

Cheryl Schleuss

Awakened

Louise's eyes popped wide open when the floor boards' creaked in the kitchen, the boards right in front of the seasoned Kenmore stove, loosened from years of her swaying and singing while frying and stirring. The sound of that creak was as familiar as the creak of her tired bones. She just wasn't sure if she heard it in her dream or if she was awake. When she took her night pills it was hard to wake-up and clear out the cobwebs that sometimes clung to her dreams and pulled them into the empty side of the bed next to her.

As she strained to listen, there was only the sound of rain water gurgling outside, pushing its way past the pine straw choking the gutters.

She turned her head toward the marble-topped night stand and looked at the big red block numbers glowing on the invisible face of the clock. Four forty-eight am. She had gone to bed at eleven and had dreamed of Clarence, of him sitting in the wing backed chair in the corner, just like he was still alive, putting on his shoes, and getting ready to go out and sit on the porch to wait for the paper.

Another creak, this time louder and closer. The hallway, the boards in the hallway just off the kitchen. Now she was sure. There was somebody in the house.

Louise eased up on her elbows careful to not make the sagging bed springs pop. Her heavy legs and swollen ankles throbbed in the joints as she swung them over the side of the bed and felt on the floor for her slippers. She slid her feet into the soft scuffs, her heart racing and hands shaking a little as she groped in the dark, feeling for the stick leaned against the bedpost at

the head of the bed. She had kept the stick close by the bed since Clarence died. He had started carving it into a baseball bat for the youngest grandson but didn't get far. It was just a smooth big old piece of hickory with a good grip on one end. She had never had need for it, but keeping it nearby was a comfort, like an old hound, doubtful, but at least offering the possibility of protection.

Who would be walking around in an old woman's house? Who would have the nerve?

She cupped her hand over her mouth unsure if she was thinking to herself as her wits sharpened, or if she had actually spoken aloud. She stood with the stick pulled up to her shoulder, ready to swing, holding her breath for a few seconds to listen.

Clink; the teardrop crystals hanging from the Victorian lamp on the side table in the hall bumped together. That lamp had been Aunt Lena's and now was Louise's most precious possession. Her fear started to simmer into anger.

She debated whether to move or not; she didn't want to give away her location. The heavy green damask drapes in front of the window were drawn as they were every night blocking any outside light, so she couldn't see much past the bed even when her eyes adjusted to the dark.

The fluorescent glow from the streetlight at the edge of the front yard cast a dull yellowness into the hall through the living room windows. *I can see him but he can't see me*, she strategized in her head. "Humpf", she grunted softly to herself for confidence and moved very quietly for a big woman, across the braided rug and stood against the bedroom wall by the open door into the hallway, the only sound of her movement--the soft swish of nylon nightgown against her legs.

A faint shadow preceded tentative footsteps in the hall as a silhouette entered her room and stopped in the doorway.

Smack! The stick connected with a sickening crack against solid matter followed instantly with a gasp of pain and surprise, and then a fading moan as the figure folded onto the floor like the paper fan Louise made out of her church bulletin on Sunday.

Lights on, Louise sat on the edge of her bed leaning against her stick, waiting for the young man to clear his own cobwebs. She studied his sagging body sitting on the floor, leaning back against Clarence's chair, and cocked her head from one side to the other assessing the cut across the bridge of his nose and the raised lump over his right eye. He had moaned when she pulled him over to the chair and tied his hands behind his back to the rusty cast iron radiator against the wall.

He won't be out long.

It was hard to tell how old the boy was as he was slight, almost wiry thin, wearing a shirt and pants so over-sized Louise wondered how they stayed on him when he walked. His pants had dropped below his hips as she dragged him to the chair and his white underwear barely hung to his skinny butt. His long eye lashes and corn rows all plaited neat and straight gave him a pretty appearance. *Someone's child*, Louise shook her head from side to side dismayed, *just someone's baby out looking for no good.*

The boy swallowed hard, his throat was hot and dry. He blinked open his eyes, lifted his aching head off the chair and tried to move his arms. Panic raced through him when he felt the bindings on his wrists and he jerked and squirmed, his eyes growing wide and wild, darting around the room, landing upon Louise and stopping as still as a rabbit caught in a spot light. A very large black woman was sitting in front of him wearing a flowing white robe, sort of like an

angel. His gaze moved down to the hot pink fuzzy slippers and the club in her hand. His head hurt and his eye felt swollen. It added up quickly. He wasn't in heaven; he was in trouble.

"Let me go," he said toward Louise but not making eye contact with her. He struggled against the bindings and tried to shove himself up with his feet, but stopped when he realized his pants were halfway down to his knees and his thighs were bare. He stared from his naked legs to Louise, confused and frightened. He tried to muster up a menacing glare, but the eyes looking back into his were much more menacing; he looked back down.

"I'll do the talking here," Louise blasted out. She had been holding her words and her temper far too long and was ready to deal with this nervy little punk.

"What is your name?"

The boy tried to look into her face again, but could not stand the contempt emanating from Louise's squinting eyes and puckered mouth.

"You let me go," he muttered somewhere between a plea and a weak demand.

"Ok, have it your way," Louise said matter-of-factly as she got up and shuffled out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen to fix herself a cup of tea.

She could hear him wriggling to get loose from the nylon cord as she propped her elbows on the breakfast table, sipping her Lemon Lift, and thinking about what she wanted to do with him. She knew he wasn't getting loose. She had hogtied many a contrary sow so the pigs could suckle when she was younger and living down in Butler County on the farm. He wasn't going anywhere till she was ready for him to go.

"Hey! You let me go; you can't keep me prisoner." The arrogance in his tone made her much madder than the words out of his mouth.

He heard the heavy steps coming back down the hallway. She came around the corner daintily holding her porcelain tea cup in her left hand and stood in the doorway with her right hand clenched and resting on her ample hip.

“You break into *MY* house in the middle of the night, preying upon a poor old defenseless lady, with the intentions of who knows what, and you got the gumption to tell me I can’t keep you prisoner. I got news for you. You are my prisoner, and ain’t nobody gonna take me as the criminal, so you just better sit still and answer my questions while you can still move those lips.”

For the first time he looked directly into her face, his eyes held with hers, and he asked a bit more reverently “You call the police?”

“I ain’t called no police. I don’t need police to handle my business. Now, you ready to tell me your name?”

“David.”

“Now, that’s better, David, assuming you’re telling me the truth” Louise said as she relaxed her stance and sipped her tea. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen. Why you asking me these questions?” He sounded a little too demanding, unable to control his fifteen-year-old attitude.

“I like to know who I’m dealing with. You are not just another little punk out on the street. You are in my house, tied to my radiator and about to get your head smashed again.”

The boy dropped his eyes back down toward his feet to avert her stare and sat quietly. *This must be a nightmare*, he thought. *I musta really been hit hard on the head.*

“What were you looking for, breaking into my house? I don’t have money. I don’t have drugs you’d be interested in. What on earth was on your mind?”

David sat, not looking up, not answering.

“Honey, we got all the time in the world. Don’t have no appointments today, got my hair done yesterday, saw the doctor last week, yes sir, we got all the time in the world.” Louise started back out of the room.

“I got to pee,” he said defiantly to her back.

“You pee right there in them big ole pants you wearin. If it runs out on my rug, you gonna wish you hadn’t.”

“What’s your name?” he asked, taking a calmer, manipulative tactic.

Louise turned around and looked at the softening face that seemed to be studying hers.

“Oh, so you want some conversation now do you? Well, maybe you should have looked up my name in the phone book when you were picking out which house you was planning to burglarize.”

Louise shuffled out of the room and down the hall. Ten minutes later, she walked calmly back in carrying a white iron, dragging the blue cord behind her and looked around for a wall plug.

“What are you going to do with that?” David drew his feet up so that his knees were touching his chest and pushed himself back against the chair, testing the binding again that held him in place. His stomach was churning and his legs started shaking. He just might pee in his pants.

“What do you think I am going to do?”

Louise left the room again and came back carrying an old folded metal ironing board with a faded blue gingham cover. She pulled open the legs with a loud metal on metal shriek, sat the board up against the wall, sat the iron upright on top of it and plugged it in. One more trip down the hall produced an armload of wrinkled white dress shirts.

“I do ironing for Mr. Pressley down at the bank,” she chatted pleasantly as she arranged her ironing station and started on the first shirt. “I usually do it in the laundry room but since I got company and you can’t go very far, I can do it in here today. It keeps me busy and I get a little extra Bingo money out of it.”

She turned around, holding the iron up in the air, and looked at David, “How do you get your extra money, other than burglarizing old ladies?”

“Why don’t you just call the police?” His voice betrayed youth and defiance blended into disrespect. The bravado was there but he was beginning to think he might be safer with the police.

Louise sighed and placed a shirt sleeve across the ironing board and misted it with a spray bottle, taking her time to get the pleat just right.

“I raised three boys and one very difficult female child. I never once had to call the police even though when they were your age, we had many a time when they headed down the wrong road, and I put myself right in the middle of that road to stop’em. Now I’m gonna just wait for you to tell me what I want to know. Then I’ll decide if the police need to handle my business. And by the way, my stories come on TV starting at ten o’clock. If you ain’t talking by then, you could be here a while.”

Louise continued to iron, humming to herself what David recognized as some old church hymn.

Four shirts later, he blurted out “Somebody told me to come here. And besides, I think I came to the wrong house.”

Without looking up, Louise muttered “Uh huh, and that tooth fairy that left a quarter under your pillow when you was six, that was me. But you are telling the truth about one thing. You did come to the wrong house.”

Frustrated David clammed up again and stared down at his shoes.

Another half hour went by and Louise finished the ironing, put the ironing board and iron away and neatly hung the perfectly pressed shirts on the back of the door.

She went into the kitchen and a few minutes later, the smell of bacon frying wafted down the hall and into the bedroom. The boy could hear Louise singing her hymn out loud and shuffling around the kitchen moving pots and pans. The smell of bacon concocted with the smell of biscuits baking made his stomach begin to growl. It seemed a long time since he had eaten last.

“Lady, I’m sorry. It was a mistake.”

Louise covered the bacon and biscuits and sat them on top of the stove to keep them warm, smiling to herself. She knew how to get the cooperation of a fifteen-year-old boy.

She plodded slowly back down the hall, her knees protesting too much ironing. She walked across the bedroom, pulled the large caned back rocker out from the corner and situated it directly in front of the boy. She huffed and fell back into the rocker and gave him a no-nonsense look that meant it was time to finish this business.

“Let’s start from the beginning. Why did you break into my house last night?”

He looked down and started to mumble his words.

“Stop and look up at me. You look me right in the eyes just like you are looking into the eyes of the Lord and tell me the truth.”

David looked directly into her round face. Her eyes meant business just like his grandmother's eyes had the day she threw him and his brother and his dad out of her house onto the street. His stomach churned nauseously and he hoped he wouldn't throw up – especially on that rug. Everything from the last few miserable days was sitting there right at the top of his stomach waiting to spill out onto the floor.

“I was camping in the dugout down by the ball field. Some old guy hanging around down there kept trying to talk to me, meddle in my business. Looked like the caretaker.”

Louise held her hand up like a school crossing guard. “Why are you camping out this time of year, in the rain? Are you a runaway?”

“I ain't no runaway. I'm old enough to take care of myself. I got mad at my old man and left for a few days, that's all.”

She pictured the boy sitting on the bench under the dugout at Legion Field; the same ballpark where she had sat on splintered benches for years watching Clarence coach her boys in the hot summer sun. It was a safe family place. *What is going on with this child?*

“So let's hear how you got from the dugout to my house.”

“Anyway, the old guy kept hanging around, so I left. Told him I needed to go get something to eat. When I came back, he was gone, but when it was almost dark I turned around and there he was again, sitting on the bleachers watching me. He asked me if I needed a place to stay and I said, “maybe.” He told me there is a house, a faded green shotgun on the edge of town that no one was staying in that was easy to get into. Said it was supposed to rain hard all night and I should get on down there and get out of the rain. He said the front window on the porch by the swing had a broken latch and I could crawl right in.”

Louise caught her breath and gripped the arms of the rocker with both hands. *Who knew about the broken window latch?* she wondered, trying to hide her surprise from the boy. She shifted in the chair to regain her composure, leaning forward, studying David's face.

"Why didn't you just go back home?"

"Because, my old man is crazy. He gets crazy when he drinks. He was beating my little brother for falling asleep before he finished his homework and I shoved him hard. I grabbed my brother and pulled him into our bedroom and pushed the dresser in front of the door. When the old man fell asleep, I crawled out the window. I never shoved him before."

Louise could read a child's eyes as well as she could read the Bible and these were not lying, not now anyway.

"So you crept into my house, rummaging around and scared an old lady half to death?"

"I said I was sorry. I didn't know anybody was here. The rain kept getting harder and the old guy said no one was staying here. The window latch was broke just like he said and I didn't have any reason not to come in. The window opened right up. Besides, who would come walking down a hall to get clubbed in the head if he knew somebody was here? I was worried about ghosts, not crazy old ladies with big clubs." He squinted his swollen eye. "My head really hurts by the way."

"I guess I can spare you two aspirins for your honesty."

"Thank you, but what I would really like is to pee."

She let out a deep belly laugh and walked out of the room and returned with a large butcher knife.

"Turn around" she said.

David froze; his eyes wide and wild again.

“Son, if I wanted to cut a boy up and eat him, I’d wait till one came along with a little more meat on his bones. Now turn around and let me cut you loose.”

David twisted his body as far as the bindings would let him go. Louise reached down as far as her knees would bend and cut through the cord. She noticed the sweat beading on the side of his temples and his hands trembling. She also could hear his stomach growling.

“Bathroom is across the hall, then meet me in the kitchen. I think you know the way.”

“In the dark, maybe,” he tried to joke, his voice shaky with relief.

She poured cold milk and watched the plate of biscuits and bacon disappear, hurriedly.

“You need to go on home where you belong. I don’t know about your father; you may need some help dealing with that, but you need to get back to that baby brother and make sure he is alright.”

“Don’t know if I can go home” he said looking down at the empty plate. “I never pushed him before. I can still see the look on his face, like I had shot him or something. He might not want me back.”

Louise shuffled her slippers into the living room and returned with a thick, leather bound, family bible; *King James* had once shined in gold on the cover but was now faded from years of hands looking for comfort.

“David, fifteen, meet Luke: 15.”

She opened the bible and placed it in front of David and pointed to a passage in the book of Luke. He started to read and then stopped and looked away.

“I already know that story. I ain’t no prodigal son.”

“You get your butt home and see what is what. If you need help you come back here to me. But you better knock on the door next time or you can expect the same hospitality you got this time.”

“Yes, mam.”

She led him from the kitchen into the living room toward the front door.

“You can stop by on Saturday and help me fix the latch on that window, too.”

“Yes, mam.”

David stopped abruptly and stared at the photographs crowding the top of the side table next to the blue flowered Victorian couch.

“That’s him,” he said weakly pointing to a picture of Louise and a tall, gray haired man with his arm around her shoulders.

“Who?” asked Louise, looking from the photograph to the boy, who stood motionless and looked confused and angry like he had been tricked.

“The old guy who told me to come stay here, out of the rain.”

“No honey, you are mistaken. That is my husband Clarence. That was our last wedding anniversary, right before he died.”

The boy walked slowly around the room looking from one photograph to another. He stopped in front of the piano and turned back to Louise. He raised his hand and pointed with a shaking finger at another photograph of Clarence sitting on the swing wearing a blue and white jersey with a baseball cap lying in his lap.

“That is him. That is the shirt and the cap he was wearing.”

Louise walked over and put her round arms around the skinny boy and hugged him to her chest.

“It’s OK baby. Just go on home. A bump on the head can make you confused. You will feel better after you sleep in your own bed.”

David did not hug her back, but did not move away either. He glanced back at the photograph and then walked out the door.

“I’ll expect to see you on Saturday” she called behind him sternly as he walked down the sidewalk.

Louise watched the boy walk with his head down studying the sidewalk, until he turned at the corner. She let the screen door close and just stood for a moment looking at the empty porch swing. She turned and walked over to the piano, picked up the picture and tapped her finger against Clarence’s chest.

How many times had she said, “May as well just bury that man behind third base?”