



When You Awake

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"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 open and 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 loose dollar bills and a discarded 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. And 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 congestive heart failure, and it meant he lived with an oxygen tube up his nose and every step a struggle. He seemed miserable to me. Whatever desire to live he’d had must’ve left him long ago because smiles were scarce in this house. 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 an economy like this, 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 at least had 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 on it was too hot, and when off and the cold winds came across the frozen lake, it was 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 closest to me 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 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 sometimes had a beaut to share when I showed up. 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 more strange.

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 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, or the 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, and 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 looked just 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 had to have been spring. It smelled just like life. Better than the stink around this place. 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 left 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 damned 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, that's no good now. It's gone. You know how when you're in a dream it's 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 again, 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—it's just when you're starting to feel stuck or settled that 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 actually started work. I thought the clients might be a source of

material for my writing, and that things would be better once I was free of any 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 could never give him the satisfaction of knowing I had to live 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 found that 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 I 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, maybe more."

"I know all about that—it was covered in the training—and how the elderly become more and more like children as they age. But I like them," I said, in something a shade 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, "And remember, we're paying you to care for these people, not mine them for stories. I'll be watching."

So it started, 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 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 thinking 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 these clients," she told me, "but you know this is typical of the breed. There's always a tendency to become isolated as you age—even if the patient doesn't cut himself off from the rest of the world, the world will do it for him. You get older, 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 one, and kept trying to figure out how to do it. Eventually it happened, but not because of anything I did. That job apparently belonged to someone else, and it wouldn't happen as quickly as I'd hoped.

It was almost six months into the assignment, long after I'd given up on efforts to draw him out, 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, back to this? That smile must've been an illusion. I pushed forward despite my misgivings. "So 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 for a visit. 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. I didn't know what to make of it, and didn't ask, but later that morning he surprised me with a question I'd never heard him ask before. "What's the weather out there today?" he asked. Sitting at the foot of his bed, I looked up and 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 said 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. It seems Hank was the dispatcher at the company, 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," he 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 that I can recall."

“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 spot that night. It was holiday season and Jake had slipped me a twenty to get him on limo duty that night, 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 in that big black car 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 that it’s Jake driving the only one empty, or at least that’s how it looked on the board, since the son of a bitch never called in to report picking up those ... ahem ... 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 hear 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 just be quiet and behave themselves while I pick up hisonner and take him where he needs to go, which I proceed to do.”

“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.

“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 and looks up. I apologize as he settles into his seat, telling him that he’d have some company, that I had to take my sisters 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 visit, 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 into the crowd the two whores jump out behind him, one on each side. They each 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 for that. You know as well as I do that it helped his reputation in the end. Being an old bachelor, everyone had their doubts about him until this happened. After those whores grabbed him, people figured maybe he wasn’t as light on his feet as they’d thought, if you know what I mean. Got him re-elected as I recall.”

“Well,” added Hank, “I have to admit that you brought us a lot of laughs with all the headaches, Jake, and 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 were pretty quiet. I thought perhaps he was right, that the long visit with Hank had used up whatever words he had inside that tired old body, but little by little he continued to open up. 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.

On the day that Hank came by for a second visit I asked him about his earlier comment, why he thought Jake had been so good, and what Hank thought he had that the young drivers didn’t have. Hank said he didn’t know for sure—experience probably, or just a good memory.

“After a year on the job, I don’t think Jake ever used a map,” he said. “He knew the city inside out, rich and poor, good and bad. Whenever a call would come in and Jake was hanging around the garage he could give directions straight to the place, tell you how to avoid traffic along the way, and most important, what to watch out for. He knew every street and which were okay and which to stay off. Guys today have no clue. How’d you do that, Jake?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” he replied. “Keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut and you’ll be surprised what you can learn.”

“It ain’t like that today, Jake,” Hank said. “Guys today, they get a call over the radio, plug the address into the GPS or their phone, and off they go, no clue what

they're running into. You heard about the kid who drove off a dock into the river last month because the fool did whatever his damned phone told him? You'd be surprised how often shit like that happens, Jake. Experience don't count for anything anymore."

Listening to them go on, they sounded like typical old farts, whining about a world that had left them behind. But it gave me pause to think.

There was a time when Hank and Jake were relied upon for what they knew, for what they'd learned in a life of experiences that the young drivers might never absorb. The old used to be considered the wise among us, and in many primitive societies they still are, but now they're rarely considered at all, and we do whatever it takes—including paying people like me—to make sure that they are among us as little as possible.

It made me realize that Jake, regardless of whatever it was that brought him to this place in his life, had been isolated longer than I imagined. When the world decides it no longer needs your services, it doesn't let you down easy. It just vanishes when you're not paying attention.

I didn't imagine how this would ever change, and it wasn't easy, but 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 lakefront 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, but I will if you want me to."

"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 before this, and my wife and I couldn't figure it out. All of a sudden he was wetting the bed, something he hadn't done for years. We couldn't understand what was going on, but 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 say, '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 at, 'Okay, but this is the last time. I can't keep stopping like this. 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 with—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?' the 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!' All I did was yell at him, but it was enough to make him run off fast, crazy-like.

"As it turned out, his mother was right. He wasn't fine. Running through the rain, looking back at us, he didn't see this pick-up truck with a big trailer on the back, and the driver didn't see him either. They never saw what was coming, but we did.

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

“There’s nothing more awful, I tell you, than losing a kid. And then, a week after the funeral, just 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 as quick as you can?

“When my wife picked the phone up off the floor she heard the rest of his story. Turns out that one of the tests he ran on Kipp didn’t come out okay after all, but the doc missed it. After my wife got through screaming at him, telling him how we’d lost our boy, he explained that the test showed that Kipp had some kind of problem with his kidneys—some big word that I can’t remember now—and that this 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 when I thought I had, I found that 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 last thing Kipp heard was my yelling—a mean sound that he took with him when he left us that night.”

Suddenly it seemed cold in the apartment. The only sounds in the room 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 understand things better. 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 that was so full of sadness. My wife left me about the same time. For the same reason, I guess. She told me later that Michael had gone to India, into the mountains to learn how to pray. I guess she was right, because when he came to see me he

was wearing a funny-looking robe and counting beads on his fingers as he talked.

“When Michael came in he could see I was scared, shivering even under the covers. I didn’t have to say anything. I know my time is coming and he could tell I was afraid of what’s coming next. And then there’s the Kipp thing. Even after so many years, I felt as awful as the day it happened, and I knew he could see that, too. It was like he could look past my skin right into me. Somehow he knew better than me what I was feeling.

“He came up to me 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 so I did. Let it go. It seemed easy all of a sudden. 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 know is that Jake was different after that, and the change in him 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 think I learned the truth for certain.

It 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 right away that Jake must’ve had a good bit of scratch. He had to, 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 on that big desk of his. 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 his son visited him?” the lawyer said. “I don’t know how that could be. Kipp, the younger son, 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. Jack was aware of that but insisted on keeping him in his will. In fact, before we release his bequest to you we’ll have to make a motion to declare Michael legally dead. Once that’s done, his share of the estate will go to you, too. You’ll have to find something else to do with your time now. Your days of working as an aide are over. That was quite the gift Mr. Jenson gave you.”

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. Through him I came to love a job that nobody else wanted, one that, thanks to him, I could now afford to keep doing.

Patrick Henry is a retired public servant who’s transitioned from memos and legal mumbo jumbo to more personal prose, both fiction and nonfiction. He’s previously been published in *Perspective Literary Quarterly* and *The Sun*.

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