

Dreams and Awakenings

A short story Collection



Claus Holm

**Dreams
and
Awakenings**

a short story collection

by

Claus Holm

Stories

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Foreword | 5 |
| The app | 11 |
| A weekend at the lake | 19 |
| They'll Run Forever | 33 |
| A window to the past. | 39 |
| Trash | 47 |
| Because you told me to. | 55 |
| Is he the one?. | 63 |
| The big mistake. | 69 |
| The burglar | 77 |
| Like-minded people | 85 |
| A heart to heart. | 97 |
| Alone in a fortress | 103 |
| The voice of nature | 115 |
| Do you believe in magic?. | 125 |
| Just a face in the crowd. | 139 |
| My friend Jack | 149 |
| An unexpected visitor | 159 |
| Comparing notes | 167 |
| Having the talk. | 173 |
| Thank God it's Friday | 179 |
| The fifth of November | 189 |
| All part of the service. | 203 |
| Movie night | 211 |
| Just in case.avi | 225 |
| Whether you like it or not | 233 |
| The cabin in the woods. | 239 |
| The Children's Street | 257 |
| Fun 'n' Games. | 269 |
| To share like brothers. | 281 |

Foreword

I never watched *The twilight Zone* as a child.

It seems to me that whenever you read an interview with, or a foreword by, a writer who writes in the borderland of the slightly supernatural or fantastic – that person will always come back to *The Twilight Zone*, and the old EC horror comic books. This makes sense, since both contain short and dark stories, where the protagonist doesn't always come out on top. Being from Denmark, none of these things were available to me growing up. I did, however, have access to the people who were INSPIRED by them. What modern writer, who writes in the horror or fantasy genre, hasn't at some point been inspired by people like Stephen King, Dean Koontz and Clive Barker? I would guess very few.

When I was growing up, my chief scares came from classic “ghost stories” of the folktale variant – or from classic stories by Robert Louis Stevenson (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), Bram Stoker (*Dracula*) and M.R. James, whose “Ghost stories of an antiquarian” were never published (to my knowledge) in one volume in Danish, but spread over many different books of spooky stories. Finding each of those was like finding a diamond lying in the grass when you walk on your bare feet: Painful, but at the same time enriching.

Eventually I got older and, most likely to my parent's great annoyance- began reading more advanced stories. You see – I suffer from nightmares. I always have. It's an unusual week in which I don't wake up at least 2 times from a dream, heart pounding, skin wet with sweat and feeling, for a few moments, that the covers are a horrible alien thing clinging to me. I spent many a night on the floor of my parent's bedroom, sim-

ply because I did not want to be alone in my room after such a nightmare. Often, the dreams were inspired by things I had seen, read or heard about – but it was never (like my brother’s fears) rooted in reality. It was never a burglar, a car crash or mom or dad leaving us that I was afraid of. It was the creatures that lived in the basement, in the dark closets, under the car when you came home at night and in the darkest corners of your mind: the vampires, werewolves, zombies, ghosts and aliens. And at the same time that these creatures terrified me, they also intrigued me greatly.

I still remember going to the library when I was a boy (a large building where the actual library was on the upstairs floors, and the ground floor was used for meeting rooms and art shows) and sitting in the reading room, listening to horror stories on tape as audio dramas. The very worst one of these was “The werewolf” – essentially a Danish reworking of the movie “An American Werewolf in London”. I would listen with my hands squeezed into fists while the narrator changed shape from a normal twelve year old boy to a werewolf, his voice gradually changing as his wolf snout and teeth appeared, growling and snarling. Later, when I went home, I had to walk through the empty downstairs gallery to get to my bus and I knew – simply KNEW – that the werewolf I had heard on the tape, even though it was simply a story, would now be sitting in the dark corner of the empty gallery, waiting for me. I would run through, with my heart in my throat, and afterwards swear that I wouldn’t listen to the tapes again....which of course, I did.

What was it about this dark side of the world that attracted me? For this I have no answer, I just know that even though I was afraid of such things, they were the most exciting thing in the world to me.

As I grew older, I discovered modern horror. Dean Koontz’s “Phantoms” was probably the first real adult horror book I ever read, and I loved it, swallowing it in big greedy gulps.

“Phantoms” is about a large, shapeless and evil creature that kills every man, woman and child in a small village in the first chapter, and the rest of the book concerns itself with the heroes coming in to stop it. The creature is gigantic, far more intelligent than the protagonists and can take any shape it wants. It was one of the most terrifying ideas I had ever been confronted with. Shortly after reading this book, I got a hold of Stephen King’s short story collection “Night Shift”, which contains (in my opinion) some of his most terrifying stories. That was when I understood the difference between something that was simply scary – like a ghost story – and actual Horror fiction with a capital H, for the first time. The most interesting thing about Horror is that it most often involves ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Not because of choice, quite often it’s exactly the opposite. Horror is essentially the story of the man who one day accidentally opens the door to the right instead of the door to the left, to enter a building he has been into a thousand times before...and suddenly discovers that the whole building is a stage set, and behind the wall there are dark things stirring, dark things who have been watching him for years.

This does not mean that all the stories in this collection are Horror stories, by far. But they all have ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, people who suddenly find out that the world is so much bigger and often more terrible than they thought. They all involve people who suddenly open their eyes just a little wider and awaken to a slightly different world. Some of those awakenings are positive, and others are not. In my experience, that is how life usually is.

Many of the stories started their life as dreams or nightmares that I remembered in the morning and put into words. Others were written as a writing exercise with two friends, where we would give each other a sentence and write a story from it. Then we would read and comment on each other’s stories, marveling over how different ideas could develop

from the same words. My sentences all came from the book “Blood Games” by Richard Laymon (which I have never actually read), simply because it was the first book I grabbed off the shelf when I had to find my first sentence. I won’t tell you which stories came from lines in this book, but I can tell you that a few of the sentences I used were “She found the others down by the lake”, “I have been receiving messages like this for the past two weeks” and “What if she woke up just a while ago”, which should give you some idea.

To return to *The Twilight Zone*, I was twenty-eight years old when I saw my first episode. It never (to my knowledge) aired on Danish television during my childhood. Today it would probably seem outdated. A show in black and white, with smartly written stories that actually encourage the viewer to think, cannot compete with the instant gratification provided by reality shows, where the contestants have sex in a hotel in Mexico. But when I first watched *The Twilight Zone*, I was astounded. It felt like this show could have been an inspiration for me, because in so many ways, my stories are like them. However, I can honestly say that I found my way of telling stories without it.

Short stories are a strange medium. They are too brief to give you much of a character to relate to, too short for the great epic love stories or extended “pursuit” stories, which have become so popular in the fiction category. Short stories are, however, a wonderful chance to tell a story where the reader is not hurt by a main character’s death after getting to know them for hundreds of pages (I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Dan Brown had simply let the bad guys kill Robert Langdon off in the last few pages of “The Da Vinci Code”). Readers want the heroes whom they have rooted for over the course of a novel or a movie, to emerge triumphant and reap the spoils in the end. In a short story, the gloves are off, and you as a writer can do exactly what you want with the characters. The best part is that none of the

stories have to go together. Have three different ideas about how the world could end? Great – write them! Chances are, people won't read them right after each other, and will still get 3 good experiences. Another great thing about the short story is how they can be just like the ghost stories I read as a child – The story is a short and sweet pleasure, which hopefully makes you think about the things in the story that the writer doesn't tell you.

The catch of writing short stories is the increasing difficulty of getting them published. In Denmark there is little, if any, chance of getting a single short story published in a magazine – and the number of people who have written a collection of short stories as their first book can be counted on one hand. In English speaking countries, the statistics are slightly better, but currently the best place to reach readers is the internet. There are hundreds of websites for aspiring writers, giving everyone a chance to post short stories, poetry or even novels. I have put some of my writing on these sites in the past, but they have two distinct disadvantages: The author has much less of a claim on copyright (cyberspace is a very shaky place to claim you did something first!), but most importantly, the writer becomes simply a “poster” of stories. One is not a real, true, full-blooded AUTHOR. You only get that title from publishing a book you can hold, feel and smell. (Despite the fact that this book will undoubtedly be available as an Ebook, I still maintain that a printed book is the real thing!). Creating such a book has been my dream for a long time.

I've been writing stories since I was sixteen years old. At first I wrote them by hand, and later on my grandfather's ancient typewriter. He was my first critic, the first to encourage me to write if I wanted to, and the first to ever read a piece of fiction I put on paper. I doubt he understood my attraction to the Loch Ness monster, which played a big part in that first story – but he still read it and gave his honest opinion. I dedicate

this book to him, and I know he would have been proud to hold a copy in his hand.

I should end this foreword by thanking a few people who have been essential to its creation. Kristina Borgen and Jolene Jensen for being my writing club partners, my editors Melinda Bowman and Ellen Taylor for encouraging me to write all these years. Finally I'd like to thank my wife, Lara Waters Holm, for giving me her time, encouragement and love.

The dreams begin on the next page. I invite you to dive into the world I usually inhabit while I sleep, and see if some of the things waiting there might even be things you recognize.

Claus Holm
Taastrup 2013

The app

“Come on over. I have something you need to see.”

These were the words that had gotten me out of my apartment on that cold November night. It was the first time I had been outside for more than three months. In the wonderfully inhuman world we live in today, you can have everything you need delivered to your home. You can have your groceries, booze and cigarettes put on your doorstep, pay with a credit card and never see another human face.

The day I had last been outside had been Hannah’s funeral. I had come home, taken off my suit and hung it in the closet. I threw myself down on the bed and cried for what felt like hours. The next day, I didn’t feel like getting up, so I stayed in bed. And the next day. And the next. Venturing to the kitchen and bathroom were the extent of my movements. Once a week I went online and ordered some food, vodka and a carton of Pall Malls, but other than that I lay in the dark of my bedroom, usually with a bottle next to the bed, smoking, drinking and thinking, until I fell asleep, then thinking again when I woke up. My body slowly seemed to lose its cohesion, my face became pale and drawn as I lost weight. I didn’t care. My mind was filled with images of Hannah as an infant, crawling around on Jean’s lap. Hannah as a toddler, crawling and grinning broadly, her pacifier dangling from her fingers, and giving everyone small, open mouthed kisses. Hannah at five, clasping her toy dog Biggles in its tail as she carried it everywhere. Hannah at seven, entering school, and sending her mom away because she wanted to appear confident in front of her new classmates. Hannah at fourteen, working in the school computer lab with the first- and second graders, teach-

ing them to use the painting programs and small games. And Hannah at seventeen, going out with her boyfriend Liam for the first time. They had eight months together. I hope they enjoyed every minute.

When the phone rang, I turned my head and looked at the display. The name of the caller always appears there, and mostly I would turn the other way and ignore it. But this time, I was surprised to see Liam's name there. He had only called my phone one time before, on that horrible night, and for a moment I felt like time had folded back onto itself and it was again the warm August evening where the sound of kids playing outside in the street had drifted in through my window as I had answered his call and heard the news in his shaking voice, even before he told me what had happened.

I rolled over and grabbed the phone, just like I had on that night, and seemed to hear an echo of the voice I had already heard.

"Mr. Bennett?"

"Mr. Bennett ... it's... it's Liam... something... happened..."

"Liam... what time is it?"

"It's a quarter past twelve, Mr. Bennett, but you need to come over."

"Hannah... she was crossing the street to meet me... she was coming out of the computer store... and she was crossing the street..."

"I'm not... Liam. I'm not going anywhere."

"Come on over. There's something you need to see."

"She was hit by a car, a big SUV... it hit her straight on, and it threw her... it threw her over the roof... she's... she's dead, Sir."

I rolled to my back, looking into the ceiling. It was lit only by the green light of my clock radio.

"Whatever it is, it's not important. Go to sleep, and stop calling me."

"It is, Sir. It's very important. Trust me, you need to see this. For Hannah's sake."

He hung up, and my phone turned itself off. I turned my face into the pillows for a moment, before giving a sigh. Using her name was the most effective way to get through to me, and I am sure he knew it. But it was also just the simplicity of the sentence without waiting around. “I have something you need to see”, indeed. What could he possibly have that concerned Hannah, which warranted my attention? Love letters she had written him? But whatever it was, I felt a sudden tingling in my stomach. Before I knew what I was doing, I had swung my feet out of bed and got to my feet, groping for the pair of pants I had last used weeks ago, still lying on the chair. I pulled a shirt from the closet, and slipped my feet into my shoes. Fully dressed, I paused in the bathroom to brush my teeth, not bothering with my otherwise shabby appearance, but not wanting to knock Liam over with my breath. Within ten minutes of having heard Liam’s voice, I was backing my car out of the garage and driving through the night.

Liam opened the door, wearing the same clothes I had usually seen him in, a loose cotton shirt and jeans. He didn’t look like he had been awoken from sleep, in fact he didn’t look like he had been to bed for days. He was a few years older than Hannah had been, and I knew he had been in college but not how old he actually was.

“Mr. Bennett, I’m so glad you came!” he said, his eyes looking serious.

“Well, that remains to be seen” I said, stepping into his small, cramped kitchen. “I’m not usually in the habit of making social calls in the middle of the night. Point of fact, I don’t feel very social, period. So what’s this all about?”

He gestured to follow him, and walked through the apartment. “I really wasn’t sure if I should have told you, but I really...I mean, if this is real...if there is some kind of chance for you to communicate...”

“Slow down, Liam...” I said, following him, “Start at the beginning.”

He sat down on his couch in the living room, and I sat in a recliner across from him. He fiddled with his cell phone, which was lying on the end table.

“Well...after the...funeral...I went home. Kind of wanted some alone time.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Well, okay, Hannah and I...you know, we met online, right? Through a dating site?”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. I warned her about them, but she said everybody did it these days.”

“Well, we used to use the site to chat on at night, if we weren’t together. There’s even an app for the phone, so you can be online all the time...kind of like texting, but you can stay online all the time...”

I held up my hand. “I’m not interested in your cell phone, Liam.”

“Well, maybe you are, actually. Like I said, it’s online all the time, right? And Hannah used to keep her phone in her pocket of her jacket. She had it there, when...when it happened. She had just sent me a message from the store, telling me she saw this new game I wanted, and had picked it up for me. I was in the grocery store, and I sent her back this little love-smiley...That’s a little picture of...”

“Yes, I know what a smiley is.”

“So, her phone was there in her pocket...and I mean...it must have been crushed when the car hit her. It’s not like...I mean, she wasn’t...buried with it or anything...”

“Of course she wasn’t!” my voice got a note of impatience. “Get to the point!”

“This IS the point!” Liam said. He pushed the phone with his fingertip, and the screen lit up. On the little screen was a message, contained in a little blue speech bubble:

"HEY BABY. I REALLY MISS YOU. IF YOU STILL WANT YOUR GAME, I'M PRETTY SURE IT'S STILL IN MY BLUE SHOULDER BAG AT MY DAD'S HOUSE. IT DIDN'T GET DAMAGED SO IT SHOULD STILL WORK. HOPE YOU REALLY ENJOY IT."

Above this, identifying the sender of the chat, was one word:

"HANNAH"

Liam looked at me, as I read the message, and cleared his throat. "I've been receiving messages like this for the past two weeks!"

He made the screen scroll up, and several other messages appeared. I caught a few:

"HEY BABY, HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A LOVELY DAY, IT'S BEEN SOOO LONG SINCE WE KISSED. I REALLY MISS IT:-)"

"IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY, GO OUTSIDE AND SMELL THE AIR, IT SMELLS LIKE JUST AFTER THE RAIN"

"IN THE BEDROOM UNDER THE DRESSER THERE'S A PAIR OF MY SHOES. COULD YOU GIVE THOSE TO THE SALVATION ARMY? THERE'S PLENTY OF WEAR IN THEM STILL AND YOU'RE NOT GOING TO USE THEM;-)"

"Liam...this is a joke. A trick, someone is playing on you." I leaned forward, taking the phone from his fingers and looking at it, my fingers tracing the sides as I read the messages, then putting it down on the table. There were about thirty all in all. "Do you have any idea how easy it is to hack into things like dating sites? Is there someone who wants to play a practical joke on you?"

"That's just it, Mr. Bennett. I've told nobody about the game...except you, now. She...it...whatever it is...knows stuff...stuff that only she would know! Where my remote control for the TV was, what she had for breakfast that day..."

“Do you reply to these messages? Because I can guarantee you, that somewhere there’s some person laughing his ass off. I really didn’t think you’d be the type to fall for this. I thought you were smarter than this.”

“Mr. Bennett...seriously...this is for real. Would you...I mean ... why don’t you ask her something? Something you’re positive only she knows?”

“All right, ask her what her toy dog was called when she was five years old. That ought to stump any would-be prankster.”

Liam picked up the phone again and typed:

“WHEN YOU WERE FIVE YOU HAD A TOY DOG. WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE DOG?”

He pressed the button to send the question off, and the phone made a small sound as the text became a speech bubble.

“So?”

“So now, we wait...she doesn’t always answer back right away.”

“Oh, of course not.” I leaned back in the chair, already slightly upset that I had come here. “I’m sure the afterlife has very poor cell phone coverage.”

Jean and I had not been religious when we met, and we had never instilled a sense of religion in Hannah either. We had never spoken of heaven or hell as something real, but of course her more religious classmates and friends had told her things, that had made her ask us questions when she was young. I had never believed in a life after death in any form, nor had Hannah, as far as I knew. When Jean had died, she had never asked if she would see mom again in heaven or other questions like that. She had missed her mother, but...

The phone gave a sharp PING.

Liam reached for it and read the screen. He turned it to me, so I could see it.

“IT WAS CALLED BIGGLES.”

“Is that true?” he asked, his eyes looking both scared and a little hopeful. He looked like he could not decide if he wanted me to say yes or no.

I nodded, slowly. “Yes. That’s true. Biggles was the name. From some old comic my father used to read. How the hell could they know this...?”

“Because it’s her. It’s Hannah. Write to her! Tell her you’re here!” His voice trembled, and he reached out his hand, offering the phone to me.

I looked down at the phone in his hand. My heart beat faster, the blood pumping in my ears at the same time as my skin felt cold. It couldn’t be real, I thought to myself. This was not a horror story where the dead whispered from the graves in the cemetery about the secrets of the afterlife. I knew better than that. Still, when I reached my hand out to take the phone, the fingers trembled slightly.

I pressed my finger on the screen, and it lit up again, the message still glowing there. I brought up the little keyboard on the screen and was about to begin typing, when the phone pinged again in my hand, and another speech bubble appeared:

“DAD?”

I gave a gasp, and dropped the phone on the floor, where it clattered. Liam dived for it, and picked it up, no worse for wear. With fingers that now shook visibly, I typed:

“YES, HANNAH, IT’S ME.”

For a moment those four words glowed alone on the screen. Then, another bubble appeared, but I only saw it for a moment before my eyes filled with tears:

“OH DAD...I’M SO GLAD YOU CAME!”

I held the phone in my hand, as more and more text appeared, each one giving the familiar ping:

“I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU SO BADLY. I WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT YOU NEED TO GET UP AND GET OUT

OF BED, DAD. I WANTED TO TELL YOU TO JUST GO ON, GO OUT AND LIVE. I WANTED TO TELL YOU TO DO IT FOR ME."

"I WANTED SO BADLY TO GIVE YOU A HUG AND SAY GOODBYE, TO TELL YOU IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY, AND TO TELL YOU NOT TO WORRY ANYMORE."

"BUT MOST OF ALL I WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT I LOVE YOU, DAD. LOVE YOU SO MUCH. AND THAT MOM LOVES YOU SO MUCH."

"GET UP, DAD. GET OUT THERE, BREATHE THE AIR. PLEASE. LIVE. FOR ME."

The messages stopped, and I stared at the phone for a moment, as if willing it to write more. When nothing happened, I put it slowly down on the table.

"I think maybe that was it." Liam's voice seemed flat, but also strangely relieved. "I think...maybe she wanted me to get you here all along."

"Perhaps." I got to my feet, and walked slowly to the door.

"Have a nice night, Liam. Get some sleep."

I opened the door and stepped outside. The dew was falling, and I breathed in deeply, filling my lungs, feeling the moisture on my cheeks and brow. It felt like small, wet kisses, and I smiled.

"Oh Hannah... I love you too!" I whispered.