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*Awakening*

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**AWAKENING**

**by**

**Andras Totisz**

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## *Awakening*

Peter Hardy woke up that morning beside a strange woman. She didn't look like a woman strangers would sleep with. She was middle-aged, Peter guessed she was about fifty, her hair was dyed, gray showing through at the root of the brown curls.

Peter closed his eyes. Why do I dream of her, instead of a slim twenty-five year old blonde, he complained to himself, as he felt the pressure of a strange bed's springs on his back. He was afraid to open his eyes again. I am dreaming, he thought, hoping he was right. For some reason I am dreaming about a fat woman with a nice face. Maybe I have a mother-complex. Peter was a lawyer with a deep distrust of psychiatrists and analysis, but now he began to waver on this point.

A grayish light was crawling sadly over the ceiling when he opened his eyes again. A grandfather clock was ticking irreversibly, reminding Peter of an old Mafia movie: the ticking, loud as your heartbeat, the bluish steel of weapons coming closer and closer.

Everything looked ancient here, too, conjuring ages that had gone forever. A wrought iron chandelier, once thought elegant, a wardrobe, with the same carved ornamentation on the board at the foot of the bed. The blinds were drawn and that grayness oozing through the slits represented the outside world.

Cautiously, so as not to wake the woman, Peter sat up reaching toward the floor with his feet. They met prepared slippers. They were his size and frighteningly comfortable, as if they had grown old together with his feet.

Peter left the room. Nobody hindered him, nobody stood in his way. The living room looked like a place where three generations had accumulated their unnecessary furniture. An enticing young girl was sleeping on a folding bed. Though it was cold, she had let the cover slip from her shoulders. Peter stopped for a moment to watch her; then, taking care not to bump into chairs, armchairs, poufs or little tables, walked on.

There was a young man in the kitchen sitting at the table. He was thirty-something, his dark hair receding from his forehead. His arms were not particularly thick, but he looked strong enough, and anyway, he was a good twenty years younger than Peter. Peter stood uncertainly in the door.

"Morning, Father. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

Peter nodded. He entered the narrow kitchen and went to the window. He saw rain-soaked streets, strange-looking houses. There wasn't a soul in sight, only the white steaming fumes of a car-exhaust showed some sign of life. A long, yellow streetcar rolled along a few blocks away, reminding Peter of the long-tailed dragon at a Chinese festival.

"Where am I?" he asked without turning back. He was listening as the younger man opened the cupboard behind his back. A soft clinking of china, the little kick as the saucer reached the tabletop, then the sound of a fridge opening.

"Where am I?" repeated Peter. "What is this place? What I am doing here?"

He turned back. The man stood with the coffeepot in his hands. It was an old, metal coffeepot, the top already blackened.

"I understand, Father" he said quietly. "Many times I ask myself the same thing." He bent his head and poured the coffee.

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It was a strong espresso, similar to those Peter had in Rome in the hotel until he learned to order: "Coffee American." Without saying a word he stepped to the cupboard, found a big cup, poured the coffee in, then filled it to the brim with milk. Now he found it drinkable.

"May I use the phone?" he asked.

The man cast a strange glance at him and left the kitchen. Peter sipped the coffee and still found it too strong. He walked to the telephone. It was on the wall, near the window. Another Chinese dragon was making its way down the faraway street. Peter followed with his eyes until it slowly disappeared from sight.

He wasn't really surprised when 911 didn't work. He tried Susan. She might be in the bathroom now or drinking her morning coffee in the big, sunny kitchen she is so proud of. She is drinking from the oversized red cup she bought at a sale. She is reading the *New York Times*, the way she does, with lightning speed. Thing, the bored Siamese is lying in his usual place on the large windowsill among the flowerpots. Damn it, I was stupid to move out, he thought.

The phone didn't ring, only a strange little melody was playing with his nerves. He grasped the receiver with such power that his fingers hurt. He relaxed them. Keep cool, he ordered himself. You will achieve nothing this way. You must think in a logical fashion, as if preparing for a trial. You have seen that streetcar, haven't you? He dialed again, together with New York's area code this time. He felt a wave of impatient rage rushing through him as he heard that silly little tune again. This time he overcame it faster. I am abroad, he thought. God knows where.

The door opened and the woman entered. She had put a robe over her nightgown, but she hadn't fastened the belt, letting her full breasts burst out. Peter turned away, embarrassed. He almost put down the phone, like one caught red-handed, but went on defiantly.

"What is the prefix for an international call?" he asked.

"Zero-zero" she answered. She walked to his side and as she caressed his face, he was hit by the scent of sleep coming from her body.

"Who are you calling?"

"My wife."

For a moment they were holding each other's eyes. She had sad blue eyes; her hair was a bit curly, probably a hairdresser's handiwork. She pulled her hand away from Peter's face. A tired, gentle hand, he thought. Who is this woman? What on earth am I doing here? Why did they bring me here while I was asleep, and how did they manage to do it? He turned away and delivered a hard punch into the wall in his anger, but he still saw the tears well up in her eyes.

Susan wasn't at home. Peter didn't call the police. What would he tell them? Somebody had kidnapped him, but they let him use the phone and he is somewhere abroad in a place where streetcars remind him of Chinese dragons and the prefix for international calls is zero-zero?

She prepared breakfast, bread and butter with some greasy sausage, something Susan wouldn't dream of eating, and weak, syrupy tea. Peter forced himself to swallow some of the food. He could hear the shower splashing from the adjoining room. This must be the girl, Peter thought, realizing he wanted to see her again. I've lost my mind, he told himself, but continued to listen surreptitiously to the voices filtering through the wall.

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“We must hurry” the woman told him. “I laid out your clothes.”

It proved to be a dark, somewhat old-fashioned suit. She had laid it across the bed, the end of the pants hanging down almost to the floor so that it looked like somebody taking a nap. The shirt and the tie were hanging on a wooden coat hanger left on the half-open door. For a moment, Peter saw a human form hanged, as he had seen somebody stretched out on the bed before.

“The bathroom is free.”

The girl rummaged into the room wearing a suit skirt and a bra. She smiled at him as she walked past.

“Dress, Father.”

Peter closed the bathroom door behind him and sat on the tub’s edge. This is madness. Some over-intensive dream. A very strange dream, in which I am not Peter Hardy, a rather successful Manhattan lawyer, married, father of two sons, one studying to be a lawyer like his dad, the other a lifeguard somewhere in California, maybe influenced by the silicon-breasted beauties of the Baywatch series. Two months ago I moved out, but my wife didn’t file for divorce. Maybe it is better this way. But in this dream, this gentle, plump woman is my wife and this beautiful girl I desire with an aching in my groin is my daughter. In this strange dream I must put on a dark suit, I can find my toothbrush with my eyes closed among the items lying scattered on the shelf beneath the mirror, and I will choose my own shaving cream instead of my son-in-law’s. He felt nausea stirring inside him, the strong coffee and the sandwich longing to come back as stubbornly and hopelessly as he longed to be back in his other life, in reality. A stranger looked back from the mirror.

They drove in a noisy little car among the rain-washed, gray houses. The girl bound her hair in a scarf and Peter found her even more charming. They crossed the large street where he had seen from the kitchen window the streetcars gliding along, looking faraway and mysterious. But no dragon was there and the stop was empty, Sunday-like and lonely. The road was bad, the car tossed about nervously. Peter’s fight with the breakfast started over. Soon they were driving in the outskirts of town. Stray dogs scratched themselves dejectedly in the rain, old cars, similar to the one they were jolting in speechless toward their unknown destiny, stood on bricks.

A small group of people clad in black waited for them in the cemetery. It seemed as if he really had dressed a bit too slowly. The priest called Peter aside.

“Please tell me a few things about your Father” he said.

“My Father?”

Peter shrugged in an embarrassed way. In this dream everything had been turned inside out and things had lost their meaning. They were in a bleak office; the only source of heat was a tiny electric radiator in a corner. The priest was short and slim; he crossed his fingers in a relaxed fashion on his belly, but his thumbs were tapping a nervous dance. He didn’t wear a coat over his black cassock and that made Peter wonder if he felt the cold at all or was just pretending not to.

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“What kind of person was he. How did he live?”

“He was a nice man” Peter said. “Diligent.” He couldn’t imagine why the priest was interested in his father. “He died the year before last, in August. He used to live in a retirement home in Florida. They told me he didn’t suffer much.”

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He usually added how he used to call him regularly, but now he swallowed it back.

For a few moments the priest was studying his shoes. They were thin-soled, cheap black shoes, the points already worn. They presented a sad, worldly sight and Peter felt a rush of shame just looking at them.

“You mean your Father lived in America?”

Peter fought back the urge to grab the other man and start shaking him, shouting that he doesn't want any part of this and he wants to go home. Why on earth are they so maddeningly nice to him?

“He used to live in Canada. He left Hungary in '45, after his return from Mauthausen. It was one of those nazi camps, you know. The only reason he returned home was to see his family.”

Peter let the silence fall between them. He didn't understand himself. Why did he tell all these things to this priest? Probably, because in this crazy dream this was his only link with reality.

“Only thirty minutes after Father left, my grandfather had a stroke. Father always told me that Grandpa had been waiting till he left. He had been holding back the stroke to give my Father a chance to be a free man. He still lived a week and was buried by the time news reached my Father in Toronto.”

He walked to the small heater. The hot air assailed his shin, then the heat began to crawl slowly toward his groin. His hands and face remained cold. The air was damp, giving the feeling that the rain had been drizzling for ages in this cemetery, that there were no seasons here, just an endless, desolate winter. The winter of puddles and blackened heaps of snow, and not of sleighs, snowmen and laughter. The Winnipeg winters of his memories.

The priest stirred behind his back, his worn, pointed shoes squeaking. Peter felt that the man wanted to tell him something. He forestalled him.

“He had a trucking company. In the beginning he used to work as a mechanic, then he bought a truck, then another... He had thirty-five by the time he retired.” Peter turned back toward the priest, smiling. The heater was burning his bottom now, the front of his thighs grew cold fast. The priest had a small, black notebook opened in his hands. With thin, angular framed glasses he was reading one of the pages. His mouth moved almost invisibly, giving the impression of praying.

Peter also wanted to tell him that his Father had met his Mother in '52. She was his accountant's secretary. That they bought the Florida apartment in '78 and spent the winters there once they retired. That they sold it when they moved into the retirement home. As if that had any importance here! But he didn't get the chance to tell any of it. A sullen man in black suit entered and led him out. The plump woman he woke up with took his arm and he followed her like a sleepwalker. He stopped when everybody stopped and let them press him forward till he found himself standing at the edge of the grave, between the woman and the beautiful girl.

He thought of his father, the way he had seen him the last time, a few months before his death. He looked thin and shriveled, but nevertheless he seemed all right. Then, unexpectedly, Susan came to his mind. That accusing look in her eyes as he announced his intention to leave. With his mind's eye he saw his office, the restaurant where he had dinner with this girl Bob had introduced to him a week before, Marge or something like that. She was thirty-two, a sales agent for a pharmaceutical factory. A

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body made slim by two aerobic classes a week, a nice face and a confident smile. He walked her home and was invited up for a drink. Or was he? He could not recall.

He heard the priest's voice in a half dream, a kind of reassuring background noise, like listening to the news on the radio in the morning, sitting in the kitchen with one's juice and toast. Though this time it was not about politicians or criminals. The priest, his voice sometimes barely audible, sometimes strong and clear in accord with the wind's rhythm, tried to convince the people standing with their heads bent down and chilled to the bone that the deceased used to be a good man. A person capable of sacrifices.

Peter watched the raindrops as they stretched over the coffin. A small puddle was beginning to form in front of his legs, only a few inches from his shoes, as the drops flew nimbly down from the black lacquered surface of the coffin. Some of the raindrops reached the edge of the coffin intact, others were hit as they tried to escape by other raindrops and continued their travel, mixed and splashed. Peter could not take his eyes off the sight.

"Hardy János was the kind of man who cared more about the happiness of others, than his own," he heard the priest's voice. The voice penetrated under his clothes, under his skin, it permeated his whole body and sent a chill down his spine. The woman standing on his right whispered something into his ear, but he could not discern the words. He heard nothing, but that unrelenting voice, the story of a man, who could not start a new life, because when he visited his father to say his last goodbye, the old man had a stroke. And that man in the priest's story chose to remain in the old country, under dictatorship, to attend upon his father. He had washed him, fed him, dressed him. Then he dropped out of the university to be able to bring up his own son, put him through school to be an electrician. This man used to be a mechanic, but after the collapse of communism, when the state sold all its property, including the big garages, he was retired and replaced by someone younger. He became a night watchman and worked hard at this job, too.

Peter was no longer hearing the words of the priest about the man lying in the coffin. He felt them in his bones, in his muscle, in his breath. And every single breath was hurting him. And with every breath, there spread in his body the terror that this was the end, he would never wake up, he'd remain in this reality.

And Hardy Péter burst out sobbing at his father's burial.

**END**

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