

When You Awake

by

J. Patrick Henry

“The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent; the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult; the day he forgives himself, he becomes wise.”

—Alden Nowlan

“What’d you dream today, Jake?”

This, my usual greeting, called out as I let myself into the client’s apartment, received no response. He must still be asleep, I thought, or maybe dead. But it didn’t smell like death in there that day, and after a weekend it surely would have if he’d kicked off on me.

Getting into Jake’s place was easy. As usual the door was slightly ajar, blown there by the breezes coming up the elevator shaft down the hall. Even after weeks of coming here I found it unnerving that he never locked his door. He said it was because he couldn’t get up to answer it, but hell, no one but me came to visit, and I had my own key.

Looking around the place it was obvious he didn’t have much to steal, but he could get hurt pretty bad while someone worked him over to find out for sure. The sad truth was that although Jake’s life was here for the taking, and the world could walk in any time it wanted to, as far as I could tell no one but me ever did.

It occurred to me that even if some local punk didn’t kill him, considering how weak he was, it couldn’t be much longer before something did, and I didn’t want to lose him as a client. He wasn’t nearly as demanding as most. Caring for an old person is harder than it looks, especially if you do it right, but Jake was easy money, more so than I ever knew.

Don’t misjudge me. I never took much from him, and only in the beginning, before he became more than a client. Just a few loose dollar bills and a pain pill to sell on the street now and again. Trust me, my less honest coworkers think nothing of grabbing

the bigger bills, or ripping off blank checks, knowing the clients aren't sharp enough to catch the problem when their statements arrive. As for Jake? He never went anywhere or did anything with his money, so if what I took wasn't missed, was it really stealing?

Jake was in his mid-seventies, but old for his age, barely able to walk. The care sheet the service gave me said his diagnosis was congenital heart failure, and it meant he lived with an oxygen tube up his nose and every step a struggle. He seemed miserable. Whatever desire to live he'd had must've left him long ago because smiles were scarce in this place.

I guess I wasn't any happier than he was; never imagined that a degree in English would leave me taking care of old people for a living, but in this economy, when it's one of the only jobs out there, you take what's offered.

His three-room apartment was in a tall, ugly building on a busy street, but it did have the benefit of a water view, something Jake didn't care about. He had his hospital bed turned toward the wall. Said the light hurt his eyes. Me, I couldn't get enough of it, but getting near the window to enjoy it was difficult with all the clutter—tables piled with books and pamphlets on various health remedies, an assortment of houseplants barely alive, and a mountain of mail, mostly unopened letters looking for donations.

The building was pre-war, and had radiator heat that we couldn't control—it was either on or off. When it was turned on it was too hot, and when off, and the cold winds came across the frozen lake, too cold. Jake always voted for too hot, and since he had the only vote that counted, too hot it was.

Pausing in the doorway to get accustomed to the stale air, I spotted the round white ball of his hairless head poking out at the top of the bed. I shook what I took to be a big toe holding up the end of the coverlet and asked again, "What'd you dream today, Jake?" A muffled sound came from under the bedclothes—words, I guess, but not ones I could understand—then came a series of ragged coughs, like an old engine trying to turn over.

"I was walking!" Jake yelled from under the blanket, pulling it down to reveal a face with more hair on it than his head. (I'll have to shave him today, I thought.) Then he added, a note of amazement in his voice, "I was actually walking! And I was up on the

green. It was my turn to putt when you slammed the damned door! Two under par after nine and now I'll never finish that round.”

“Ease up, Jake,” I said. “There’s plenty of time for that later, when you nap. You can slide right back into that dream anytime you like. You know you’re the king of dreams, don’t you?”

Man, was he ever. I don’t know if it was the drugs he took to help him sleep, or the boredom from being mostly bed-bound that made his imagination so wild, but he often had a beaut to share. And they weren’t your typical dreams about flying like a bird, or walking naked through the airport, or having to take a test and forgetting all the answers. Nope, his were realistic, but in a way that made them seem all the stranger.

There was the one about him being young again, but still in his hospital bed being cared for by me, and after I’d leave for the day he’d get up and be normal, and go out to the bar for drinks with his friends and all, and then come home and get back in bed and be there when I showed up in the morning, still young and healthy, but needing me to take care of him. He said in the dream it wasn’t that he was faking being sick and hiding the fact that he could walk, it was just seemed that as long as I was there, he was stuck in his bed.

And another where I was the one in the bed and he was taking care of me instead of the other way around, and one where he was back on the job driving the cab and he kept picking up and dropping off the same fare over and over again. The customer never seemed to know for sure where he wanted to go, until finally he gave up and got out of the cab. Don’t you know every time Jake glanced in his mirror the guy in the back seat was himself? Spooky, like one of those old Twilight Zones that repeat non-stop late at night.

“I tell you, Jake, I never met a man who has dreams as good as yours.”

“Yeah? Well you’d be the same if you were my age and dreams and memories were all that was left. And some of ’em ain’t so pleasant, trust me. Not as pleasant as this one was—walking on that wet green grass right after it was cut, fat worms and the smell of earth everywhere. Gawd! It must’ve been spring. It smelled like life. Better than the stink around this place. By the way, you going to clean up today and earn your keep for a change?”

For a man I figured to be dying, he had an awful lot of vinegar in him. He never hesitated to tell me when he thought I wasn't carrying my share of the load, and because he thought my share was pretty much one-hundred percent, there was always room for complaint. Dreams or complaints—that's all I seemed to get out of him—never a nice, ordinary conversation.

“Now Jake. You know I'm not the cleaning lady. I'm here to take care of you, not your house. Help me help you sit up now, so you can take your morning meds.”

While he continued to mutter under his breath, I went over to the small kitchenette and began to prepare his usual breakfast of yogurt and fruits cut up and mixed together. “Tell me the rest of your dream,” I said.

“Ah, it's no good now. Gone. You know how when you're in a dream it's so real? But as soon as you wake up it fades, and even if you remember the details, it's not the same. Once the feeling of the dream is gone, the dream is gone too.”

So back we went, in silence, to our morning ritual, he with a frown on his face and me gritting my teeth. We both struggled to get through the days, tied together by circumstances that seemed beyond our control. I imagined then that it would never change, but you know the universe—just when you're starting to feel stuck or settled it jumps up and gets you rethinking what you thought you already knew.

Like this job as an aide—I thought things would be better when I finished my training and that I'd be free of obligations to my brother, who'd been helping me since I got out of school.

My brother resented the fact that I always came to him and not Dad for help, but after what happened between us, what could I do? Trying to make it as a writer when your father has made his own mark the same way is hard enough, but after what he said to me?

See, my old man has this obsession about speaking what he calls **THE TRUTH**, and damned be to anyone it might hurt. Claims it's the ultimate responsibility of an artist, to be brave enough to do that no matter the situation. So, after the famous author declared that I'd never have one-quarter of his talent, I would never give him the satisfaction of

living off the proceeds of his literary efforts. No way. I'd take a minimum wage job or steal first.

Turned out I had to do a little of both, but it didn't make my life any smoother. I thought that once I was earning my own way life my writing would come easier, but the job took more out of me than I expected, and I had no energy left at night to even open my laptop.

Arleen, my boss, an older woman who'd been in the business for years, didn't want to hire me when she saw I had a degree in literature. "Why aren't you teaching, or working in publishing or something like that? Why do you think you'd be happy in a job like this?" she asked.

"Tried all that. Didn't like it. Teaching kids who could care less about what you're giving them didn't jazz me, and sitting in a room by myself fighting with someone else's words was too frustrating. I felt like I needed to help someone, and this job seems like one way to do that."

"You know that taking care of old people isn't much different than dealing with children, don't you? It requires the same patience, probably more."

"I know all that—it was covered in the training—and how the elderly become more and more like children as they age. But I like that in them," I said, in something a few shades darker than a white lie.

"I know they can be cranky and unresponsive and self-absorbed," I added, "but they fascinate me, knowing that there's always a story, a history somewhere inside there. Getting those stories out is a challenge I think I'd enjoy."

"Alright," she said, "I'm not convinced you're right for the job, but we'll take you on." Then she added, a suspicious note in her voice, "But remember, we're paying you to care for these people, not mine them for stories. I'll be watching." So it began, and three months into the job I was assigned to Jake's case, the one that just about cured me of the notion that I was cut out for this line of work.

When we first met I had hopes that he would have plenty to offer, but his conversation consisted of monosyllables, except when he had a complaint, or when I could get him to recount one of his dreams for me. And that would happen only if I

arrived at the right moment: just when he was in the middle of one. Then he would give me the gist of it almost involuntarily, without thought and with his eyes still closed. Other than that? Not much. We were just two strangers thrown together in a bright, hot room. After I did my work, he would nod back off and I would sit and read.

Not long after meeting Jake I pulled Arleen aside after a staff meeting to ask for her help.

“What’s the background on this guy?” I asked. “Why does he seem so sullen, so tough to talk to?”

“I can’t be expected to know all the clients,” she told me, “but this is typical. There’s a tendency to become isolated as they age—even if the patient doesn’t cut himself off from the rest of the world, the world does it for him. Your relatives and contemporaries die off and your world shrinks, sometimes down to the space of one room.”

She was right—Jake fit that mold—but I felt there was something else at work there. Often, especially as he was describing one of his dreams to me, there was a light in his eyes that gave me hope for a different Jake, one who wasn’t so deeply grim. I wanted to meet *that* Jake, and kept trying to figure out how to do it. Eventually it happened, but not because of anything I did. That job belonged to someone else, and it took a while.

It was almost six months into the assignment that I arrived to find Jake awake, lying there with what, if I didn’t know better, could’ve been mistaken for a smile.

“What’d you dream today, Jake?” I asked, my usual. “Must’ve been a funny one based on the look on your face.”

“No dream for you today. I was awake all night. Hey, you don’t sleep, you don’t dream. Sleep doesn’t come easy to old people, so if I’m a grumpy old man this morning, just blame it on my age.”

“Nah,” I said with a slight smile, “you’re not one of those grumpy old men, Jake, you’re just plain grumpy.”

He mumbled something as I went behind the hospital bed, pushed the button to raise the head, and put my hands under his arms to pull him up. He seemed to be cursing in a whisper and I couldn’t make out what he was saying. I asked him to speak up.

“I SAID THAT I WOULDN’T HAVE TO PUT UP WITH THE LIKES OF YOU IF MY SONS WERE AROUND!”

Oh no, I thought, that smile must’ve been an illusion. I pushed forward despite my misgivings. “Tell me about your sons, Jake. I can’t recall you mentioning them before. Where are they? Why don’t they come around?”

“One of ’em does; in fact, he was by here last night. That would be Michael. He’s the one people always say looks just like me. We had a real good visit. But Kipp? The other boy? I don’t talk about him—best to leave that be.”

I respected his wishes and left it there, but going about our morning chores I continued to notice a difference in him. He seemed calmer and a bit quicker to laugh at my lame jokes. Later that morning he surprised me with a question I’d never heard him ask before.

“What’s the weather out there today?”

Standing at the foot of his bed, I looked over his head to the window. “Sunny and bright, Jake,” I replied, “and must be pretty windy. I can see whitecaps on the lake.” He didn’t respond, just nodded and closed his eyes again.

After lunch he surprised me again by asking me to make a phone call for him. It was to someone named “Hank” that he used to work with at the cab company, and he amazed me further by asking me to invite Hank to visit him. Hank was sitting on the edge of his bed when I walked in the following Monday morning, the first visitor Jake had in all the time I’d been coming there.

After being introduced, I went about my business while they settled back into the conversation I’d interrupted. It consisted mostly of what sounded to be friendly insults. Hank would remind him of some incident in which Jake was either the butt of the joke or the instigator, and Jake would counter with one about Hank’s failure to cover his back when loyalty demanded it. Hank was the dispatcher, a job that gives one enormous power over the fortunes of the drivers, and Jake reminded him of the many bribes he had paid to be steered to the safer parts of the city, or to be pushed to the front of the line for fares from the most expensive nightspots.

“Jake,” Hank said, “do you remember what you did to the mayor the night of the Winter Ball? That’s as close as you came to getting fired.”

“Yeah,” he said, “sure I do, and he deserved it too, the crazy son of a bitch. It didn’t turn out too bad for him in the end, as I recall.”

“Wait,” I called in from the kitchen. “You can’t keep this one to yourselves. Give it up. What happened?”

“Well,” Hank started, “when it happened I was never sure if he did it on purpose, but Jake put the mayor into a hell of a fix that night. It was holiday season and Jake had slipped me a twenty to get him on limo duty, which meant he was supposed to just sit and wait for a call to come in—no cruising allowed—but this guy, you couldn’t control him, so there he is out wandering the city and he picks up a couple of whores—fancy ones—but whores just the same. Not sure if they were working that night or not, ’cause they were dressed extra fancy. Were they working, Jake?”

“How the hell do I know?” he shot back. “All I know is they flagged me down and their money was as good as the next person’s, so in they came. But then your radio call came in and screwed me all up.”

“See, a call came in from the mayor’s driver,” Hank continued. “He was supposed to get him to this fancy affair downtown but the car broke down, and no way was the mayor going to show up in a cab, had to be a limo, and don’t you know Jake’s driving the only available. At least that’s how it looked on the board, since the son of a bitch never called in to report picking up those ...ladies.”

“Hey,” Jake said, unapologetic, “you do what you gotta do. You took your payoffs from us; I took an extra fare off the books now and then. It all worked out. And let me tell the rest of the story—you weren’t even there.”

As Jake paused to catch a breath, it occurred to me that this was the most life I’d heard in Jake’s voice since I’d met him.

“So I got these two girls in the car, and they heard the call come in over the radio. I tell ’em I don’t have time to get ’em cross town to their destination ’cause the mayor’s in a panic to get to his big event, but I don’t wanna lose their fare—no one tips as good as the night people, you know—so I tell ’em to move up to the jump seats and behave themselves while I pick up hizonner and take him where he needs to go.”

“That was your big mistake, Jake,” Hank chimed in, “trusting a couple of whores.”

“How was I supposed to know what they had in mind?” Jake said. “Besides, I’d trust them people over a politician any day. At least when they take your money they do it right in front of you, and you get something in return. Now let me finish!”

Hank and I sat back to listen. The light coming in from the window over his shoulder made it hard to see Jake’s eyes, but you couldn’t miss the spark that shone there now, or the smile on his face.

“So I get the girls quieted down and we go pick up the mayor. His driver stays with his car and since you can’t see in through the smoked windows, the mayor has no idea there’s someone else in the limo until he climbs in. I apologize as he settles into his seat, telling him that I had to take my sisters here to the hospital to visit a sick relative. By the time he sees that these girls probably ain’t nobody’s sister, and *definitely* ain’t dressed for a hospital, it’s too late—I jump in the front seat and take off for the hotel. I have the partition up so I don’t know what’s being said back there, but looking in the rear view mirror it seemed cordial enough. Looked like I’d get through this after all.”

“I don’t see what could go wrong at this point, Jake,” I said. “So what if the mayor had to take a ride with a couple of ladies?”

“It should’ve been okay,” Jake responded, “and it would have if them whores had stayed where I put ’em, but they had other ideas. Don’t you know, as soon as we pull up to the entrance of the hotel, it’s a mob scene—cameras and people milling around waiting for the mayor to arrive—and just as he steps out of the car the two whores jump out behind him, one on each side. They grab hold of him and smile like they was all old friends. Every morning paper had that same picture right there above the fold: the mayor with a painted lady on each arm!”

“That coulda been the end of your driving, Jake,” Hank said. “I can’t figure out how you dodged that one.”

“Hell, the mayor shoulda thanked me. It helped his reputation in the end. Being an old bachelor, everyone had their doubts about him, but after those whores grabbed him, people figured maybe he wasn’t as light on his feet as they’d thought.”

“Well,” said Hank, “I have to admit that you brought us a lot of laughs along with the headaches, Jake. I wouldn’t have traded you for ten of the young ones we got driving now.”

You could see Jake absorb the compliment. He seemed bigger lying there in his bed. “Anything I can bring you, Jake?” Hank asked. “Or does this kid take care of things for you?”

“Ah,” he said, referring to me. “He ain’t all that. I guess he gets it done most days. But there is something as long as you’re here, why don’t you help him get this bed turned around to face the window. Sometimes I’m curious to see what the weather is like when he’s not around.”

After Hank and I finished the job and he was on his way, I sat back down, my back to the sun and Jake’s face bright now with the light. “You surprised me, Jake,” I told him. “I didn’t think you had that many words in you.”

“Hey. Don’t get yer hopes up for a repeat performance. Let me get some rest now.”

The next few days he remained pretty quiet. I thought perhaps the visit with Hank had used up whatever words he had inside that tired old body, but then, little by little, he opened up again. He was like an unused machine with its hinges frozen, and it took lots of small movements to break the rusted bonds. Our conversations were short at first, and about not much of anything at all, but each one was a small shot of grease that got things moving. I began to have hope now that I’d learn what first drove him inside himself, and more important, what had triggered this release.

Slowly Jake and I became more than aide and client. I found that the more attention I paid to him, the more of himself he was willing to share, and I eventually learned who he was in great part by learning who he had been, by urging him to talk about his past. Oh, don’t be fooled. He remained as ornery as ever, reminding me often of how much better he could have done my job if he were healthy. But the barbs were blunted now, and delivered with a trace of a smile.

It wasn’t long after when, breakfast done with and the morning light shining in from the lake on both of us, he finally agreed to tell me Kipp’s story. He was right. It wasn’t pretty.

“You see, I have... I had... two sons,” he started, ”but now I only have one. That’s the part that ain’t so nice. The part that makes me ashamed to tell it.

“This happened when Kipp, the younger boy, was just about to turn twelve—that age when kids start to think they’re independent and know everything better than their parents? He and I just wasn’t getting along at all. I was taking the family on long a trip out of state, a car trip. It was a lousy day, bad weather, too much traffic, late start, everything going wrong. And you know how kids are, antsy as hell in the back seat, bored and always asking for this or that, saying, ‘Dad, when will get there?’ or ‘I’m hungry, when can we stop to eat?’

“Of course, the worst one is, ‘I have to go to the bathroom,’ because that’s one you’re not allowed to ignore, and that’s what we’d been hearing from Kipp the whole day. See, he’d been acting strange for a few weeks. All of a sudden he was wetting the bed, something he hadn’t done in years. His doctor ran a bunch of tests and said he was fine. Probably just a growth spurt. Said just tell him to grow up, that he’s too old to be wetting the bed. So that’s what we done, but it didn’t seem to help.

“So there we are, running late, starting to get dark, rain making the drive tough, my hands cramping from holding the steering wheel so tight, when he says it again. ‘Dad, I really have to go bad, can you stop?’

“‘No,’ I said, “We need to make up for lost time and get through this storm. Just hold it a while longer.’

“‘I can’t,’ he yelled. ‘I’m going to go in my pants if you don’t stop!’

“Angry now, I yelled back, ‘Okay, but this is the last time. When are you going to grow up and learn to hold it?!’

“I pulled off at the exit and into the first truck stop we came to. The place was jammed—people trying to wait out the storm, I guess. The smart thing. The thing I should have done. I pulled in behind a line of cars parked off to the side of the building, and told Kipp to get going and to make it quick.

“‘Aren’t you going to go with him?’ my wife asked. ‘It’s raining hard. He shouldn’t go alone.’

‘He’s a big boy. He’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘Get in there, Kipp, and get back as soon as

you can. I'm tired of this shit!

“My yelling lit a fire under him, and he run off fast, crazy-like.

“As it turned out, his mother was right. He wouldn't be fine. As he ran through the rain he looked back at us, and didn't see this pick-up truck with a big trailer on the back. And the driver didn't see him. Neither one saw what was coming, but we did.

“I tried to warn him. We both called his name, but our yells were washed away by the rain and wind. We saw him slip under that trailer full of horses and he was gone, crushed, just that fast.

“There's nothing more awful, I tell you, than losing a kid. Except there was.

“A week after the funeral, when we thought it couldn't get any worse, his doc calls us all in a panic. He must not have heard about the accident because he said that we had to get Kipp to a hospital as quick as possible. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine someone telling you to get your son who's already dead and in the ground to a hospital?

“I dropped the phone and when my wife picked it up off the floor she heard the rest of the story. Turns out that one of the tests he ran on Kipp didn't come out okay after all, but the doc missed it. He explained that the test showed that Kipp had some kind of problem with his kidneys—some big word I can't remember now—and that was what was made him have to go all the time.

“It took a long while to get over my anger at that doctor, and even when I thought I had, I found it wasn't gone—just turned inside, against myself. I'd already felt guilty about not going out into the rain with him that night, and now to hear that it was all because of some disease that nobody told us about? That was too much, and it about killed me. All I could think about was that the very last thing Kipp heard was my yell—a mean sound that he must've took with him when he left us that night.”

Suddenly it seemed cold in the apartment. The only sounds were the banging of the radiator pipes, contracting as they lost their heat, and the wheezing of Jake's overworked lungs.

“That's... that's one sad story, Jake. Thanks for trusting me with it. I'm sorry for your loss. I don't know how a person could get ever over a thing like that.”

“Well,” he said, “I didn't get over it, not for the longest time. Not 'til Michael's

visit awhile back. He was the one talked me through how to understand it, and I've been thinking about it ever since. Hell, I could never have told you that story if he hadn't helped me see things better. You know? I think Michael might be some kind of saint—a real, live saint. See, he run off after Kipp was killed, as soon as he was old enough to be on his own. I guess he got tired of living in a house so full of sadness. And my wife left me about the same time. For the same reason, I guess. I found out later that Michael'd gone to India, into the mountains, to learn to pray, I guess. When he came to see me a few weeks ago he was wearing a funny-looking robe and counting beads on his fingers as he talked.

“Michael came in and he could see I was scared, shivering under the covers. I didn't have to say anything. My time is almost up and he could tell I was afraid of what's coming next. And then there's the Kipp thing. Even after all those years, I felt as awful as the day it happened, and he could see that, too. It was like he could look past my skin right into me.

“He came up close and put his hand on my shoulder, gripped it real tight. His hand was warm—as warm as if it'd just come out of a fire—and the warmth went right into me.

“He told me, ‘Let it go, Dad. You've lived with this for too long. Kipp loved you. He still loves you, and he's okay. He's moved on now, and I know he wants you to move on, too. It's almost time for you to take the next step yourself, and you can't carry this with you. It'll hold you back. Let it go.’ And somehow it seemed easy all of a sudden. I did let it go. It wasn't the words he used as much as the feel of his hand on my shoulder. It was as if what I'd done to Kipp rose up out of me and into his hand.”

“That sounds like one of your dreams, Jake,” I told him. “Pretty powerful.”

“It weren't a dream, I'm telling you. I know the difference!”

I didn't argue with him. What would've been the use? People who're near to dying often get their memories and dreams mixed up. All I knew was that Jake was different after that, and the change was dramatic enough that I decided Michael's visit couldn't have been just a dream. It wasn't until much later—when his lawyer called me after Jake had passed away—that I understood the truth.

Seems Jake was sitting on a sizeable nest egg all the time I cared for him, and shortly before he died, he changed his will. The lawyer said I had to come to his office to find out what he'd left me. When I arrived, I could tell that Jake must've had a good bit of scratch in order to afford this fat lawyer, sitting in a soft leather chair behind a desk as big as a bed. He told me to take a seat and had his secretary bring me a cup of coffee while he shuffled through some papers. Once my coffee was served, the lawyer got to the point.

"You wouldn't have known it by the way he lived," he started, "but our Mr. Jenson was a moderately wealthy man when he died. Some of his estate will go to charity, and you and his son Michael are the only other named beneficiaries."

My shoulders jerked upward in surprise at hearing this. I had to shift sideways to avoid spilling the hot coffee onto my lap. "Michael? I'll be damned. That story he told me about him visiting was true?"

"You say a son visited him?" the lawyer said. "I don't know how that could be. Kipp died in a car accident when he was a child, and Michael disappeared thirty years ago, presumed dead in an earthquake somewhere in the foothills of the Himalayans. Jake was fully aware of that, but insisted on keeping him in his will. He always hoped he'd reappear, but as far as we know he never has. In fact, we'll need to make a motion to have Michael declared legally dead. Once that's done, his share of the estate will go to you, too. I'd say you'll have to find something else to do with your time, because now you're rich. Your days of working as an aide are over.

That's where he was wrong. Oh, it's true that aides make lousy money—that's why the profession attracts people who don't really like the work but can't find anything better—and now with Jake's money, I didn't have to do it any longer. But Jake gave me something else. He taught me that everyone has a story worth telling, and a life worth caring about.

Because of him I came to appreciate a job that most people don't want, one that, thanks to Jake's give, I could now afford to keep on doing.