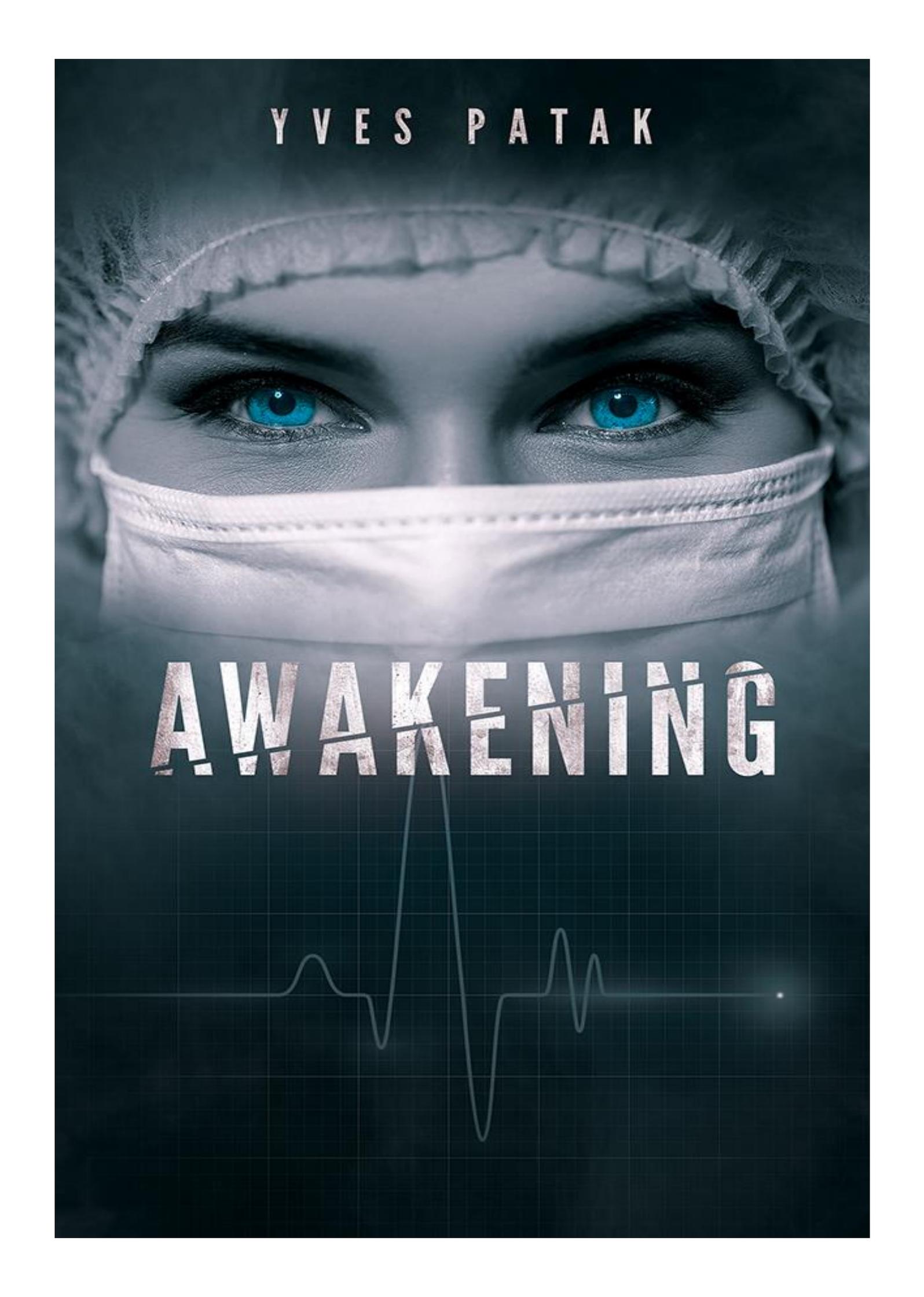


YVES PATAK



AWAKENING



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Awakening

The world is tangerine luminescence – a hazy sundown melting into a shapeless ocean. The light, I realize, is coming through my closed lids. I struggle to open my eyes, but they feel leaden and crusted over. *An infection?* I try harder and manage to wrench them open, squinting into an overhead light, a double fluorescent tube. The light is viciously bright, a steel nail drilling into my forehead, and I squeeze my eyes shut again.

Where am I?

The one question everybody hates to face in real life. My memory is a bottomless pit. I search for pictures and recollections of the last minutes, hours or days before I wound up here – wherever here is – but there is nothing but that sickening void. One question summons another.

Where am I — and *what on earth happened?*

A nasty suspicion worms itself into my mind. Aren't those questions the archetypal ones occurring to people who wake up in some hospital, oblivious of the disaster that had brought them there, amnesic about the calamity that might have wrecked their regular lives forever?

A cotton-wrapped hammer is pounding away inside my skull. The pain is bearable, but building up momentum. I try a half-assed attempt at convincing myself this is just a hangover, but the cool fluorescent tubes overhead and the room's sterile air suggest a much darker truth – a truth I probably don't care to know about.

I become aware of my own heartbeat, a steady thud in my chest. Not a frenzied rhythm, and yet too fast for someone who's not moving a limb. Unease turns into anxiety. There's a soft, regular beep somewhere above me, a sound perfectly in time with my heartbeat. I force my eyes open again, steeling myself against the glare. There are two flat screen monitors right above my head — one with zigzagging lines, probably an ECG, and another I can't identify. Due to the slight slant in the setup I can see the screens. *I am* in a hospital, no doubt about that. There's an IV bag on a chrome stand next to my bed, with a line leading into my heavily bandaged left hand. Correction, my whole arm is wrapped in surgical dressing.

Shit.

I turn my head, feeling resistance, a tugging sensation in my nose. I try to reach for whatever there is, but my right arm won't move. When I try again, more forcefully this time, an arrow of pain shoots up from my arm into my shoulder. I gasp, stifling a scream. My arm must be broken, probably a comminuted fracture judging by the ferocious pain. The beeping sound accelerates. Warily, I try my left arm, the one with the IV line. It feels stiff and heavy, but with some effort I can move it to my nose. There's a double-ended tube going right into my nostrils. Oxygen. A new fragment of truth comes crashing down on me. I'm not just in hospital, but in a goddamned ICU — which means something really bad happened. But what?

The tension rises by a few notches. Again, I search my memory for my own name, draw another blank. Fear turns to panic, a flat, heavy stone on my chest.

Gingerly I turn my head to the left. My neck hurts, but that pain is bearable. There are three more beds in the room, the one next to mine empty, the other two occupied, above each bed two monitors, next to them chrome stands and alien machinery. My two room mates – two men – lie in their beds immobile, eyes closed,

apparently sleeping or in a coma. Maybe a permanent coma.

I suppress a shudder, look the other way and stop short. There's a woman sitting close to the door, a few steps from my bed, wearing a surgeon's cap and mask and green scrubs. A nurse? And has she been there all the time? I must have missed her because of her absolute motionlessness. She just sits there, hands folded in her lap, looking at me. Above the mask, her gentian blue eyes are beautiful, like mountain lakes. Still, the way she gazes at me makes me feel uncomfortable.

I clear my throat. "H... hello?"

My voice sounds awful, like someone gurgling words through a mouthful of seaweed. For a moment she just keeps observing me. Then she rises and steps closer, her thighs brushing along the side of my hospital bed while she checks the monitors and IV bag.

„Awake?“ she asks. There's a hint of a lisp, although there is no sibilant in the single word spoken. Strange. I search for a name tag on her scrubs and find none.

„I ... guess so. What happened?“ My mouth is dry as dust. I'm terrified of her answer, but there's no point putting off the evil hour.

„Are you in severe pain?“ she asks, ignoring my question. This time the lisp is distinct, ‚severe‘ coming as ‚thereve.‘ To my surprise, I feel a touch of irritation at the question. ‚*Are you in severe pain?*‘ Why not simply ‚Are you in pain?‘

But the question has steered my mind in a direction, and I realize I am in pain indeed. *Thevere* pain. My right arm still throbs from the futile attempt to move it. The hammer in my head has intensified its efforts, and the lower part of my spine feels like shattered glass.

„Yes, it hurts pretty bad,“ I say. „You a doctor or a nurse?“

She checks the monitors, once more ignoring my question.

„Can you give me something for the pain?“

I'm trying to blanket my growing irritation. The idea crosses my mind that working in an ICU, dealing with human vegetables day by day, changes people. *Numbs* them.

Then I see her looking at my feet. I try to follow her gaze, but my head is a wrecking ball weighing a ton, and I can't lift it an inch from the pillow.

Her mountain lake eyes turn on me. „Do you remember what happened, Mr. Korman?“

The last word wafts through my brain like a cool breeze, lifts the curtain of oblivion. *Korman*. That's my name. Of course! Simon Korman. The tidal wave of relief that washes over me abates the pain for a few seconds. My brain is undamaged! Whatever happened, I'm not a human vegetable, doomed to carve out a miserable existence in a nursing home. Thank God for little favors.

Then I focus on her question again and realize that my name is all I remember. Did I have a job? A wife? A past? In a flash, the strangling hand of dread is back.

„No. I ... I can't remember. Tell me what happened!“

She's standing very close to me, her thighs touching the bed frame, her expression placid.

„You've been burned pretty bad, Mr. Korman.“

I blink, confused for a moment. *Burned?* I had begun to nurse the hope that I had suffered a few broken bones, something that would heal eventually. But a serious burn?

„Yes indeed,“ she says, „a burn of more than fifteen percent of the body surface can be dangerous. Life threatening. And you've suffered burns on over sixty percent

of your body. At least half of it third degree.“

She’s got my attention now. I suppress a fresh bout of panic and struggle to sit up. Pain explodes in my right arm and neck, and yet my whole body seems glued to the bed.

„For Chrissake, what happened, Miss — ?“

„Santorini. Jane Santorini. You had a car accident. Brought on by your own fault, I’m afraid to say.“

Santorini comes as ‘Thantorini.’ If the name sounds faintly familiar, I can’t place it. There’s neither compassion nor blame in her voice. I still have no idea if she’s a doctor or a ICU nurse. Her eyes keep scanning the instruments above my bed. I force myself to ask the question that daunts me more than anything else.

„Am I in ... a critical condition?“

Her calm eyes assess me, as if gauging if I can take the truth. Then she sits down right next to me on the edge of the bed, her thigh brushing against my right arm, but I can’t feel the touch. *Not a bandage there, I think, but a cast. My arm must be wrecked.* I can smell a whiff of perfume, something lemony. The fragrance seems more familiar than her name.

„Do you remember anything at all, Mr. Korman?“

I nod, and the hammer in my head turns vicious.

„I ... I remember my name. Simon Korman. I’m a ... “ I struggle for my profession, but it’s gone, along with the rest of it.

She looks at me levelly. „Anything else?“

I search the void. „No. Nothing. Please, Jane, tell me: what happened?“

She casts a glance at the other patients, then looks back at me. „You tried to escape from the police. Gave them quite a race, I heard.“

Escape? From the police? For a fleeting moment I’m certain: I’m dreaming this conversation. Maybe I did have an accident, and maybe I am in an ICU, comatose, dreaming this unlikely chat. Then again, the pain feels way too real for a dream, despite the analgesics they must have given me.

„Why would I run from the cops?“ The words don’t come as casual as I intended them to. Did I have *reasons* to run?

„Simon ...“ Jane puts her hand on my arm, but I still can’t feel it. „What I’m going to tell you now might be a bit of a shock.“

She waits, watching my reaction.

I press my lips together, holding her gaze. „I’m a big boy, so shoot.“

„All right.“ She nods, as if satisfied. „Your name has been in the police files for years. They’ve been searching for you on an interstate level.“

I look at her blankly. *Police files? Searching?* I wrack my brain for a hint of a memory, but except for the splitting pain in my head there is nothing.

Nothing at all.

„They found your hideout on Randolph Street.“ Jane’s bright eyes never leave mine. „Found the cellar. Still no recollection?“

Cellar? I shake my head, cursing myself that I keep forgetting what a bad idea that is.

„Jane, are you sure you’re talking to the right patient?“

„Do you remember your job, Simon?“

My job ... *Goddamn amnesia!* My name seems to be the only thing that survived the accident along with me. „No, but —“

„You worked as an investment banker at NLT National. But it was your ... *hobby* that gained you some notoriety. Think hard, Simon. It's important you remember.“

An uneasy thought crosses my mind. What if this nurse isn't a nurse at all, but a cop in disguise? And if so, do I really have reasons to worry?

I lick my lips. They're swollen, and there's some sticky unguent on them that tastes like tar.

Tar ... Tarmac ...

Out of context, a picture pops up in my mind, as vivid as real life. „A Mustang! I drove a red Mustang convertible!“

Funny how a trivial memory can spring a flood of happy hormones under the wrong circumstances.

„That's right, Simon.“ There's a gleam in those gentian blue eyes now, but I can't quite tell what it is. Satisfaction? „When the police found you, you made a hasty departure with that Mustang. They told me your top speed must have been eighty miles an hour, in the heart of the city.“

„Jackson Boulevard,“ I groan as another picture lights up in my head. „Jesus ...“

„Yes, Simon.“ Jane's eyes betray no emotion. „You were dashing down Jackson Boulevard like hell on wheels, with four police cars on your tail. When you veered into St. Clark Street, the Mustang flipped over. A big-time crash and burn. Ring a bell?“

I close my eyes. The memories are pouring in now, and I realize I don't want them. Don't want them at *all*. Careering into that curve at a breakneck speed even the Mustang's traction couldn't handle. The car's left-hand tires lifting off the tarmac. The Mustang somersaulting, twice, thrice, crashing into some high-rise's cornerstone, going up in a fireball.

Had I really been conscious all through this nightmare?

„I remember,“ I whisper, trying in vain to push the pictures aside. There's shock and trauma lurking under a melting barrier of denial.

Jane's eyes are bright and intense. I wish she would take off her surgical mask so I can see her face, but certainly mask and scrubs are ICU-regulations to minimize any danger of infection.

„The cellar.“ Her lisp is almost a hiss now. „Tell me about the cellar.“

Another picture arises, hazy, a faded photo in an ancient album. A cellar that looks like the inside of a bunker. Gray concrete walls. No window. A naked bulb on the ceiling, emitting a harsh light. A metal chair, bolted to the cement floor.

„I have no idea what you're talking about,“ I mumble, closing my eyes. There's something in that cellar I definitely don't want to see, no matter if it's a mere figment or something real.

„Do you see the woman on the chair?“ she asks.

My eyes fly open, but the picture won't fade away. There *is* a woman on the chair. A young woman. She's naked, her wrists and ankles tied to the chair's armrests and legs with blue adhesive tape. She's wearing a black sleep mask, the kind they used to hand out in airplanes back in the old days. There's dried blood on the woman's lips and around her mouth, on her chin, between her breasts.

The pain beneath my temples gets worse. The vision of the bound, bleeding woman is nauseating.

„You *do* remember,“ Jane says matter-of-factly.

I shake my head, ignoring the pain. Pain is better than recollection. Words are bottling up behind my lips, rushing out before I can keep them back.

„I ... I kept her prisoner?“

Jane nods, and this time I can see the satisfaction in those mountain lake eyes.

„Yes, Simon. That’s right. You kept her prisoner for a very long time.“

Thirty-one days and nights.

In my mind’s eye, I see a dark root cellar with a gravelly soil, a tiny room with wooden racks on both sides, racks filled with preserving jars. It’s the cellar where Mother had incarcerated me each time I trespassed against her laws, or sinned against God, or pissed her off in any old way.

„Is it all coming back?“ Jane persists.

„Yes!“ I moan. “Please ... I want to sleep now!”

She is searching my face. „Do you want to know the truth about amnesia, Simon? It’s never complete. Some things cannot be forgotten. Some things *want* to be remembered.“

I stare into those cool blue eyes, the terror in my soul so much worse than the physical pain now.

„Who are you?“ I whisper.

„I know about the woman in the cellar.“ She squeezes my shoulder, making me gasp. „And about all the others you held captive before.“

„I didn’t — “

„You used a pair of pliers,“ she says. „To pull out their teeth.“

„Please,“ I whimper. „I need something for the pain now. *Please!*“

Instead of answering, she leans forward until her mostly covered face nearly touches mine. The eyes above the mask fill me with a terrible chill.

„You tortured them, Simon. With pliers. With a cattle prod. With acid.”

I try to scream for help, but all I can manage is a hollow wheeze.

„You raped them,“ she whispers in my ear. „Then you strangled them with barbwire.“

„Stop it!“ I croak. „You’re crazy! I want a doctor, right now!“

Instead of answering, she reaches behind her head and removes the mask. Everything inside me turns cold. That face ... *I know her face!* Her smile reveals missing incisors. There are ugly maroon burns and scars on her cheeks. I recoil, try to crawl away from the nightmare, and never mind the IV lines and nasal tubes, but I *can’t move!* Overhead, the monitors’ beeping jumps into a tachycardic frenzy.

„You’re a monster,“ she says matter-of-factly. „But I survived you. And I *found* you.“

Without warning she rips the nasal tube from my nose and pinches my nostrils shut with two strong fingers. I inhale sharply, preparing to scream bloody murder, but her other hand presses down on my mouth. In the blink of an eye everything in the room seems preternaturally lucid and sharp. I yank up my left hand up to fight her off, to keep her from smothering me. A metallic jangle from somewhere near my left hip, and in my adrenalized state I understand at once. *A handcuff.* The ghoulish woman has cuffed my one good hand to the bed while I was unconscious!

I’m choking.

My chest quakes as I struggle to suck in air. My own heartbeat is in my head now, deafeningly loud, an apocalyptic horse stampeding through my brain. My body is twitching and thrashing in vain — and still I keep staring into those gentian blue eyes, eyes that had been filled with mortal terror the last time I saw them in the cellar, while I was working on her. Around her disfigured face, the room dissolves into a grayish mist.

My agony reaches unspeakable dimensions. Every cell in my body is screaming for oxygen, unable to accept the ghastly inevitability of my fate. Suddenly, just before I get sucked into the dark pit of death, she let's go of my nose, and I suck in sweet, sweet air through my much too tight nostrils, cold sweat trickling from my brow.

She smiles a gappy smile, her palm still on my mouth. „When the cops came and you ran away, I was mutilated,” she says. “Traumatized — but still alive. The first woman who survived your hospitality. And now I'm here ... to return the favor.”

My eyes dart to the door. Easily reading my thoughts, she says: “Don't worry, we won't get interrupted. It's two in the morning, and I've put both the doctor on duty and the night nurse out with a cloth imbibed with chloroform. Just like in those black-and-white flicks.” She winks at me. “They never saw my face.”

Her fingers pinch my nose shut again, this time with a vengeance. I thrash around, losing my mind in the black torment of asphyxiation.

“Don't get me wrong, Simon,” she says earnestly. “This isn't about vengeance. Well, not only. I truly want you to realize what you did. What it feels like to be burning hell.”

She lets go of my nose, allowing some oxygen into my system. I am burning all right. Burning. Burning.

„We're going to spend some time together, Simon – and there's something I promise you” – her scarred lips are so close now I can feel her breath against my ear – “I'll show you eternity ... “

Yves Patak, November 2016

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