

AWAKEN

A collection.

By
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Nearly Nine

Amongst the infinity of numbers that are nearly nine, there is ample enough space for a great many terrible and tragic occurrences. Nearly nine minutes, by definition, is an eternity. For instance, it took nearly nine minutes for Aiden Potter to remember the word 'gorgeous.' Whitney Heap just stared as Aiden, fidgeting with a tennis ball, struggled to remember the word. "Are you some kind of retard?" she asked, before slinking away in her cotton that illustrated the perfect outline of her body.

It also took nearly nine minutes for Sasha Oliver's cheeks to return to their natural color. Her father gnawed the gristle on his steak. "I just think no one wants a female doctor," he admitted. "You'd make a better nurse." Sasha admitted failure by turning back to her own plate, a dismal wilted forest of greens.

Paul Schaffer's friends took nearly nine minutes to ruin a bunker at Amdahl Country Club while his back was turned. Coach screamed spittle onto his face, but Paul was more afraid of being outcast. Years later, this cowardice would again arrest him as the dull thuds of a neighbor beating his girlfriend echoed throughout the building. After nearly nine minutes, Paul put on headphones.

At age seven, it took Justine Carson nearly nine minutes to put her cat to rest. The ailing Himalayan left several long, ruby red streaks down Justine's arms as it struggled for animal rights. At twenty-seven, nearly nine minutes ago, Justine, dressed neatly in her uniform, completed her duty to Alaska Airways.

It took nearly nine seconds for Justine to empty most of two handguns into the crowd of passengers. "Repent and live!" she called out over the chaos. Then she turned to baptize the tail section. Paul ached to act, to push aside his cowardice for heroism. He moved quickly down the aisle and dove to tackle Justine. She turned and responded. Paul crumpled to the floor.

Sasha immediately rushed to his side. She struggled to pull him out of the aisle. Justine stood over them, her gaze hard and distant. A rush of footsteps came from the tail section as Aiden blindsided Justine with his laptop. With a spray of blood, Justine went limp. Aiden patted her down, looking for more surprises. He opened her coat.

“Bomb!” Aiden shouted, and the crowd stirred. Paul screamed as Sasha dug the bullet out with her hands. Aiden thought for a moment, then grabbed some people to help him carry Justine to an exit row. “Hold tight!” yelled Aiden, and he pulled open the emergency door. Wind roared into the cabin. People sobbed and questioned and clung to those nearest. With an awkward heave, he pushed Justine out the door. Aiden held tight to the door frame as the body tumbled out. Justine was nearly beyond the plane when Aiden caught a bright flash of orange.

It took nine years to find the wreckage.

Casio's Dream

"Knowledge sought beneath the stars is kept between its greedy guards."

"Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth."

- Revelation 12: 3 – 4

Casio pulled the covers back. He couldn't sleep any longer. He had had That Dream again; the one that always woke him up, and always ended with the horizon. Trying his best to not wake Gabrielle, he sat up, swung his legs out from beneath the covers, slipped on his sandals, and left the room.

He made his way to the kitchen. He found a long, slender bottle, and pulled the top off of it. As he drank, he looked up, and he saw the same horizon as in That Dream, sitting beyond the double, glass sliding doors. He left the kitchen, passed through the doors, and entered the crisp night air of the coast.

The moon cast a purple hue, as if the world was wrapped in violet gossamer. This night, like so many others, Casio stood at the cliffs watching the waves, the stars, and the horizon. Here he found a rhythm to life, to the unknown, to death.

His right arm throbbed in the sea air. The weather was changing; more than that was changing. The metal of his forearm butted against and bit into the still-human part of his arm, closer to his shoulder. The salt air and water wasn't good for him biomechanics, but he loved this spot too much to move. He had picked it, straight out of That Dream, when he'd been asked to quit his life years earlier.

Tonight? he thought, his eyes pouring over the night sky like an old, dog-eared book. He took another blue drink from the long, slender bottle. The liquid vibrated down his throat, like a shivering, living thing. It warmed his face,

watered his eyes, and it dulled the throbbing, the waves, the stars, and the horizon. It put back the clock.

No. He sighed and turned his thoughts, his eyes, to more important things. He turned back to his cliff-side house. He, and an architect friend, had designed every inch of the building. Casio had drawn it after a building that he saw in That Dream. He had always felt there was something missing. He could never remember much of That Dream; only that it had always ended with the horizon, and that it gave him quite a wonderful feeling when he had it.

He wondered how things had turned out this way: the house, the dreams, and the long, slender bottles. Casio had, until relatively recently, been a respected Keeper of Local Peace. His task had been to Keep People in Line, and he had been entitled to use Extreme Measures (and even Personal Judgment) in doing so. To make him physically capable of the task, they had fitted his right arm with a biomechanical replacement dubbed "The Hand of God" by those he worked with. He was respected, loved, and feared. All of this, of course, was until his dreams and his drinking had begun to cause problems. He wasn't gifted with the Second Sight, but he had made the constant mistake of thinking that he was, and it made him unpredictable and dangerous. He had been asked to leave, honorably, but never had he been more ashamed. Still, he never blamed it on That Dream. Not ever. Now, thirteen years later, he padded, quietly, toward the sliding door that faced the sunsets. He was living his days in a self-enforced exile in a hand-made prison.

Gabrielle was in the folio, in front of the VisoScreen, her eyes dark. I must have awaykened her, Casio thought, with pangs of regret. She was sunk deep into her favorite arm chair, her red hair clashing dangerously with the maroon upholstery. The VisoScreen in front of her, five times thicker than a sheet of paper, hung anonymously on the far wall of the folio, flanked by a portrait of herself on the left side and a portrait of her with Casio on the sand, near the waves. On the screen appeared the strangest symphony of colors and shapes, twisting and mutating to the music, as if with dance.

"Sorry to wake you, sweetheart," he apologized. Gabrielle gave no sort of response. Casio slid the door shut and removed his sandals, feeling Gabrielle's icy anger. He crossed the floor to the fridge. The floor was warm, being heated by a snake's pit of semi-conducting coils beneath the thin, floral tiles. Casio liked the floor at this temperature. It was what he thought the desert sands felt like halfway between the sun's passing and resurrecting.

Casio opened the fridge and pulled out another long, slender bottle. This one was green, and he pulled the top off and brought the bottle to his lips. The liquid

inside slid thickly, and slowly, down his throat. Instead of warming his body, the drink prickled it and pushed it with frosty points. He got goosebumps. "Anything interesting on the screen, Gabbs?" he called to her.

She stirred at the mention of her name. Casio entered the folio, found the remote control, and switched the screen to the weather. She half-turned to him, found the bottle with her eyes, and turned back. "No," she answered, tersely. She turned further away so he could not see her tears start. If there was such a thing as hating someone you loved, then her life had become that thing.

"I told you; things like this aren't foretold but in the most oblique of messages and messengers."

"So, we're just supposed to wait? We're supposed to assume that this dream is just going to show up without notice, and no one in the world will know it's going to happen except you? Is that right?" She rose angrily from the chair. Casio reached for her, but she moved to the picture of them on the sands. That had been one of the last happy days. A few nights later he had first told her about That Dream.

A clock somewhere in the house struck 2:00am. The clock was a working model of the Notre Dame Cathedral. Softly wafting through the rooms, the cathedral played a beautiful concerto by Mozart. As the music faded out, the clock announced the time.

"I know. I sound crazy. You'll just have to trust me. You've done it so far," Casio explained. He longed to put his arms around her, to comfort her, but he knew she would turn away from his touch. He would have to wait.

"I want to believe you. It's been fourteen years, Casio. Every night you wait for That Dream to come true. You're so sure, and I... I don't think it's going to happen." Gabrielle turned to Casio. She took the long, slender bottle from his hands and dropped it at their feet. Then she put his arms around her, and he held her, at last.

"I love you, Casio," she said longingly into his eyes. She kissed him, a stray thought told her it would be their last real kiss, and she led him back to the bedroom.

"I'm scared," she admitted. They both resumed their nocturnal positions. "I'm scared, too." He kissed her shoulder. There was a pause of comfort.

Then she whispered, "Hold me tighter."

The next morning, Casio awoke early, which was quite contrary to his custom. The sun hung lazily near the bottoms of the window panes, thin and white. Today, he was nervous. Something told him it was the day. There was no

hangover this morning, surprisingly enough. With a clear head, he went to his bookshelf and picked up a brown, little-used book.

Casio was not a religious man. He was not a particularly scientific man, either, but he did know that whatever it was that happened in That Dream, it would not be discovered on any meteorological or astronomical chart or graph. Gabrielle had wasted hours reading such documents, scanning weather reports, when (in reality) she should have been reading the Bible.

He could not explain how he knew. There had been a rare occasion some years ago when he had decided to leaf through his untouched, brown Bible. His mother had just passed on, and he had been searching for answers in bars and bottles and had found nothing. Suddenly, he had come across a verse in Revelations. It had given him the same feeling That Dream had given him. So, he had come to believe that this verse was largely related to That Dream. A lump rose in his throat.

He flipped open the Bible now. It opened, almost on command, to that same verse. It was the only one he knew, and it was the only one he liked. He read that The Dragon would sweep exactly a third of the stars from the sky (though he had never dreamt this part of things). He had always taken the verse for religious symbolism, but he then thought of the horizon. It seemed inconsequential, but to think of it made him elated and excited. He tried to calm himself down. There was a long wait for night. He went to the kitchen, stood in front of the fridge with another long, slender bottle, and let his eyes and mind lose focus and relax.

Gabrielle rose from the bed and saw Casio in the kitchen. She walked over to him, her once strong and proud protector, and kissed him on the cheek. The bottle in his hand slipped from his grip and bounced off the floor spilling its expensive contents.

Casio snapped out of it. "Today," he said.

"No, honey," she consoled. "Not today. Not ever. I'm sorry."

He smiled. She would believe him tonight. "I'm going to the bar today."

Her expression flickered, for a second, to anger. She hid it quickly. He was so sensitive, and she didn't want to upset him.

"When I come back tonight, I want you to join me at the cliffs. We'll watch the end together." He gathered his keys and began to leave.

"I love you." Her voice was barely a whisper.

He stopped at the door. He looked back.

He said, "Tell me that when I'm right."

It was 1:30am, or so the Cathedral clock showed. The two young lovers stood on

the firm ground above the cliffs. The ocean was quiet. Casio could no longer hear the waves below them. Staring out at the moon-spilt waters, one could discern no islands, boats, plants, or animals. It was if the world knew what Casio knew. Everything was waiting.

Casio was scared.

"Casio," Gabrielle said, "I want you to know that whatever happens, I still and will always love you. I thank God everyday for you. You know that, right? Every day."

He pulled her into his arms. She could feel his tears on her neck.

"I love you more than-" He tried to say more, to finish, but his voice choked. Instead, he kissed her cheek. They pulled apart, and he took her hand.

It was 1:55, now. The stars twinkled maliciously. Casio thought he saw some moving? With a tiny streak, he knew it was beginning.

The brighter, closer stars began a slow deliberate journey to the horizon. Tails pulled behind them, like drops of paint pulled by gravity. Those stars got brighter and closer, but they also changed their colors. At first, they were yellow, then green, and blue. When they reached the color blue the stars became like a wand with a long azure shaft and a sapphire jewel in the tip. The light from this army of shooting stars grew and overpowered the moonlight. Casio and Gabrielle's shadows were pushed away from the horizon, toward the house, and became longer as the stars dipped lower. The sapphire became indigo and finally violet as the star stretched longer and longer. Constellations that Casio had known since childhood became disarranged and broken. Finally, four dozen streaks of bright smashed headlong into the ocean.

There was a white flash. The explosion was brilliant. Immediately, the horizon became cloudy and vague and white with hissing steam. Then they saw an arm of purplish seawater stretch up into the sky. A ring of ocean, a tsunami, was heading towards them. Preceding the actual wave, a sound wave raced over the waters. Like a sudden, strong wind, the sound blast brought with it a spray of warm water, knocking Casio and Gabrielle over. The house shuddered heavily against the shock. Casio and Gabrielle were wet. Getting back up, they let go of each others' hands. Casio briefly glimpsed the horizon as more stars went crashing into it. He realized with horror what was soon to follow.

Casio yelled at Gabrielle to get into the house and seal it. The wave of ocean neared them. She ran through the sliding door and pushed a red button on the far wall, near the phone. Immediately all the doors locked, all the windows shut and latched, and the house began to sink into the cliff. Gabrielle thought back to when Casio had designed this seemingly unnecessary security measure and

wondered if, even back then, he had suspected something. The house at last came to a stop, fully submerged and cased in steel, and the lights went out. The only light came from the display pad of the beautiful Cathedral clock. The time was 2:15am.

On the cliff, Casio saw the first wall of water fast approaching. He heard the metallic click as the steel plates sealed off the hole to his house and his wife, protecting them. He stood his ground. Strangely, he did not think for a moment that he would die. In fact, he was sure that he would live on; that is what he was sure had happened in That Dream...

If Casio had been looking down at the water at the base of the cliff, he would have seen them abandon him for this rising ocean wall. The wave itself rose nearly 150 feet over his head, blocking the moon and the stars as it towered above him. Water dripped onto his face, as he peered into the dark, purple monster. It seemed poised, calculating.

"The Dragon feasts on me tonight!"

With a terrible sound (a roar), the wave came smashing down on the cliff. The wave hit, and everything went black.

He opened his eyes. He felt like he was floating, but, looking down, he saw his feet touching snowy earth. He was standing in a World of Winter. Everything was white, but it was a dark white, as if the world was wrapped in gray gossamer. His breath came as a fog, a mist, like the one that had danced at the horizon as the constellations dove into it. He peered up into the sky but all he saw was blackness: no clouds, no celestial bodies, nothing. He saw that was in a forest where the trees still had leaves (covered in frost), though those broad, green limbs of foliage should have fallen off a season ago. Piles of snow sat on the green grass (grass looking as healthy as in summer) and light airy flakes floated leisurely from the sky. Then he saw before him an arch and beneath it a door. Behind it, he heard the ocean.

He started walking towards the door, curiosity on his thoughts (Gabrielle quite a thing of the past). He felt something, a foreboding, in the pit of his stomach that told him to walk faster. He picked up his pace. Panic soon drove his legs. He was jogging and then running, kicking up snow, grass, and dirt with each stride. He got closer and closer, sprinting towards the door now. But it was not towards a door; it was towards something else entirely. Then he realized, with horror, that he couldn't hear the waves anymore.

He stopped just short of the door, his arm outstretched, inches from the knob. The door swung open with a terrible sound, and he saw the sun dipping into the horizon. That same feeling that had gotten him running had stopped him in his

tracks. His eyes lost focus and his brain stopped thinking. He dropped his hand to his side. He felt the vague sensation of falling to his knees, but he knew was already on his knees. He felt slumped over, but knew he was already on the ground. He felt his eyes close, but knew they were already closed.

He felt death, but knew he was already dead.

He felt far away and pushed out. It wasn't the soft chill of snowy landscape or the cold pressure of a wall of water that he felt but the stiff sheets of a lonely bed. The wave, the stars, they all fell away, leaving him in that moment just before he pulled the covers back. That Dream was leaving again, the one that always woke him up, but he wasn't waking up.

And he wasn't sleeping.

Somewhere, far away, he heard a woman screaming his name, screaming for help. Somewhere, he felt a long, slender bottle slipping out of his hands onto the bedroom floor.

Casio felt Death, but knew he was already dead.