” the loving voice directed. “Time to wake up.”

My eyes opened. I could see the elder's familiar, glowing red shape. Its sunken, black-circle eyes and yellow teeth were near enough to kiss as it held me in its arms.

We cuddled.

The flames surrounding us reached high into the air. They whipped around and danced with no rhythm — demons having a joyous time.

“How was your sleep?” the elder asked.

“I always wake up,” I growled. “Just when it’s getting good.”

The end.