# REFLECTING PRAYERS

By John Miller

*"Bloody Mary, I summon thee!"*

*Timmy stares at his reflection in the mirror. The room glows from thirteen black candles on the basin. His watch shows midnight, and he hears the grandfather clock in the living room.*

*Bong!*

*The bathroom door is open and he sees his father walking by, hesitating, then he rests against the door. He feels his father's pride. He swallows his fear and continues.*

*"Bloody Mary, I killed your children!"*

*Bong!*

*"I'm proud of you." His father whispers. "You can do this; you can master your fear."*

*"Bloody Mary, I killed your children!"*

*Bong!*

*The candles flicker. He glances at the doorway, sees his father gone. He doesn't remember him leaving. It's almost as if he fell asleep before the mirror. A trance?*

*Bong!*

*He looks and finds the mirror black. He feels as if his eyes are playing tricks on him until he sees darkness within the mirror swirling; shadows coiling like serpents, hungry and reaching, tendrils flowing out like a steam; evil pours from the mirror, black bile lapping at the bottom edge, dripping onto the sink, snuffing out the candles.*

*"Daddy?"*

*"Don't back out now," his father's voice echoes in the hallway. "You can do this."*

*She appears freezing the scream inside his throat. Warmth drips down his leg, fear pours from his pores, and his pajamas stick to his skin.*

*"Timmy?"*

*She appears. A stern woman in period clothes, no eyes in her sockets. Blood drips from the holes, but it's black and he realizes the black bile filling the sink is her blood.*

*He hears his father's footfalls, eternities away.*

*"Daddy!"*

*Bloody Mary's eyeless sockets fill with a crimson glow, and suddenly she lunges, her long claws nearing Timmy's face. His father rushes into the bathroom, but it is too late, for Bloody Mary has Timmy by his head pulling him into the mirror. She drops him to the ground and he splashes in black bile, a flood of deadened blood, and drags him by the wrist, her claws digging.*

*Inside the mirror he screams, his voice echoing, and he hears children whimpering. He sees them huddled around a stake, the kind they used to burn witches with during the Salem Witch Trials. It's an old town, like what the Puritans and early colonists lived in.*

*"Timmy!" His father's scream echoes.*

*He sees a rectangle of light. It is the shape of the mirror floating in midair, and his father is pressing up against it, his palms flat against the glass, his face red from trying to press into the mirror, but Timmy knows his father can't see him.*

*"Daddy!"*

*"Timmy! I'm coming!"*

*Mocking laughter fills the area, and his father backs from the mirror. Bloody Mary lets Timmy go and floats to the rectangle of light.*

*"She's coming for you, dad! Look out!"*

*His father raises his fist and brings it to the glass. From inside Timmy looks out at his father, and he realizes he is somehow stuck inside the reflective glass; bound in another realm. He knows this instinctively.*

*As his father's fist strikes against something invisible, he sees the rectangular light shatter, sees shards of light against blackness falling, broken pieces of his father's wide eyes and red-flushed face.*

*Bloody Mary stops where the mirror had been, but now that it's shattered, Timmy realizes the portal is closed. She turns around, her eyeless sockets continuing to bleed, stepping in the ankle-deep bile.*

*She nods once. A child around eight rises and walks to the stake, her footfalls splashing black. She cries the entire way, whispering in another language, and Timmy knows she's Hispanic. There are four torches set around it. She picks one up and flings it into the wood.*

*Blood Mary smiles.*

* * *

"But it's true, dad," he cried, his voice wavering and cracking. "Bloody Mary was in the mirror!"

His father stood on the front porch, his mouth agape and brows furrowed in consternation. He shook his head and walked inside. Timmy followed.

*Why doesn't he ever believe me? He must think I'm a bad person.*

He realized if he was a good person, God would protect him, wouldn't he? That's kind of what Mrs. Averato taught in Sunday school, but Timmy wasn't sure.

His father got a beer from the refrigerator and stood between the living room and kitchen. He gestured for Timmy to sit. Timmy noticed the black grease smears on his father's clothes, the dirty cheeks and the way his father's face sagged like his shoulders. Working in the factory took a toll on his dad, he knew.

"I had to tell my foreman there was a family emergency." His father took a sip of beer. "Now what am I supposed to tell him?"

"Dad, I got home from school, did my schoolwork, then saw Bloody Mary."

His father frowned.

"I know I'm not supposed to talk about it but—"

"I can't keep leaving work to protect you from something that just isn't there, Timmy. Likewise, I wish I could find those fifth graders who told you about the legend of Bloody Mary in the first place. Too many damned nightmares, and now you're starting to see her in the middle of

the day? Come on!"

"But she was there!"

His father gazed at him for a long moment then gulped down his beer. He went to his bedroom and Timmy heard glass chinking, then he heard his father in the bathroom. His heart sped up because that's where Bloody Mary was, and he couldn't help walking down the hall to check on his father.

"Are you okay, dad?"

He found his father setting thirteen black votive candles in little thin bubbles of glass. The stuff looked like it had been purchased at the dollar store.

"Ever since your mother died I've been trying to raise you best I can." His father arranged the candles around the sink, and Timmy saw a book on the floor about *Mary Worth*. "I know I'm at work a lot. Can't afford babysitting, but you used to be so damned mature. Now?"

"Dad, you got a book about Bloody Mary?" When his father shot him a curious expression, Timmy pointed at the book and said, "Mary Worth is Bloody Mary's real name."

His father nodded and said, "Should have guessed you'd know her name."

His father lit the candles. He pulled Timmy in front of the mirror. Timmy fought hard, blinded by panic.

"You've got to master your fear, son."

"Let me go!"

His father let him go and went through the ritual to summon Bloody Mary. He made Timmy watch from the hallway.

"Bloody Mary!" His father's voice was loud, serious. "I summon you, Mary Worth."

After it was over and Bloody Mary didn't appear, his father said, "See there?" He blew out the candles and smiled at Timmy. "She didn't appear because she doesn't exist."

"She didn't appear because you forgot to do something."

"I knew you'd say that so I did everything… *everything* the book mentioned."

"Except the time, dad. You didn't do the ceremony at midnight."

* * *

*She snatches children throughout the night, and they huddle in the little group growing larger. Twenty children including him squat or kneel in the sludge of black slime that is from Bloody Mary's eye sockets. The rumors are true: Bloody Mary killed her own children, and in her grief she cut out her eyes and weeps for them in eternity, except her tear drops is blood running down her face.*

*A rectangle of light appears at the same spot periodically, and they hear a child's voice chanting, calling on Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary goes toward the light, reaches through a mirror, and pulls a child through.*

*"Why are we here?" he asks the Hispanic girl.*

*"She's going to burn us at the stake just like she was burnt at the stake," she says in a heavy accent. "She blames us for killing her children."*

*"But we didn't—" He remembers the chant the books teach. "The chant we say in front of the mirror."*

*"We all confessed to something we didn't do," she says. "Bloody Mary, I killed your children."*

*Bong!*

*Another rectangle of light appears. The last child taken was an Indian with a fur coat, possibly Alaskan. The child inside the mirror now looks European or Russian. The language of the child makes him think of movies he watches with his dad about World War II, and he knows the child is Russian. Bloody Mary is making a sweep over the planet just like Santa Clause, snatching children through mirrors and the shadows of their nightmares.*

*Timmy stands and the Hispanic girl tugs on him trying to get him to sit. He shakes her hand off and begins praying loud. The Lord's Prayer. Blood Mary screams. The Russian child's mouth opens in a loud scream, his eyes wide and his arms rise to protect him from Bloody Mary.*

*The rectangle of light disappears.*

*At least one of us has been saved, Timmy thinks.*

*Bloody Mary flies at him until she places both hands on either side of his head. Her fingers, ethereal and physical, slide into his head like gossamer cloth, more thought than flesh. He sees memories of her life sliding into his mind. The legends are true.*

*She grew up in Early America, got married and found her husband cheating on her, and she killed her children and then tore out her eyes. When the Inquisitors investigated she told them, "Who killed my children?" They burnt her at the stake and she died lying, screaming, and declaring she would haunt the nightmares of their children until she found whoever killed hers.*

*Along with the memories flows a melancholy so strong and palpable it is like an entity, sliding into his mind and soul, requesting he take his life, give up, give in. Defeatism saturates his being, tempts him to simply lay down in the black sludge and go to sleep. Forever.*

*He knows these feelings are from Bloody Mary's fingers, but he also knows his dad taught him to never give up, to believe in God, and although his father never goes to church, his dad taught him that his mom is in Heaven… and the reason Timmy goes to church is to meet his mom again one day.*

*That is why he begins praying. Not to fight the demon-ghost Bloody Mary, or to protect the children, or to offer himself in place of the children—it is to see his mom again. The depression and sadness emanating from the ghost into him is evil, threatening to claim him and bring him to hell, fill his eternity with nightmares and wickedness.*

*He pushes the ghost with his hands, but slides through her as her fingers dig into his brain, as her grasp upon his mind and soul solidifies.*

*"Our Father, who art in Heaven… hallowed be thy name!"*

*Blood Mary screams. Mirrors throughout the world, where children are soon to be discovered missing, shatter into fragments at the velocity of her voice—the children have slipped into the darkness.*

*"And deliver us from evil."*

* * *

"You don't have to do this if you're scared."

His father stood with him at the mirror. The candles were laid out.

"I'm not doing this for you, dad. Or for me."

His father squeezed his shoulder. He looked so tired in the mirror. Timmy knew it wasn't

just from working in the factory; his father had lost a piece of himself when mom died. Timmy had, too. The cancer had eaten her away from the inside. In a way, the cancer had eaten the inside of their family, too

"I want to see mom someday. That's why I go to church. You told me she's in Heaven, so I have to do everything I can to get there like fighting Bloody Mary. I just have to believe."

His father's eyes brimmed with tears but he said nothing. He cleared his throat and left the bathroom.

"If you need anything… "

"I'll be okay, dad."

* * *

*Timmy is losing. His prayer is full of hope to see his mother, rests on the power of goodness, but the evil is too strong. Until another child's voice fills the night, when the words of his prayer falter.*

*It is the Hispanic girl.*

*Bloody Mary screams.*

*Then another child's voice fills the night as the stake burns bright. The town is deserted save for the children who all pray in their native tongues: Russian and Kenyan and Spanish and Hopi. The children all pray to different gods or are from different religions, but in the end it comes down to a battle of good verses evil. For Timmy it comes down to the need to see his mother again, and he cannot do that if Bloody Mary takes him to hell.*

*"Suffer not the children," Timmy says. "For to such as these belongs the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*Bloody Mary's fingers slowly slide from his head. Hands rest upon his shoulders and voices from all languages fill the night, praying and believing, pulling heaven down into a nightmare, until the stake's fire recedes and stops burning and Mary Worth falls before Timmy, weeping and crying, "Who killed my children?" And still they continue praying, childlike faith uniting under one banner without religion or racial animosity; just human and childlike faith fighting against evil insanity and the darkness of hell.*

*"We forgive you, Bloody Mary, for killing your children."*

* * *

The police came and questioned Tim Sr. about his missing son. The States Attorney brought charges but they were dropped after six months—not enough evidence.

Tim Sr. started attending the Baptist Church Timmy had attended. He did it to find his son, to locate the child he'd become.

"I don't know where your son has gone," Pastor Ralph told him after church one Sunday, "But in the end he'll be where his heart is."

"And where is that?"

"Where's your wife?"

Tim Sr. broke down crying because he remembered telling Timmy over and over that Samantha was in Heaven.

"Even if Timmy was taken into the mirror as you confessed, he's still in Heaven," Pastor Ralph said. He gestured at the church. "We don't necessarily go to church to find ourselves in Heaven; sometimes we make Heaven come around us through prayer."

* * *

*Prayers bleed into years and years into decades, but time is different in that realm. Sometimes Bloody Mary almost wins, but Timmy watches them pull something from deep within themselves time and time again, inner strength and fortitude. Many times he gives up, but his friends do not let him down. They are strong when he is weak.*

*He doesn't know their names. One thing he knows for sure is that they don't stop praying, because if they do then Bloody Mary will consume their souls. It's a standoff of good verses evil, and it continues through the years.*

* * *

When he was seventy, he stood before the mirror. A picture of Samantha, who preceded him decades ago, lay on the sink next to Timmy's photo.

"If Timmy could summon that ghost," he said to his reflection, "maybe you can summon your family."

He lit seven white candles. He knew Pastor Ralph wouldn't approve but didn't care. He needed a little touch of Heaven right now, a little happiness. The factory had seeped into his lungs. The doctor had told him he didn't have much longer to live. The bleeding coughs proved the doctor right.

"I'm coming, Samantha." His eyes brimmed with tears. "Timmy tried to reach you. But something got in the way. Something always gets in the way."

The mirror shifted, and Samantha wasn't there. Instead a stern looking woman appeared. Blood stained her face, dark, almost black.

Bloody Mary cried.

* * *

*Something happens that turns the tide. Everything has seemed like a dream to Timmy, and although it's been eternities wrapped in forever, and paradoxes trapped in enigmas, it's been almost easy praying for so long, fueled by the unity of his friends who do not age, like him. Everything makes sense and everything's surreal.*

*Until Bloody Mary falls to her knees.*

*"I did it!" She screams. "I killed my children!"*

*Bong!*

*Twenty portals of light appear. Hope springs in Timmy's heart and all the children run past Mary Worth. Timmy sees her eyes are back in her face, and instead of blood she's crying real tears of remorse. He's not concerned about her, as much as he is about the mirrors hovering.*

*"Dad!" His voice hopeful, wavering with emotion. "Dad, I'm here. Can you hear me?"*

* * *

Bloody Mary looked at him. She had eyes sadder than any he'd ever seen, and she cried real tears. Her tears mingled with the blackened blood on her face and washed the filth away.

Her image faded as his eyes blurred with tears, and he saw Timmy.

"Timmy!" His voice faltered. "You haven't changed in over forty years!"

"Dad!" Timmy ran at him from some sort of abandoned colonial town, his footsteps splashing through brine and black. "Dad, I'm here!"

Lightning struck the stake, destroying it. The brine evaporated. Steam flowed into the bathroom, and his eyes blurred with tears, but he still saw Timmy's silhouette… and that of another more feminine shape.

The second shape descended as if she'd been flying, and he couldn't see through his tears and steam, but he knew… felt the presence of someone familiar, someone he hadn't talked to or touched in years… someone consumed from his life by the cancer…

"Oh, Samantha!"

* * *

*A dove lands on a tombstone in Smithfield Cemetery. One plot holds the body of Samantha Myers; the one next to it is empty. Tim Myers Sr.'s body will never fill the earth. Like his son, he is simply missing.*

*The dove drops a green leaf on the empty grave and flies away.*

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John MIller is a single father with full custody of three sons. His stories/poetry have appeared at The World of Myth as well as other publications: The Horror Library; Monsta Productions; Red Pulp Underground, and he is in two anthologies. His family jokingly attests to his writing addiction.