

Long After Midnight (short story) Ray Bradbury

Long After Midnight

The police ambulance went up into the palisades at the wrong hour.

It is always the wrong hour when the police ambulance goes anywhere, but this was especially wrong, for it was long after midnight and nobody imagined it would ever be day again, because the sea coming in on the lightless shore below said as much, and the wind blowing salt cold in from the Pacific reaffirmed this, and the fog muffling the sky and putting out the stars struck the final, unfelt-but-disabling blow.

The weather said it had been here forever, man was hardly here at all, and would soon be gone. Under the circumstances it was hard for the men gathered on the cliff, with several cars, the headlights on, and flashlights bobbing, to feel real, trapped as they were between a sunset they hardly remembered and a sunrise that would not be imagined.

The slender weight hanging from the tree, turning in the cold salt wind, did not diminish this feeling in any way.

The slender weight was a girl, no more than nineteen, in a light green gossamer party frock, coat and shoes lost somewhere in the cool night, who had brought a rope up to these cliffs and found a tree with a branch half out over the cliff and tied the rope in place and made a loop for her neck and let herself out on the wind to hang there swinging.

The rope made a dry scraping whine on the branch, until the police came, and the ambulance, to take her down out of space and place her on the ground.

A single phone call had come in about midnight telling what they might find out here on the edge of the cliff and whoever it was hung up swiftly and did not call again, and now the hours had passed and all that could be done was done and over, the police were finished and

leaving, and there was just the ambulance now and the men with the ambulance to load the quiet burden and head for the morgue.

Of the three men remaining around the sheeted form there were Carlson, who had been at this sort of thing for thirty years, and Moreno, who had been at it for ten, and Latting, who was new to the job a few weeks back. Of the three it was Latting now who stood on the edge of the cliff looking at that empty tree limb, the rope in his hand, not able to take his eyes away.

Carlson came up behind him. Hearing him, Latting said, 'What a place, what an awful place to die.'

'Any place is awful, if you decide you want to go bad enough,' said Carlson. 'Come on, kid.'

Latting did not move. He put out his hand to touch the tree, Carlson grunted and shook his head. 'Go ahead. Try to remember it all.'

'Any reason why I shouldn't?' Latting turned quickly to look at that emotionless gray face of the older man. 'You got any objections?'

'No objections. I was the same way once. But after a while you learn it's best not to see. You eat better. You sleep better. After a while you learn to forget.'

'I don't want to forget,' said Latting. 'Good God, somebody died up here just a few hours ago. She deserves—'

'She deserved, kid, past tense, not present. She deserved a better shake and didn't get it. Now she deserves a decent burial. That's all we can do for her. It's late and cold. You can tell us all about it on the way.'

'That could be your daughter there.'

'You won't get to me that way, kid. It's not my daughter, that's what counts. And it's not yours, though you make it sound like it was. It's a

nineteen-year-old girl, no name, no purse, nothing. I'm sorry she's dead. There, does that help?'

'It could if you said it right.'

'I'm sorry, now pick up the other end of the stretcher.'

Latting picked up one end of the stretcher but did not walk with it and only looked at the figure beneath the sheet.

'It's awful being that young and deciding to just quit.'

'Sometimes,' said Carlson, at the other end of the stretcher, 'I get tired, too.'

'Sure, but you're—' Latting stopped.

'Go ahead, say it, I'm old. Somebody fifty, sixty, it's okay, who gives a damn, somebody nineteen, everybody cries. So don't come to my funeral, kid, and no flowers.'

'I didn't mean...' said Latting.

'Nobody means, but everybody says, and luckily I got the hide of an iguana. March.'

They moved with the stretcher toward the ambulance where Moreno was opening the doors wider.

'Boy,' said Latting, 'she's light. She doesn't weigh anything.'

'That's the wild life for you, you punks, you kids.' Carlson was getting into the back of the ambulance now and they were sliding the stretcher in. 'I smell whiskey. You young ones think you can drink like college fullbacks and keep your weight. Hell, she don't even weigh ninety pounds, if that.'

Latting put the rope in on the floor of the ambulance. 'I wonder where she got this?'

‘It’s not like poison,’ said Moreno. ‘Anyone can buy rope and not sign. This looks like block-and-tackle rope. She was at a beach party maybe and got mad at her boyfriend and took this from his car and picked herself a spot...’

They took a last look at the tree out over the cliff, the empty branch, the wind rustling in the leaves, then Carlson got out and walked around to the front seat with Moreno, and Latting got in the back and slammed the doors.

They drove away down the dim incline toward the shore where the ocean laid itself, card after white card, in thunders, upon the dark sand. They drove in silence for a while, letting their headlights, like ghosts, move on out ahead. Then Latting said. ‘I’m getting myself a new job.’

Moreno laughed. ‘Boy, you didn’t last long. I had bets you wouldn’t last. Tell you what, you’ll be back. No other job like this. All the other jobs are dull. Sure, you get sick once in a while. I do. I think: I’m going to quit. I almost do. Then I stick with it. And here I am.’

‘Well, you can stay,’ said Latting. ‘But I’m full up. I’m not curious any more. I seen a lot the last few weeks, but this is the last straw. I’m sick of being sick. Or worse. I’m sick of your not caring.’

‘Who doesn’t care?’

‘Both of you!’

Moreno snorted. ‘Light us a couple, huh, Carlie?’ Carlson lit two cigarettes and passed one to Moreno, who puffed on it, blinking his eyes, driving along by the loud strokes of the sea. ‘Just because we don’t scream and yell and throw fits—’

‘I don’t want fits,’ said Latting, in the back, crouched by the sheeted figure, ‘I just want a little human talk, I just want you to look different than you would walking through a butcher’s shop. If I ever get like you two, not worrying, not bothering, all thick skin and tough—’

'We're not tough,' said Carlson, quietly, thinking about it, 'we're acclimated.'

'Acclimated, hell, when you should be numb?'

'Kid, don't tell us what we should be when you don't even know what we are. Any doctor is a lousy doctor who jumps down in the grave with every patient. All doctors did that, there'd be no one to help the live and kicking. Get out of the grave, boy, you can't see nothing from there.'

There was a long silence from the back, and at last Latting started talking, mainly to himself:

'I wonder how long she was up there alone on the cliff, an hour, two? It must have been funny up there looking down at all the campfires, knowing you were going to wipe the whole business clean off.'

I suppose she was to a dance, or a beach party, and she and her boyfriend broke up. The boyfriend will be down at the station tomorrow to identify her. I'd hate to be him. How he'll feel—'

'He won't feel anything. He won't even show up,' said Carlson, steadily, mashing out his cigarette in the front-seat tray. 'He was probably the one found her and made the call and ran, Two bits will buy you a nickel he's not worth the polish on her little fingernail. Some slobby lout of a guy with pimples and bad breath. Christ, why don't these girls learn to wait until morning.'

'Yeah,' said Moreno. 'Everything's better in the morning.'

'Try telling that to a girl in love,' said Latting.

'Now a man,' said Carlson, lighting a fresh cigarette, 'he just gets himself drunk, says to hell with it, no use killing yourself for no woman.'

They drove in silence awhile past all the small dark beach houses with only a light here or there, it was so late.

'Maybe,' said Latting, 'she was going to have a baby.'
'It happens.'

'And then the boyfriend runs off with someone and this one just borrows his rope and walks up on the cliff,' said Latting. 'Answer me, now, is that or isn't it love?'

'It,' said Carlson, squinting, searching the dark, 'is a kind of love. I give up on what kind.'

'Well, sure,' said Moreno, driving. 'I'll go along with you, kid. I mean, it's nice to know somebody in this world can love that hard.'

They all thought for a while, as the ambulance purred between quiet palisades and now-quiet sea and maybe two of them thought fleetingly of their wives and tract houses and sleeping children and all the times years ago when they had driven to the beach and broken out the beer and necked up in the rocks and lay around on the blankets with guitars, singing and feeling like life would go on just as far as the ocean went, which was very far, and maybe they didn't think that at all.

Latting, looking up at the backs of the two older men's necks, hoped or perhaps only nebulously wondered if these men remembered any first kisses, the taste of salt on the lips. Had there ever been a time when they had stomped the sand like mad bulls and yelled out of sheer joy and dared the universe to put them down?

And by their silence, Latting knew that yes, with all his talking, and the night, and the wind, and the cliff and the tree and the rope, he had gotten through to them; it, the event, had gotten through to them.

Right now, they had to be thinking of their wives in their warm beds, long dark miles away, unbelievable, suddenly unattainable while here they were driving along a salt-layered road at a dumb hour half between certainties, bearing with them a strange thing on a cot and a used length of rope.

'Her boyfriend,' said Latting, 'will be out dancing tomorrow night with somebody else. That gripes my gut.'

'I wouldn't mind,' said Carlson, 'beating the hell out of him.'

Latting moved the sheet. 'They sure wear their hair crazy and short, some of them. All curls, but short. Too much make-up. Too—' He stopped.

'You were saying?' asked Moreno.

Latting moved the sheet some more. He said nothing. In the next minute there was a rustling sound of the sheet, moved now here, now there. Latting's face was pale.

'Hey,' he murmured, at last. 'Hey.'

Instinctively, Moreno slowed the ambulance.

'Yeah, kid?'

'I just found out something,' said Latting. 'I had this feeling all along, she's wearing too much make-up, and the hair, and—'

'So?'

'Well, for God's sake,' said Latting, his lips hardly moving, one hand up to feel his own face to see what its expression was. 'You want to know something funny?'

'Make us laugh,' said Carlson.

The ambulance slowed even more as Latting said, 'It's not a woman. I mean, it's not a girl. I mean, well, it's not a female. Understand?'
The ambulance slowed to a crawl.

The wind blew in off the vague morning sea through the window as the two up front turned and stared into the back of the ambulance at the shape there on the cot.

'Somebody tell me,' said Latting, so quietly they almost could not hear the words. 'Do we stop feeling bad now? Or do we feel worse?'

The end