

AWAKE

Part 2

My eyes rested on the subtle soft features of her face, her perfect bone structure and velvet skin. Her hair was carefully platted and resting on her shoulder and a warm smile had settled on her face. The only thing spoiling this view was the lump of plaster on her nose. I adjusted my focus trying to see past it, but I could not hold the image any longer. Her gentle features faded away leaving me staring at my ceiling. I let out a sigh and turned on my side. My eyes came to rest on the card, propped up on my bedside table. Her name, and the lipstick kiss, danced in my eyes causing my stomach to join in as a pang of something powerful tugged at my nerves. “Please come back,” it read, and I wished I knew how.

I took a deep breath and sighed again. What was this feeling, I only met her once, though I’m not entirely sure it was real. Was I dreaming that night? NO! She did feel very real. Is she out there somewhere? I didn’t know. My gaze shifted to the glow coming in from the window, accompanied by the buzzing of the sign, filling my ears. I’d not been to the café in a few days, I just didn’t feel like it. Each time I did, it seemed to amplify this feeling I was having. A feeling I couldn’t explain but a feeling that was growing. I felt as if I needed to run but didn’t know what from. I could best describe it as anxiety but I still felt calm.

Tonight I give in, and decided to head to the café. after a splash of water, and some strange conversation in the mirror, trying to convince myself I wasn’t mad, I grabbed my jacket from the chair and keys from the bowl and descended the shabby stairs onto the street. I looked up at the sign and paused for a few minutes

to take it in. Its yellowing sides and the word convenience displayed on it. Hmm not that convenient, I thought. How I had longed for that sign to change, to look out of the window and find it off once more. That small change to my routine had seemed to trigger the events of that night, but, as always, it had remained on. I'd even thought of damaging it myself once or twice, which wouldn't have been hard, as wires seemed to dangle from it in a haphazard kind of way. Nevertheless, night after night it just buzzed and hummed away.

I lifted the collar on my jacket and wondered down to the lights. The red man blazed proudly. I Waited. My urge to beat the system had gone. Waiting was the right thing to do. The green man appeared and I carried on my way down the small street, this time unhindered by any street cleaners cart.

I opened the door, to a faint tinkle, and moved to the counter.

"Morning hun," said Sue.

"Can I have a coffee please, and I'll take a muffin."

"Sorry hun, no muffins."

"Just coffee then." she nodded, and I sat in my normal window seat. The place was empty with not a soul around. It had been like that for the last couple of times, which I enjoyed. This was my quiet space and I didn't like disturbances. Sue slid my coffee in front of me and left. I stared from the window wondering where I had gone that night. I don't remember taking a wrong turn, and I had the card. The card proves I wasn't dreaming. That said, my awake state and my dream state seemed a lot less far apart these days. I slurped at the bitter hot stuff cupped in my hands and wondered if I'd ever find her.

Back on the street the air was crisp and cool and I wondered back to my apartment. The green man was playing the game this time and waiting for me. I crossed without delay. I was about half way across when car pulled up to the lights rather quickly startling me! I froze mid crossing just staring at the bright headlights. The green man turned red and the lights in front of the car turned green. I stared steadfast my heart pounding. The driver now becoming impatient hooted his horn which snapped me out of my daze and I turned scurrying to the protection of the pavement. What an idiot I thought only realising I was probably duplicating his own thoughts of me.

Back at my place I didn't hesitate. I pushed through the door, up the stairs and into my apartment, placed my keys on the hook, my jacket on the chair and slumped on my bed.

The next hour turned into an evening and the next day turned into a week, the routine didn't change much. Writing in the day eating in the evening, staring at the ceiling at night, writing, eating staring at the card. Writing eating listening to the hum of the convenience sign.

I had thought many times about walking around the area to see if there were a different café that I may have stumbled into that night, but I seemed locked into my routine and found it hard to do anything new. I had been back to the old café a couple more times, but each time the pang of anxiety worsened so each time the gap between visits got longer.

It had been almost four days since my last visit and I think I was only going tonight out of guilt. I picked up my jacket and looked for my keys on the hook. But I didn't have a hook. I shook my head and blamed my tiredness, scooped my keys from the bowl and headed down the stairs and onto the street completely ignoring the wretched sign. As I neared the crossing the red man was on show and I slowed my pace in order that I arrived as it changed. I timed it perfectly. As I placed my foot on the road a car burst through the crossing at high speed I lurched back onto the pavement shouting abuse after the car, the occupants were too distracted by loud music and the car seemed to outrun my words anyway.

Recomposed, I stepped out and crossed the road in peace. It's funny how this crossing can be completely dead night after night and then one bozo can ruin the tranquillity. I Entered the small street unable to see any glow from the café lighting. I approached the window and peered into the gloom. The lights were off. Everything was as it should be but tonight it was closed. I hoped sue was ok and turned for home. Perhaps she was on holiday, somewhere sunny I hoped. I smiled at the thought and headed back, this time looking both ways carefully before crossing, no bozos in sight. As I neared my apartment the familiar hum of the sign acted as a calming force. The apartment was as I left it and everything felt normal.

Normal is an interesting word. What is normal? Spending your days writing, eating, and staring at the ceiling may seem anything but normal to the average joe but to me it was my normal. I sank back into that routine day after day writing, eating and staring at the lipstick covered card or Writing eating listening to the hum of the sign for that matter. Wait! Something was different. Writing, eating, listening to the... Silence! that was it, it was silent. There was no hum from the sign. I almost gasped for air my heart racing as I leapt from the bed falling over my chair sending my jacket to the floor. I clambered to the window and peered out. The sign was off. I shrieked out loud unintentionally and turned toward my front door not stopping for my new jacket shaped rug or even my keys, as tonight my door was staying wide open.

I pushed open the glass door to see a man standing in the street wearing a long green overcoat. My eyes rested on his dark beard and moved up his face to his eyes. They were looking directly at me. He glanced at the sign and back at me.

"You know they will turn that off permanently one of these days," he said. I shrugged at the strangeness of this one sided conversation, with that he turned and walked the opposite way. I didn't care about the silly fool, I turned walking

briskly toward the crossing, breaking into a slight jog and then a run. The crossing man was red but I sprinted across not wanting to wait for the approaching car to pass which would only waste more time. I turned into the street to see the bright glittering view of the modern diner. It was back! It was really there, colourful light spilled out onto the pavement. I began running once more the anxiety building in my stomach desperate to see if she was real, my eyes welling up with excitement. I burst through the door, but to my dismay into total darkness.

The dirty walls were still there, as was the tired paint but everything else was gone. No tables no counter. The place was bare. A dust cover lay over something in the corner, and no sign of sue or the coffee. This didn't make sense, I'd seen the bright light of the new diner. I turned to look out of the windows but they were covered in that white paint they use on disused buildings.

I noticed my breathing was rapid and my heart began to pound. How? How can this be. I felt dizzy and sick, struggling to breath, my head spinning. I made for the door needing the cold fresh night time air of the street. I grabbed at the handle pulled it open and stumbled through, tripping on my jacket and falling to the floor of my apartment.

My apartment? What was going on? I felt dazed and confused the sun shone in through the window, I didn't understand what was happening. I jumped to my feet staring out of the window wondering where the night had gone. Snapping back to life, raced to my door and headed down the road to the crossing. It was much busier in the day and took me a full 3 minutes to cross waiting for traffic. 3 minutes of hopping on one foot to the other. I noticed my feet were bare. People were staring at me but I didn't care I turned into the small street heading for the café.

As I arrived the sight before me shook me to the core. A scaffold lent against the building where a man was taking down the café sign. I dropped to my knees, tears in my eyes and let out a scream.

"Noooo!" The whole street stopped and looked and me crying in the street, bare foot. What is wrong with me? Where was this feeling of loss coming from? I jumped up and ran to the café door it was unlocked. I went in and tripped over my jacket once more landing back on my apartment floor.

I lay perfectly still frozen to the spot of my apartment room in complete darkness. what was happening? A chill went down my spine. Nothing was right, I let out a groan of despair as I inched to the window where the night sky poured in. I carefully peered out to see that the sign was off.

Tears built up in my eyes and I could hold it in no longer. I felt cold and alone. The anxiety had grown inside me into a feeling of panic that I would lose her forever and I couldn't understand it. I know I'd only met her once, but logic was not part of this, ever since night had turned to day and day back to night.

I ran to the door and headed down the stairs. The old guy was once again standing under the sign.

“I told you,” he said, pointing at the sign. I pushed him out of the way sending him crashing to the floor. As I ran off down the street he shouted after me “She’s not down there, nothing is down there.” I couldn’t stop to understand what the crazy man meant. I didn’t care. Tears flowed from my eyes as I pounded the floor in my bare feet one step after another after another. The distance to the crossing seemed longer now I was in a hurry, like a bad dream where you are trying to run but are stuck in the same spot. I could see the red man in the distance glowing, so I pushed on harder. My heart pounded and I could hear my pulse in my ears and in my temple. My feet pounded the cold pavement, my whole body felt cold. I reached the curb and leaped into the road.

A glow of light caught the corner of my eye and grew filling my iris. I began to turn my head in slow motion as the sound of loud music began to resonate in my ears. The light source grew and grew lighting up my whole body. I squinted barely able to see. The music became harsh losing its tune sounding ragged like a high pitched screech. I continued to turn facing the lights straining to see where it was coming from. The screeching filled my ears deafening me as I noticed a flash of metal between the lights.

The car struck my right thigh first then my hip and my shoulder, my head broke the window and shards of glass flew into the sky as if it woken up a wasp’s nest. I tumbled into the air in a swirl of colour with noise all around me. every part of my body felt on fire. The angry wasps demonstrated their sting tearing into my flesh as the swirl of light continued like a sick Ferris wheel.

And then it was over with a dull thud. my face pressed into the cold floor my body in a heap. I could see the car fading into the distance. My vision began to blur as cold began to seep into every corner of my soul and then nothing.

I woke up in a strange bed barely able to see as the light was so bright. I tried to sit up and instantly regretted it as pain seared from the top of my head to the tip of my toe. I let out a cry and slumped back down. I stared up at the ceiling looking for comfort but it looked different. It was smooth and clean. I desperately tried to see her face just one more time but it was no use. I gave into the pain my vision fading but my hearing holding on long enough to hear the scurry of feet nearby and a muffled voice.

“He’s awake!”

I came around slowly, my eyes taking a short while to adjust once more to the bright room. my focus sharpened on the smooth ceiling tiles which offered little distraction from my situation. I closed my eyes and focussed on my breathing, trying to relax. The gentle hum of the sign eased my nerves a little. Wait! the sign?

With my eyes now wide open I searched the room for the source of the sound. I was in a small two-person hospital room each bed surrounded by a blue curtain mine was open giving me a view of the room but the other was closed. The room was well used with tired paint but clean.

Next to my bed was a small machine with a yellowish outside where light had distorted the plastic case. It hummed and whirred in a way that was so familiar to me I recognised it instantly. I stared at the machine closely trying to make sense of everything. wires that hung from it in a haphazard way draped across my bed and attached themselves to me at various points. The gentle glow of the screen soaked my bed in yellow light as numbers and graphs flickered up and down.

That's when I saw it. Right by the screen were the words Convenience medical supplies. The pang of anxiety kicked in like an electric shock I let out a moan. I heard motion outside as my voice had drawn some attention. footsteps came chasing down the corridor, a figure rounded the corner. I felt a warm touch on my arm.

"It's ok hun, we are taking good care of you, you've been in an accident." I stared up at the familiar features of Sue's face her beehive hair and her coloured eye makeup, the only thing out of place was her nurses uniform. She began to take measurements of my pulse and blood pressure. I felt dizzy and confused, a pang of pain riddled my chest "I know hun, I know, don't worry, it's going to be ok, we have called your wife she will be here any moment." What? My wife? I was married? I tried to sit once more and more pain soaked my body. Sue laid me back down, much to my annoyance. Then I heard a voice somewhere distant, it was high pitched and frantic but the gentle tone turned me cold.

"Where is he?" begged the voice.

"Stay calm he's right here," replied sue. There she was Standing there bathed in the yellow glow from my machine. Looking twice as beautiful as that night at the café. It was Tilly, she started to cry.

"I'll leave you two alone," said sue.

"I thought I'd lost you." Her voice was trembling but soft just as I,d heard it before. She came closer and bent down a tear rolling down her cheek. As soon as I saw her face I knew she had put into words the feeling that was eating away at me. I couldn't lose her either.

"My... My wife?" I struggled to speak.

"Yes baby, I'm right here," her tears started to flow steadily, "don't worry," she said, reading the confusion on my face, "they said your memory will be hazy, it has been a year since the accident."

A year? I searched the room for answerers. My eyes came to rest on the crazy man with the beard. It was the man from the sign who was now resting his hand on the machine and dressed in green hospital fatigues.

“We are glad to have you back,” he said. “It was touch and go for a while, you gave us a real scare.” I heard a faint tinkle from somewhere to which the crazy man turned and opened the other curtain revealing a little old lady sat up in bed ringing a small bell. “Hello Mrs Jones,” he said “need another coffee?” she simply nodded, and he scurried away.

Was any of it real? My apartment the café. had my mind created a world and trapped me inside. I turned my gaze back to Tilly who had taken a seat next to me and was stroking my hair. “do I live in an apartment?”

“No honey you live in our house”

“Am I a writer, and you serve coffee?”

“No sweetheart, don’t worry, I know you are confused, but they said it will take time, what do you remember honey?”

“I remember er, I remember a café.”

“Yes, that’s good, yes. you went to buy us coffee that day, what else?”

“I remember the crossing.”

“Good, now do you remember the accident?”

“A car with loud music,” I asked puzzled.

“You see its coming back to you already, it won’t be long.” I didn’t share her positivity; all I could remember was the fake world my damaged brain had created, it seemed that for the past year I had laid in this bed and all the things around me had slowly bled into my dream world, my prison. she leant forward and hugged me and it felt normal and real and like I’d done it every day. Something about her touch felt right, felt reassuring, felt like home, the best place in the world.

As we hugged I looked over her shoulder to my bedside table, and there propped up by a glass of water was a card that read please come back with a lipstick kiss on it and a phone number. I reached out and took it in my hand turning it over it read “Call me the moment he wakes.”