

AWAKE!

Part one

Have you ever had the feeling that you were meant for more. That the world just didn't fit you, as if you were dealt a bad hand but there wasn't a complaints department. Thoughts like this plagued me on a regular basis. Weather I couldn't sleep or had woken from a nightmare I would often lay awake sleepless, soul searching. Tonight was no different, the night was warm and the air felt muggy, not stifling like a summer evening, but it felt close as if a storm were brewing. The sound of a distant engine grew and grew until I was staring directly into the headlights of an approaching vehicle. It wasn't slowing, my heart began to beat faster as panic set in but my feet were frozen to the spot. The sound of tires screeching filled my ears shaking me back to the real world. I lay on my bed staring at my bedside lamp trying to shake off that recurring dream.

My gaze shifted to the ceiling, which had become my main pastime. The small dots and lumps of the plaster began to form familiar shapes, the more I looked, the more I would see an animal or face appear.

I shifted my gaze once again to the window, my second favorite pastime, watching the curtains dance in the breeze to the tune of some distant buzzing played out by a faulty piece of electrical equipment. It was no good. I sat up in bed, swung my feet over the edge and felt the cold floor, it was refreshing. I hoped the

cool feeling would spread all the way up to my brow where a bead of sweat had formed and begun its race down my cheek dipping in and out of skin pours.

The alarm clock struck the hour and made me jump. The insignificant noise of the mechanical arm moving to the next hour was amplified by the quiet of the night. That was it, I'd had enough! I was on my feet heading to the bathroom to stare into my own wary eyes. A splash of water on the face did nothing, so my mind was made up. I slipped on some trousers, a shirt and shoes, and headed to my front door.

My jacket and keys were in their usual places, I barely looked in their direction, my hand finding its way to them unaided. The door closed behind me with a soft click and I descended the 12 or so shabby stairs to the lower floor of the apartment block. Pushing open the glass door, I eased out onto the street as slightly cooler air stroked my face. I took a deep breath, exhaled, and gazed up at the night sky then finally my eyes came to rest on the neon sign glowing above the shop to my right, casting everything in a yellow glow. I wondered why it was never turned off at night, but then immediately felt sad at the thought of my curtains dancing with no accompanying tune.

I turned and walked away on autopilot, my body knowing it's way to the salvation of sleeplessness. The buzzing of the sign faded away as I rounded the corner. The night was completely still, there was not a soul in sight, which made me feel odd waiting at the traffic lights to cross the road. I kicked myself, mentally, at the unconscious conformity I was displaying and swore I would ignore the red man next time.

Across the road I turned into a dirty little street, no better than the one I had left. I was nearly there, and could already see the warm glow of incandescent lighting pouring onto the road ahead. I passed a large steamy glass window and opened the old wooden door with a tinkle of a bell somewhere above.

The late night café was in 'full swing' or as much as it ever would be at these small hours. My gaze settled on the small room filled with a dozen or so tables, most of which were empty but laid in anticipation of guests. A large counter spanned the length of the room with stools dotted along it. The place looked worn and tired, with faded paint and peeling wallpaper. The select clientele consisted of a young couple recovering from a heavy night out while canoodling in the corner; A dirty faced man clutching a paper bag of unknown content; and a lady of, shall we say, professional capacity.

I moved to the counter and looked over the clutter of display containers and offerings to see an aging lady, not quite ready to give up the ghost. She had on bright red lipstick and purple eye makeup. Her hair was tied up in a kind of beehive, and her glasses hung around her neck on a cord.

Her name badge announced 'Sue' was happy to help, however she looked anything but happy.

"What can I getcha hun?", she asked.

"Coffee please, black no sugar." She gave a small nod acknowledging that actions were needed more than words in this moment and moved over to her machine. I gazed around the room and wondered why I had been here so many times before.

I was doing well as a writer. I was productive and full of ideas, however no matter how well my day went I seemed cursed with insomnia. It was as though my mind were too active to sleep, as if sleep were a waste of precious writing time. I could never switch off, besides, I had grown fond of Sue, she felt like my only family these days. I flashed her a smile and took my mug over to a window seat. She barely looked up more interested in moving stuff around behind the counter.

I sipped the hot coffee and winced at its bitterness. For a moment though, I saw a face I recognized from my ceiling in the froth, but it faded quickly. Droplets were forming on the window as drizzle settled in, maybe a storm really was brewing somewhere!

The tinkle of the doorbell broke the silence, as a group of rowdy partyers entered. I decided to leave, downing the dregs of my brew. I passed them by and pushed out onto the street. The air felt cooler now the drizzle had taken hold. I lifted my collar, tucked my head down, and set off home.

Back in my room, I sat on my bed wondering how I had managed to place my keys and jacket in their exact spots, without remembering doing so.

I laid back on my bed resting my head in the pillow and once again staring at the ceiling. This was my prison, one with no guard or fence. My only roommate was the soft buzzing of the neon sign filling my ears, along with a now gentle ripple of rain on the glass.

That was the last I remember of that night. I was up bright and early, which was surprising. I even led a productive day. I finished an entire chapter of the new book, made two appointments, called my publisher and found some time to organise my fridge. Overall, I was pleased with how I had spent my time. I had spoken with my mother on the phone for an hour and enjoyed a nice piece of fish for supper. Two glasses of white wine later, a spot of reading, freshly brushed teeth and here I sat, once again on the edge of my bed, with a couple of restless hours tossing and turning behind me!

Nothing seemed to work tonight, there were no sheep left to count, and I had even seen my mother's face in the ceiling, she looked angry!

There was nothing left but to get dressed and head down to the Café.

Tonight was much cooler and fresh outside. The sky was clear and the stars twinkled brightly. I thought I noticed a star moving, until a car passed by and broke

my concentration. I looked up at the buzzing sign, the words 'convenience' glowing in neon, casting a yellow glow everywhere.

"Annoying isn't it," said a strange voice. A bearded man dressed in green trousers and a green trench coat. "But imagine a world without it," he exclaimed, as he disappeared out of sight.

I shrugged it off as one more nutcase in the world, trying to reach out to someone. My body's navigation system kicked in once again, and a few steps later I was approaching the crossing. I could see the familiar sight of the green man glowing proudly. While cars had to follow the big red, yellow, green traffic lights, us pedestrians took our cues from a little box mounted on the traffic light pole, a green man shaped light meant cross, while a glowing red figure assured us the pavement was the safer option.

Seeing the green man in full splendor, I picked up my pace fearing it would go red before I got there. I crossed in time, shaking my head at how silly this process had become especially on an empty road at the dead of night with no one around.

I pushed on tuning into the little street I knew well, though this time I could see a dark shadow hulking on the curb by the café entrance. My gaze was fixed on it as I approached. Its shadowy shape changed a few times as I got closer, my eyes playing tricks on me in the dark. It looked like a large animal or person bent over. I strained in the gloom, until finally I could make out the shape of the street cleaner's cart parked by the door. I laughed at the thought of all the other things I had seen.

A faint tinkle of the bell and I was inside. Tonight, my only company was just the dirty faced man who, now that I was paying attention, was wearing a civil service ID tag confirming that it was his cart outside. This time I could see in his open bag was a small bottle of whiskey which I had guessed he had used to season his coffee.

I warmly smiled at Sue,
"coffee hun?" she asked.

I nodded, and smiled at the thought that our conversational roles had reversed. I would let her nod tomorrow night.

I picked my window seat and sat undisturbed for my whole drink. I wondered how this place made any money, it was like a time machine. The coffee cups were see-through, like the ones you got at the sea-side ten years ago. The plastic table covers may ward off ketchup stains, but were not very eye catching. The checked floor had seen better days, and the wood panels around the seating bays were dated. I was grateful for it none the less as this was my refuge, my escape from the prison of my bedroom!

I made my way home and bedded down for round two. The days ticked by in monotonous form, writing, calling, eating, lying in bed staring at faces. Writing, calling, eating, lying in bed staring at the clock, staring at the curtains or the door. Nothing could break the spell, and each time I would find myself on the same journey, over and over like groundhog day. Down the stairs, out the door, look at the neon sign, wait for the green man, down the street and through the door with a tinkle.

Some nights there were no other customers and sometimes there were a few. Sue was always there, as was the coffee. The walks home was always unmemorable and my keys always ended up in the bowl by the door and my jacket on the back of the chair. The only thing that broke the theme were those nightmares, the blinding lights, the screeching tires, waking up in a sweat, spending the rest of the night staring at the ceiling.

I had seen more than my mothers' face in the ceiling too. I had seen a cat, a dog and once I saw an alien which made me sleep with the light on for two days. Tonight though, I lay face down quietly listening to ambient noise. The gentle hum of the sign was my usual company but tonight I couldn't hear it! I moved my head, nothing! I listened intently, still nothing!

Curious, I climbed out of bed making my way to the window. The sign was off! I don't know why this bothered me, but it just felt odd.

My mind raced with reasons why. Was it broken? was there a power cut? Before I could think another thing I was dressed and heading down the stairs. I pushed open the outer door and felt a chill. That's when I noticed I had forgotten my jacket! Something didn't feel right!

I made my way down the street more hurriedly than normal, trying to fight the urge something was wrong. As I approached the crossing I saw the red man glowing brightly. To hell with it I thought, not tonight, I needed to get to the café to shake this feeling.

I rounded the corner onto the small street and could instantly see things had changed. There was an amazing bright colorful glow flooding onto the street, the whole place glistened. I approached slowly in a daze, taking it all in.

The café was different! the sliding glass door drew back automatically, and I entered with a faint beep from somewhere. My jaw was agape at the site in front of me. Gone were the plastic table covers and old furniture. Gone were the tired walls and peeling paper, now the place looked modern and chic. Plush new stools, contemporary art, brightly colored walls and high tech machines surrounded a sleek counter, which felt cold like posh stone. Had I taken a wrong turn? it barely felt real.

"How can I help you?" Her soft tones tickled my ears, she sounded warm, friendly and a little bit flirtatious.

“Coffee,” I drawled, my head lifted until my eyes came to rest on this beautiful creature. Long flowing brown hair that cascaded from her shoulders. She had the figure of a ballet dancer and a smile of an angel. Her badge read that “Tilly” was happy to help, and she looked it. The now lack of clutter behind the counter meant her focus was solely on me.

A tall glass of posh looking frothy stuff was pushed across the counter toward me.

“Will there be anything else?” As she spoke she rested her head on her hands and smiled.

A fire began burning somewhere in the pit of my stomach, my mouth went dry and butterflies flew around my chest.

“Your number?” I said. Where did that come from? I’m not brave, not with girls.

“Cheeky”, she smiled and left the counter continuing to work.

My usual spot was free but like everything else it had had an uplift. Soft leather seats and new condiments that wouldn’t look out of place in a wine bar.

An old man struggled in the door, and without a pause Tilly rounded the counter, to save him walking the extra distance to place his order.

I sipped at the coffee, and got a shock, it was smooth and slightly sweet. It slid down with ease not bitter at all.

Tilly had finished with the old man and was heading this way. She flashed me a smile and slid a card under my mug. I froze too scared to look at it.

I finished my drink, grabbed the card and rushed outside. Looking down into my hands I could see, handwritten, was her number and the words “Please come back.” sealed with a lipstick kiss. I let out a shriek of excitement like a besotted schoolboy, shoved the card in my pocket and rushed home in a haze of love-struck bliss.

I don’t remember getting home or putting my keys away, I just awoke the next morning feeling amazing. My work that day was upbeat and fun. I finished the last chapter and vowed to start proof reading tomorrow. I moved with a spring in my step all day.

I barely ate anything as I could not think of anything else, other than getting back to the all night café.

I didn’t wait long. I skipped down the stairs and opened the door, only pausing to notice the sign was back on. I lifted the collar on my jacket and walked briskly to the junction.

I checked the time as I waited for the green man. I was early, I hoped not before her shift.

I turned into the dirty street, passed the window and through the door with a tinkle. I froze on the spot. There should be no tinkle.

The hairs on my neck stood up and my eyes flicked around the room, until they came to rest on the familiar plastic covered tables.

“Wait, No!” I looked around taking in the tired paint and peeling walls, the grubby old machines and cluttered counter beyond which Sue stood staring at me.

“Look like you’ve seen a ghost Hun,” Sue spoke with concern. “Hope you are ok Hun, we missed you last night.”

A pang of panic hit my stomach as I turned and made for the door. Out on the street the cold night air filled my lungs.

“How, how could this be happening?” Then it struck me, last night was not real, I had been dreaming. I shook my head in complete and utter disbelief. The one time I had actually fallen asleep I had dreamt of the late night café.

My heart sank and I headed home. The short walk felt twice the distance carrying my heavy heart. I closed my door, dropped my jacket on the floor and threw my keys on my desk. I walked to my bed and slumped down.

It was at that moment when I felt something against my leg. My eyes widened and my heart started to race, “It can’t be.”

I placed my hand deep into my pocket and pulled out a lipstick covered card

* * *

Was he dreaming? How could he still have the card? How is the sign involved? Is she still out there? Will he find her? All these questions are answered in part two.

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To be continued...