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In the Third Minute

The first time I met Mary, I was peering in my bathroom mirror after chanting the phrase “Bloody Mary” three times. My gaze had been fixed upon my own hazel eyes. I couldn’t make out their color in the darkness, but I knew they were staring back at me. The steady sound of rain pelting the house was momentarily interrupted by the sound of a child giggling.

“What do you see?” inquired my younger cousin Sarah from the other side of the closed antique door. We were two truths and one dare into our sleepover, and I was pretty sure that I would dare her to eat a booger for making me do this.

“I can’t see anything, doofus. It’s too dark.”

A flash of lightning shone through the cobwebbed window over the shower, followed reliably by the low grumble of thunder. 5 seconds.

“You have to stay in there for 3 minutes after you’ve said it,” her muffled voice stated matter-of-factly.

Another flash of lightning bathed the room in white light. Still staring into the mirror, the peeling baby-blue paint on the walls looked a muted gray. Thunder rattled the windows. 3 seconds – the storm was getting closer.

I glanced toward the door uneasily: storms made me uncomfortable. Surely my time was almost up.

Looking back towards the mirror, I froze. For the briefest moment, I thought I saw another face looking back at me. I rubbed my eyes and squinted at my reflection, feeling the hair on my arms begin to stand.

Another flash of lightning lit the room, followed immediately by the violent tremble of thunder.

As the room darkened, I could once again see that the face in the mirror was not my own. It was still a girl’s face, but the flesh was saggy and rotting from the bone. The sunken milky-blue eyes were trained on my own, and… oh God, it was *smiling* at me.

Moist black teeth shone like oil in moonlight, and I choked for air trying to scream, yell, or emit some kind of noise. As my eyes teared up, I could only muster a wheezy protest as I stumbled backwards, falling to the floor.

The mirror was now obscured from my view by the sink, and I made an effort to scoot towards the door.

“30 seconds left!” a voice from outside remarked giddily.

More lightning, and I swore I could see a hand emerge slowly from the bathtub, grasping the side. It was thin and bony, and its angle suggested that the owner was lying in the tub.

As darkness reclaimed the room, my lungs found enough air for me to scream.

The door swung open, and artificial light from the hallway spilled into the room. Sarah, laughing, flipped the light switch on.

The specter I had seen in the bathtub was no longer there, but the room was ice cold. As warm tears welled up and began to fall down my cheeks, I realized that I, too, was freezing. Sarah helped me back up onto my feet, still laughing but a bit quieter now.

“You really look like you saw something,” she said, having noticed my tears. I wanted to tell her what I’d seen – the rotting face, the blackened teeth, the hand in the tub – but the words caught in my throat. I cautiously leaned over to inspect the mirror, and let out a shaky breath when all I saw was my own reflection. From somewhere in the distance came the faint grumble of thunder. The storm was getting farther away.

“Game’s over,” I said in a voice that sounded steadier than I expected. “Let’s go to bed.”

I didn’t look back as I shut off the light, but I could feel it – a chill lingering in the air that penetrated to the bone.

Mary had vanished, but I would never say her name again.