Open Category – Winner 2020

AWAKENING

By Ruby Todd

Author's note:
This story references the historic maritime disaster of the Melbourne-Voyager collision in 1964, when two Royal Australian Navy warships collided during maneuvers off Jervis Bay. Eighty-two men were killed. After two Royal Commissions, it was concluded that the HMAS Voyager Captain, Duncan Stevens, had been under the influence of alcohol on the night and unfit to command.

1.

Three days after the premonition came the disaster. It was that time in summer when everything reaches its full extension, and begins to speak of final things: evenings of salt wind and jasmine shorten, green leaves fade, and Earth grows farther from the sun. Nora and Paul had not been married long. Sydney was still strange, and she often got lost wandering its streets. February 1964, a leap year.

In the spring, Nora had baked a cake for Paul's birthday, a layered sponge with passionfruit cream. To her surprise, nothing burned and nothing collapsed; the cake looked composed and inviting, as if someone else had made it. At some point she

must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes it was afternoon. Paul, back from the races, was sitting opposite with a cup of coffee, looking at her sidelong, smiling. The sunlight through the shutters divided his face in two, the one half bright, the other shadowed. She saw in his expression a patient, concentrated pleasure. His posture in the chair seemed different, easier and more open. Their eyes remained on each other, yet nothing was said. The moment passed; they talked and ate cake; the afternoon darkened into evening. But it was to that image of them unspeaking that her mind often returned, when she tried to discern the outline of their future.

2.

Their courtship had not been passionate. They had married like two people arriving late to a jetty, to form the final viable pair. At times they still encountered each other at unexpected moments in the kitchen or lounge, with the blinking stares of creatures caught out. They were still relative strangers that February, when one morning Nora woke from a dream with a foreboding she couldn't shake.

She had slept late that day, and after waking stood before the bed where Paul's shape and her own were still impressed. In the kitchen amid the remains of his coffee and toast, she boiled the kettle and filled the pot. The humid heat had persisted overnight, but now it was beginning to rain. Through the window she saw the leaves of the plane trees in the park quivering, the sky darkening. When the first rumbles of thunder came, she felt it fill her body as if it were hollow. She watched the sky turn white. She watched the lightning break. The world seemed expectant and charged. The green and yellow of the leaves appeared saturated, and as in early colour photography, this strange exaggeration was somehow moving. She wanted it to last. *It will be a long fall*, the man in the dream had said, his face shadowed by a brimmed hat. He had led her, wordless, out of the dark interior in which he found her, into a pale day. Looking up, she had seen a clock tower against the sky. When she turned around he was gone, and she felt her aloneness in that strange place—a grass plain devoid of people, before a wide bay where ships were docked. As she wondered which direction to take, the sky darkened with unnatural haste, and she felt a deep conviction that something dreadful was to happen.

She opened the window now and heard the traffic. The rain had stopped. The

washing on the balcony was wet, and the potted succulent her mother had given her was again on its side. Looking out over the park and the road beyond, she inhaled the smell of earth after rain. She was trying to retrace the arrival of certainty, as if this certainty were born of thought and evidence rather than a dream, which in its tide had washed over her and simply left it, solid as a deposit, behind.

3.

Like a chemical seeping through skin, the dream charged the afternoon. At the butcher's she saw the wild look in her eyes reflected in the cabinet glass, and stumbled over her order of chops as if she hadn't used her voice for years. At the dry cleaner's she handed over the ticket and received with both arms Paul's uniform, pressing the starched shirts and jackets to her chest as if embracing his disembodied form. Holding the bag of chops in one hand and the dry cleaning in the other, she walked home, feeling heavy and estranged from the sunshine, from the quickness of people and cars, and from her own body. In three days, Paul, an Officer of the Watch, was departing Sydney for maneuvers off Jervis Bay. When he finally returned they would again meet like acquaintances, again begin the process of growing comfortable with each other. He had been on shore leave for five months since his last deployment, yet Nora still hadn't shaken the persistent sense of playing an intricate adult game, the rules of which seemed arbitrary, and was visited often by the feeling she was living someone else's life.

As the daylight dimmed, she washed vegetables. She closed her eyes and felt for the dream, its dark weight beneath her eyelids. The door to the clock tower had been open, and she had found herself ascending its staircase. When she finally reached the lookout, she saw the man again. He nodded with the solemn, collected aspect of a priest about to perform a rite. She looked at the clock standing behind them in stillness, its face somehow suspended, and thought that she could feel the tremor of its bell before it rang. What struck her then was not the sense of dread, but the terrible thrill that shot through it, the thrill of feeling she would escape in time.
Without knowing why, she knew this dream had been different—it peered back at her when she touched it, uncompromising in its veracity. It refused to embarrass her instinct that the man's cryptic message would somehow prove true.

4.

When Paul walked in that evening, she had to shake the sense of being visited by a ghost. She heard the steady clomp of his boots, saw the tall form in the doorway. Saw the shy, lopsided grin, the look of someone slightly stunned. Of course the feeling passed, and she told herself she was being ridiculous. She walked over and kissed him, felt his warm arm.

The room was filled with the sound of cicadas shrieking. As she served dinner, he closed the windows and she missed it, that click and whir of wings in her ears. In the half-light they sat chewing potatoes and cutting up the chops, which she had overcooked. Paul was talking about the ship's refit. Apparently it was behind schedule.

'Davo's just been made up to two and half and will likely be our navigator,' he was saying. 'He was a hard taskmaster during College, so I doubt it'll be an easy trip.' She nodded. She knew none of these men, but their names animated their dinners. 'Damn shame about the timing,' he was saying now. She looked through the window behind him, where streetlamps glowed between power lines. If she stepped onto the balcony she would hear the trees in the park behind, that wonderful hushing sound.

'I'd love to be here for the rest of the Test,' he said now. The sky had an orange tinge. Looking at it, she realised it would not be long till she was forty.
'It's a shame,' she said. The fifth Test of Australia versus South Africa had just begun. Paul loved the cricket.

She told him nothing of the dream, but its impact remained. That night she lay awake, trying to anticipate the shape her life would take on without him in it, for another six months. She looked at his face, resolute in sleep, and saw a stranger who presumed to know her. It was always in the twilight pause between wakefulness and sleep when, lying prone with nothing to hold her back, she would slip. Their wedding reception had been in a marquee in the botanical gardens, where the tinkling of glass and the chatter of guests echoed. The warmth of the champagne had collected in her chest, and while watching the waiters light the lanterns for evening she had been visited by

the feeling that everything would be all right. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder, and turned around to receive the congratulations of another of Paul's friends. When she faced him it was as if the rest of the room were water, violently receding.
Finally he spoke: 'There you are.'

She eventually said something she no longer recalled, something about not realising he knew Paul. They just looked at each other. The line between his eyebrows had deepened since she'd seen him last. She tried to keep her mouth from wobbling.
'Paul's a solid guy,' he said.

She heard herself telling him they had met the previous year. She tried to read his face, and shifted her stance. The bodice of the satin gown she'd bought to please her mother was too tight.

'I always wondered,' he said. She waited for more, waited for the wave to break.
But Paul's father began beating his spoon on a champagne flute, and commenced a toast.
Tracing the outline of that moment in the dark bedroom, she again saw Jim looking down at her from his great, loping height. She heard his warm voice, always amused, and remembered how difficult it had been to speak. He was a Lieutenant Commander, and had flown in from Cairns for the wedding. Until that day he had just been another name. Paul called him Jimmy; she had never thought to draw the connection. And on that day of all days, coincidence had compelled her to face the fact that what she had hoped was buried, remained alive.

5.

She remembered the spring she had first come to work in payroll on Garden Island, the brightness of the colours in the street, the smell of chlorophyll and jasmine, the breathless feeling of arrival. Jim approved the accounts and sought her help with transcriptions, and when he passed through the office she registered him as a kind of radiance that remained after he had gone. Between signing papers she gave him and briefing her on tasks, they would talk about life outside work—trivial desires and amusements—in snatches, which stretched and gained in gravity as the weeks passed. She had never before had someone look at her as he did, or felt herself so recognised.

She remembered their days in the apartment in Cairns. In the evenings they would cook together, clattering around the kitchen, tasting things, laughing. He showed her how to make Chinese dumplings, cannelloni, Welsh rarebit. She would watch his quick, generous hands. They would eat watching the sunset, and then he would hold her like something rare and fuck her until all details of time and space fell out. In the mornings she would watch him sleeping and feel rage eroding her joy, recalling that for the man who made her feel so singular, she was one of two. She was the woman he fit in, the other one.

She remembered her mother's grim face regarding her over a cup of tea in her council flat, not long before it all ended and a work friend introduced her to Paul. 'Don't make the mistake of thinking you have more time than you do,' her mother had said, drawing out the words as if they were scarce. She sighed and tipped the ash of her cigarette onto a saucer. 'It's an old story and you'll be no exception. When he's had his fun with you, he'll still have his wife and children. The worst thing is to be alone.'

Nora didn't remember what she had said in response, but she could still see the sour turn of her mother's mouth, a mouth that loneliness and struggle had transformed. The next summer, she had accepted Paul's proposal.

6.

For the next two days after the dream, life continued, unchanged from the outside. But in everything she did—pegging out washing, greeting the fishmonger, reading the newspaper—she experienced the feeling of gliding across the surface, separated from all she touched, and she realised she was waiting. By Saturday she had convinced herself that the vague conviction she felt after the dream was an illusion, even if the feelings it had revealed to her were real. Over the course of lunch at the pub she saw Paul's lightness and excitement at the coming trip, and wondered whether he would miss her at all.

In the morning he left for Jervis Bay. She woke with him early, sat with him over breakfast and kissed him at the door. He ruffled her hair and winked, slung his duffle over his shoulder, and was gone. All morning she fussed around, noting things that

needed doing—ironing, shoe polishing—as if avoiding an unwelcome guest. She realised she was setting things in order.

The following day she packed a suitcase, wrote a note, and eyed herself in the hallway mirror, to see if she had the nerve. The woman who stared back looked more certain than Nora felt, so she decided to trust her.

As she stood there, the doorbell rang. It was Barbara, Jim's wife. Nora's heart lurched to see her. She had to remind herself that Barbara knew her only as the wife of Jim's friend. They had met once before, at a wardroom mess dinner where Barbara had spoken of decorating plans for her sunroom. Now she stood white-faced and panting on Nora's step in a housedress.

'Have you heard? There's been a collision. Last night off Jervis Bay.' It was only when they were seated on the couch that Nora registered Barbara's words.
'I heard it on the radio early this morning, and called Defence Liaison. But they couldn't tell me anything about Jim.' She pressed a handkerchief to her eyes and looked at Nora, who peered back without expression and asked if Barbara would like a cup of tea.

Barbara frowned and touched her shoulder. 'Nora, you do know that Paul was on the ship with Jim?'

'Yes,' she said, blinking, feeling Barbara's appraising gaze. As she listened to her explaining that the *Melbourne* was on route back to Sydney with the survivors from the *Voyager*, their husbands' ship, Nora's eyes fell on the suitcase in the hall.

7.

It was mayhem when *HMAS Melbourne* finally came into Sydney Harbour, carrying the survivors of *HMAS Voyager*. The crowd had grown, and it seemed like forever as it dawdled around Bradley's Head and into dock. The whole scene was like a dark carnival, exploding with sound: the cameras, the reporters, the medics, the engines, the women, the men. Unable to wait, the wives called the names of their husbands, some having to be held back from jumping aboard. Wild-eyed barefoot men in

pyjama bottoms, grimy with oil, began being lifted out of the ship on stretchers by medics and other sailors, and loaded into waiting ambulances. Some men from Voyager walked and were able to embrace their wives and children.

Nora rested her eyes on the horizon, the line of which seemed to harden as she looked. Finally she saw Paul being helped along by two sailors from Melbourne. Paul. For a moment, she watched him as if he were any other man. Then she rushed toward him.

'Nora,' he said when he saw her, his face breaking into a strange smile. 'Have you seen Jimmy?' When she said nothing, he looked down and adjusted his good leg. 'I can't believe it,' he said, 'I thought we'd been hit by a torpedo. I was sure I was—' He shook his head. Nora's eyes followed his toward the ship, where men were still emerging.

Paul was lucky. Three of his shipmates arrived home to their wives in body bags; another seventy, including Jim, were missing at sea. After an overnight stay in hospital, Paul was back home with a leg in plaster and little else externally to show for the ordeal. On his first few days home he spoke often, in terse, fervent sentences dropped like weights to be measured: *Both ships were flying when it happened. We turned left instead of right. We broke in two on the Melbourne's bow. I watched us pass it, just as our forward boiler was exploding and I realised that men were going to die.*

In the mornings Nora would help him to the couch, where he would lie with his leg propped up facing the balcony, with a view of the yellowing trees. There was little time to talk alone; the first week was filled with visitors—Paul's parents and sister, colleagues and friends; a Navy rep with paperwork. Nora would hear him cut through the chatter now and then, as she brewed tea and lowered flowers into vases; a slow, measuring voice that began from far away and left silence behind it: *Some men who had survived died waiting in the water, while we carried out the tradition of searching for the captain first. Stevens, the drunk, the one who had turned us the wrong way.*

8.

As flowers and cards accumulated, the lounge took on a ripe, festive air which testified to the miracle of Paul's survival. Then, in the second week when the shock, and the distraction of visitors had ceased, his silences set in. Like her husband, Nora retreated inside herself. She thought of the journey she had been poised to make. A train through the mountains, the shock of resolve setting in, the relief of motion.
In the third week, she fell ill. Aching and feverish, she took to bed and slept. In the strange clarity of illness, her dreams seemed to be the real life, and her brief awakenings to the dim bedroom a kind of limbo. She dreamed she was on a train. A young man alighted and sat opposite her, but she couldn't see his face. 'That's some sunset,' he said in greeting. Out the window, the rocks on the horizon had turned gold under the low sun, leaving everything else in shadow. 'Where are you headed?' she asked, but he didn't say.

After one of these dreams, she woke to see Paul sitting on the chair beside the bed, looking out the window to the street, where the dawn garbage trucks were emptying bins.

'You're not sleeping,' she said. He looked at her and shrugged.
'Are you feeling better?'
'A little.'
'I made you some broth. Mum used to do it. It helped.'

A mug stood on the bedside table, purling steam. She looked at it for a long moment. Then she looked at Paul and thanked him.

They were silent for a while, as the light came up and the rubbish bins crashed.
'You know, I was sleeping when we hit the *Melbourne*. I woke in my cabin to the sound of my sheets tearing. Then I realised I was lying on the shower wall. I could smell the lead from the paint that had been stretched from the walls in the impact. The emergency yellow lighting was flashing, and I heard the Officer of the Watch broadcast for Emergency Stations.'

He took a breath and leaned forward in the chair, pressing his hands together. He

stole a glance at her then, to gauge whether to go on. To show she was listening she smiled.

'I heard the men in the lower cafeteria singing hymns, and followed the sound,' he went on. 'They were clustered around each other by the portholes. I was about to ask them what they were doing when I realised they were the ones who couldn't fit through. I just stood there listening to them sing, those big men, as the water poured in and we were left in the blue gloom of the Melbourne's steaming lights. Eventually Steve, one of the techos, saw me standing there, and with a great gust of life he bellowed at me to go. Go, they all said, motioning to the nearest porthole, swinging open unhinged. Steve and Rodger slapped me, peered at me to see if I still had my senses and steered me forward. The water was at our thighs now. They formed a hoist for my feet with their hands. Then I took a breath and tried not to think of the freezing water.'

Listening through her fever from the propped-up pillows, his words took longer to arrive. She closed her eyes, and imagined waking to find herself drowning in a disaster she thought she had dreamed. She tried to feel the pressure building in her lungs, the numbing cold, friends' screams distorted underwater, the involuntary convulsions.

Then, his voice again: 'Instead I thought of you.'
She peered at him through the half-light like a thing she hadn't yet seen. Peered until he at last looked back at her. And they sat in the room together, until they felt the morning sun on their hands.

9.

When Jim had been declared dead at sea and memorialised at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Manly, and Paul's leg had begun to heal and the leaves were reddening, Nora visited HMAS Creswell, the base where the bodies that were found had been taken. It was a cool day, with a breeze that lifted the edges of everything, and when the scene slowly opened itself to her during the walk from the road, she was not surprised to find herself returned to the landscape of the dream. She stood on the brilliant grass, the clock tower before her, the mute grey sea beyond, and felt the chill of evening

coming. For an instant the clock face seemed to dilate under her watch, until she blinked and it looked back at her, impervious and still. Then she steered herself back over the grass, the wind in her ears, and left the clock tower behind.