

WEST OF WINSOR

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by
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Chapter 2 “Wake up”

Part 1

“The years that are gone seem like dreams ---if one might go on sleeping and dreaming --- but to wake up and find ---oh!well! Perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life.” *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin

Danny double checked the quote from the book. She dreaded the assignment the moment it was given to the class - “Write from her perspective how she relates to the book, the main character, or the main character’s conflict”. Dread. She didn’t relate to the book, the main character or her conflict. She read through the quote again and again. Then she swept through her notes hoping to find something that would trigger a personal response from which she could write an entire essay.

These were her worst assignments - relating her life to fiction. Danny preferred the math and science classes and sticking with the facts.

She sighed at her computer screen as she recalled Edna, the main character of *The Awakening*, and her story. Danny found nothing to relate to just as she did with many of the classics. Unlike Edna, Danny wasn’t married and didn’t have children. She didn’t live in a society where women were valued only as a mother or wife. She certainly had no intention of ever dating, let alone marrying, a man as repugnant as Edna’s husband whose every woeful discomfort was a direct result of Edna’s non-compliance to his needs.

And also like many of the classics, the book was devoid of the voices of people of color, referring to them only by color or ethnicity or disparaging them completely as silent entities whose existence is either dangerous or subservient. Yes, Danny could call on the prejudice she had experienced in her life but she didn't want to do it again and unlike all of the non-white people in the book, Danny came from excessive wealth.

Maybe that was it? She would write about societal constrictions of wealth. She pondered the idea for a moment then passed. It really didn't scream "Oppression"! Maybe she was missing something, she thought. Maybe it was time to look at the book from a different angle.

Danny closed her laptop in frustration. She walked downstairs to the kitchen and sifted through her personal cabinet filled with foods she had purchased and foods Tina had given each of them. Perhaps a couple of pieces of dark chocolate or some granola would help clear her mind or, if nothing else, satisfy her stomach.

The second kitchen door, the one leading to the study area and dining room was closed but she could hear Jacob and Will talking. She had taken the back stairs that led directly to the kitchen as she always did allowing her to avoid the house's inhabitants – except for Joe Joe, who always seemed to be waiting for her in the hall and then would follow her where ever she went, be it downstairs, the kitchen or even the bathroom.

Most nights when she came down late she could hear the guys in the study area. Then she would quietly retrieve a snack from the kitchen and head back upstairs without acknowledging her housemates. Danny preferred the solitude of her bedroom when it came to studying. She also was not concerned with making friends which is why she often skipped dinner, the prayers and the supper time chit chat.

"We made extra coffee if you want some," Will called from behind the closed door.

Danny raised an eyebrow and twisted her mouth to one side in disappointed recognition of being discovered. She slowly pushed the door open exposing Jacob and Will, who were sitting at the large table with laptops, notebooks and books sprawled everywhere.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Danny said while popping Tina’s homemade granola in her mouth.

“We don’t bite,” Will said.

“No, but you probably drool a little,” Danny replied.

Will cocked his head to the side confused.

“He does drool a little when he’s really tired,” Jacob said. “And when he’s doing math. That’s when it’s really bad.” Jacob laughed.

“Thanks, man.”

“Look! She smiled,” Jacob said pointing to Danny. Danny shook her head.

“Are you in fem lit?” Danny asked acknowledging the book *The Awakening* sitting next to Jacob’s laptop.

“Yeah,” Jacob said.

“Do you have to do an essay?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m doing now. You have Felix?”

“No, Johnson but I’m working on an essay too.”

“Relate your life” Jacob said when Danny cut in.

“To the main character’s story, conflict, blah blah blah,” she mocked.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“You’re not studying for the math test tomorrow?” Will asked.

Danny shook her head and smirked.

“No, I think I’m good,” she said.

“Okay, Super Woman, why do I keep getting this problem wrong?” Will asked spinning his laptop around so Danny could see it. Danny paused for a moment in the doorway then reluctantly walked over to Will’s laptop. She scanned the problem then looked down at his notebook where he had worked out the problem.

“Here,” she said pointing to a line on the page. “Your order of operations is off.”

Will looked but still did not see the error. A wave of confusion and frustration ran across his face. Danny took notice. She felt a pang of sympathy for his frustration since his look seemed to mimic hers from working on the essay. She was also hit with a pang of annoyance that he was asking for help.

“This action comes first,” she said pointing. “You can’t calculate this part until you do this first.”

“Son of a...,” Will said. “I’ve been looking at this for like ten minutes.” He reworked his calculations then slid back in his chair. “Yup, that worked.”

“I know,” Danny said.

“Thanks,” Will said.

“Thanks, Super Woman,” Danny teased. Will frowned.

“Come on,” she prodded with expectation.

Will got out of his chair and stood in front of Danny. Danny’s eyes looked at Jacob for some help. Jacob shrugged.

Will dramatically fell to his knees. “Thank you! Thank you dear Super Woman!” he exclaimed.

“Dude,” Jacob said. “Shut up. You’re going to wake up your family.”

“Dearest Super Woman, I am at your mercy and now I owe you my life in numbers.”

“You are a freak,” Danny said.

“Oh, Super Woman,” Will continued. He fell to Danny’s feet as if bowing in honor.

“This is why I don’t come down here,” Danny said rolling her eyes.

Jacob laughed.

“He has a debt to honor,” Jacob said.

“Okay, get off my feet,” Danny instructed. “I’ll be sure to collect at some point.”

Will rolled away, bounced to his feet and sat back down in front of his laptop.

“What are you doing for the essay,” Danny asked.

“When I woke up,” Jacob said.

“What do you mean, when you woke up?” Danny asked.

Jacob looked away a little embarrassed. Danny noticed immediately.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want – like if it’s too personal or something.”

“No, it’s cool.” Jacob was still noticeably uncomfortable but he continued. “I’m writing about when I was a freshman in high school. The end of my freshman year all this shit happened and it, well, it changed me. It changed how I looked at the world. It changed how I wanted my life to go. It made me realize I needed to do something to change my life or at least die trying. It’s kind of how I wound up here.”

“Here, like in this house?” Will asked. “Or at this school?”

“All of it. I should be working making minimum wage somewhere or running around on the street but I’m not. I’m here.”

Jacob tapped his thumb on his laptop channeling his nervous energy. He didn’t mind telling Danny and Will about his life. He thought about how he wound up here all the time. He just hadn’t vocalized it before and wasn’t sure what their reactions would be. Would they judge him once they knew where he came from? After all, he did a good job of passing for a middle class kid. Would they trust him once they knew the truth?

“You know I’m from Michigan but I’m not from any decent parts,” Jacob said. “I lived with my father and aunt in a two bedroom apartment that barely had heat in the winter and no air conditioning in

the summer. I didn't get in trouble or anything but that's because I was invisible. I stayed away from everything. Anyway, my mom died when I was in eighth grade."

"Sorry, man," Will said.

"Things were somewhat cool up until then. My parents were decent people. They worked hard. They just couldn't get anywhere. When my mom got sick we didn't have any insurance so she never went to any doctors or anything until it was too late. She died the beginning of eighth grade. By my freshman year my sister was a mess. She and I are twins. Anyway, she wound up hooking up with this guy, Dante. He's bad news. We tried to tell her but she wouldn't listen to anyone. She just couldn't handle my mom being gone and did all this crazy stuff. Then my aunt came to live with us. My dad was pulling as many shifts as he could just to pay the bills. That's why my aunt came to live with us, to try to help out. She did help but she's harsh, real harsh. She's kinda mean. Then my sister got pregnant and nine months later had a baby boy. He was cool. Eli. He was this perfect little thing." Jacob smiled.

"A couple of months after Eli was born I was at a party with some friends. We weren't doing anything – just hanging out. I was with my best friend, Cole. We grew up together. A couple of high school kids showed up. Actually, I don't even know if they were in school or not. They came in and starting messing around. The girl whose house it was told them to get out but they wouldn't. Her older brother started pushing them around to get out. They went outside, walked to the curb then turned around and shot at the house. Cole and I were watching from the window. People started screaming and running. I hit the ground for cover and Cole was lying next to me. His eyes open, blood coming out of his mouth and he wasn't breathing."

"Holy shit!" Will said.

"Is that when it all changed?" Danny asked.

"No," Jacob said. "That's when I got angry, very angry. A month later I woke up to my sister screaming like I've never heard anyone scream. I ran in her room. She was holding Eli and screaming.

He had died that night. I don't know when or why. No one knows if Dante did something or he just didn't wake up. Once we calmed my sister down and the paramedics came, she handed Eli to me. That's when it all changed. That's when I looked at his little face and his beautiful eyes and realized we had failed him. That it wasn't right for a life, any life, to be wasted. I cried for Eli. I cried for Cole. And I cried for my mom. When I stopped crying I swore I wouldn't die a waste. I decided I would exhaust myself and put forth every ounce of energy I had towards something better. If others had it then I could have it. I just had to figure out the best path for me and accept that when the shit came at me I would step over it and keep going."

"Sorry, Jacob," Danny said.

"It's weird, right? Good and bad. Bad things happened that got me here. I suffered but in the end, hopefully, it wasn't in vain. Those bad events got me here."

"Yeah, they did," Danny said.



The phone call came at one in the morning. Joe jumped up. He knew before looking at the phone what the call was about. What he did not know was who would be calling – the police, the hospital or the morgue.

"Hello," Joe said in a rough, sleepy voice.

"Joe?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's Chris."

"What happened?"

"I'm with Lenny. He's at my house."

"Is he all right?"

“Not really. The police called me about a homeless guy passed out on the street. When they described him I knew it was Lenny. I went and got him instead of having them take him to jail.”

“Thanks, Chris.”

“I think you should come...”

“Why? You know he’s gonna tell me to go away.”

“I think this time might be different. He was pretty bad off when I got him. Just come and talk to him and see what happens. But Joe, even if he does tell you to leave, the fact that you’re here...”

“Yeah, yeah. All right I’ll come over.”

Joe hung up his phone then looked at Cecelia who was now awake and watching him.

“Is he okay?” Cecelia asked.

“I think so. He’s at Chris’s place. Chris wants me to go over and talk to him.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, you go back to sleep. I’ll call you later.”

“Ok,” Cecelia said. She watched her husband sitting on the side of the bed rubbing his face in an attempt to wipe the sleepiness away and subdue the stress and anxiety she knew was building inside him.

A half an hour later Joe was at Chris’s house sitting beside his brother who was either asleep or passed out in the bed. The room had changed very little in the seven years that had gone by since Joe was lying in that same bed. The walls looked fresh and clean, probably from a recent coat of paint, and were the same light blue color. The furniture was in the same spot, the painting on the wall remained, and the same odd metal sculpture sat on the dresser across from the bed. The only things that looked different were the curtains and bedspread. The matching plaid patterns were now solids – dark blue curtains edged in white complimented the white bed spread that was outlined in dark blue.

There was a part of Joe that was accepting and somewhat relaxed reflecting on his past but there was also a part of him that was angry with Lenny for making him come back to this place.

“He looks clean,” Joe said to Chris.

“He woke up on the drive here. He showered or mostly showered. I found him sleeping on the bathroom floor soaking wet. I would have let you sleep if I thought he would pass out again.”

“I’m sorry, Chris.”

“No. You know the rules.”

“Yeah,” Joe said with a solemn smile. “Why do you think this time is different? We’ve been through this time and time again. He’s not me.”

“No, he’s not you. His story and his problems are his own but just like you, just like me, he can get to a point where he’s had enough and face the fight that lies ahead of him. Maybe this is it.”

Joe shrugged his shoulders.

“Coffee?” Chris asked.

“Sure.”

Joe watched his little brother sleep. Like a child, he thought, without a care in the world, but it was a facade. Sleep was Lenny’s escape. Joe knew that better than anyone. He also knew what was waiting for Lenny the second he opened his eyes – debilitating doubt, an endless lack of self worth and the loss of his identity as a human being. These were the monsters Joe was able to escape with the help of Chris. And these were the monsters that mercilessly tortured Lenny backing him into a corner until his only relief was a noxious volume of alcohol.

Joe’s mind drifted to the summer night that brought him to Chris. His drinking had been a problem for years. Cecelia tried to help him and his kids tried to help him but he never acknowledged it. He just kept telling them they were overreacting. Having a few drinks here and there was no big deal

and the mess-ups at the cafe just happened – they were honest mistakes and had nothing to do with his drinking.

When Cel found the hidden bottles at the cafe she threatened to leave Joe if he didn't get help. So he signed up for counseling, talked to his doctor and did whatever she wanted but it didn't matter. He didn't want the help or need the help. Instead he learned to do a better job hiding alcohol or finding alcohol that had a quicker impact on him. He learned to control how he looked and learned to speak without slurring his words so his family would not be tipped off that he had been drinking. He even knew which alcohol would not smell on his breath.

It worked. His family got off his back as Joe became a well functioning drunk. Everyone was happy, or so he thought, until one hot summer night seven years ago when Joe found himself scared out of his mind. He, Cel and their two boys, Ryan and Jeff were at Cel's sister's for their nephew's barbecue birthday party. Joe drank all day. He played it cool using a cup and then refilled the cup so no one could tell how much he had been drinking. He made sure to let people know that he had been "nursing" the same drink all day. Towards the end of the day he filled a Coke can with vodka so no one would even ask.

Divide and conquer – Cel took Jeff home early to go to a friend's sweet sixteen party while Ryan would stay at his cousin's party. The day had been planned in advance and they took two cars to the barbecue. Joe would have preferred that Cel drive but was confident he would be fine. He had hours to sober up.

Joe and Ryan were the last ones to leave the party. It was late, dark and unknown to everyone else, Joe was loaded. No worries, he thought. He could drive and besides the roads would be pretty empty.

Ryan fell asleep in the car. It wasn't a long ride home – only about twenty minutes but the kid had had a long day. Ryan had asked to leave two hours earlier but Joe wanted to stay and drink.

It was a deer. That's what he told Cel but it wasn't. He had come around a bend and couldn't keep the car in the lane. He slid off the right side of the road bumping over debris and through bushes until his fender hit a small tree. It wasn't too bad – only minimal damage to the car but it could have been worse – much worse. He missed hitting one of the huge oaks that lined the side of the road by inches and if he had hit it, it would have destroyed the passenger side of the car where Ryan was sleeping.

Ryan woke up in a panic. The fourteen year old felt the bumps and then the sudden stop. Joe told him it was a deer. Ryan heralded his father a hero for managing to miss the big trees.

Ryan told his father to call the police but Joe knew he would fail a breathalyzer. Joe convinced Ryan the car would get them home. He somehow managed to get it back on the road and all the way home which was another miracle in itself. After reassuring Cel that he and Ryan were fine they all went to bed. Joe got up once his family was asleep and headed outside for a bottle that was stashed in the garage. He chugged the bottle then collapsed in tears. Then he called Chris, a man he knew from the cafe, a man he knew helped people.

The months that followed were torture but Chris and Cel, Ryan and Jeff, and the rest of Joe's family were there with him every step of the way. Whatever Chris said they needed to do, they did. Everyone helped out except Lenny, who had lost his drinking buddy. Lenny was eventually banned from seeing Joe until Joe was sober and retained a clean bill of health.

Tears stung Joe's eyes as Lenny jolted awake and then passed back out. He knew how Lenny felt – he knew the pain. He knew everything was working against Lenny just as it had worked against him so many years ago.

Chris stopped just short of the doorway when he heard Lenny's voice.

“Joe,” Lenny whispered. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you.”

Lenny started to laugh.

“You’re an idiot Joe.”

Joe took a deep breath.

“This is your fault, you know,” Lenny continued. “If you would just come out with me once in a while and hangout like we used to, we could have fun together.”

“I can’t do that. You know...”

“Screw you. You left me. I was good enough for you when we were in college and then after college.”

“Is it getting worse Lenny?”

“Can I have a beer?” Lenny asked.

“You have money?”

“No,” Lenny hissed.

“I’ll get you some food,” Joe said.

“I don’t want food. I’m not hungry.”

Lenny looked at Joe with hate in his eyes. He hated Joe for everything he walked away from, for everything he stood for now and for everything he had that Lenny didn’t. Cel stood by Joe but Lenny’s wife, Isabel, left him years ago. Lenny missed his nephews, kids he loved, who he was now forbidden to see. Now all Joe ever asked Lenny was ‘do you want any food?’.

Lenny couldn’t recall exactly how he got to Chris’s. He remembered some kids giving him twenty bucks to buy them beer and another five for him. He told them he wanted a bottle of scotch instead. They reluctantly obliged and Lenny drank the bottle or at least he thinks he did. There may have been two groups of kids and maybe another bottle of scotch or vodka or something but he really wasn’t sure.

Then something did come back to Lenny. He suddenly remembered waking up in Chris's car. The car windows were wide open and Lenny's legs stung.

Lenny started to cry. Joe was caught off guard. Usually the night was full of verbal abuse and attacks. Then, when Joe had enough, he would leave.

"Lenny," Joe said. "Why are you crying?"

"Shit," Lenny cried. Joe didn't know what to say.

Chris leaned against the wall to the right of the doorway. Chris was hoping and praying Lenny's moment had come and his life would change. He closed his eyes and listened.

"Shit!" Lenny yelled. "I was sitting in my own shit! What am I? What am I?"

Joe walked over to his little brother.

"We can help you. Chris and I can help you. Cecelia can help you. We want you to get better."

Lenny sobbed.

"Cecelia hates me."

"No she doesn't. She just wants you to get better. But we can't make you. It's up to you."

"I can't do this anymore. I'm hungry. I'm tired. This wasn't who I was supposed to be. I'm not even a person anymore."

Lenny looked at his brother with desperate eyes. Joe's heart broke. He was looking at his little brother just like he did when they were kids.

"If you want to change – if you want to get better – we can help you."

"I do, Joe. I have to. I can't do this anymore. I'm going to die in my own shit."

Chris breathed a sigh of relief. A slight smile crept up on his lips. There were no guarantees but he was hoping this would be the beginning for Lenny. Wanting and asking for change was the start. Now the hardest fight of Lenny's life would begin.