

Opening extract from
Paradox Lost

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The Awakening (2006)

He awoke in complete blackness, without even the slightest hint of pearl suggesting dawn. His lids flickered in that first rush of consciousness, confirming the inky veil of instinct: he was in darkness, though not blind. The weight of gravity assured him that he was lying down, but everything else felt strange... the pillow was tight; the mattress firm: this instantly struck him as being unnervingly unfamiliar. His hands sought in vain the padded counterpane of his own bed; instead he located some silken fabric with just a few harder points of contact. This initial rush of information frustratingly refused to combine and form a picture in his head; nothing registered as he had expected.

His mind raced as he realized he had no recollection at all where he was: the flashing images in his mind felt separated from reality. His conflicting sensations set one part of his brain against another and drew him almost into a scream, but his mouth felt clammy, like half-set glue, and yielded little more than a groan.

Bizarrely, as if his punishment had been self-inflicted, the more he relaxed, the freer his body became. Sensing release, he gradually eased onto his elbow, half-upright. There he raised his hand and rubbed it across his eyes, as if that alone could remove the darkness.

Andrew felt for his watch, yet it had been removed. Increasingly curious, he padded his body with his hands, to see what else he could learn from his attire. His clothing was strange, smooth and almost silky to the touch – perhaps some kind of tunic. His feet were also bare and the surface was smooth as liquid.

What had happened yesterday? His memories seemed distant as if it had been days or weeks since he was last awake. Still worse, it occurred to him that someone could be imposing them upon him: it was almost mind-splittingly nerve-racking not knowing for sure if his thoughts were even his own. He had to accept the possibility that

someone had been – or was still – playing with his mind in some way. Or even that he had been drugged.

‘Basics,’ he said aloud. ‘My name is Andrew Marshall.’ He could have doubted even this memory, but the first reassuring thoughts were coming together. ‘I’m married to Alison. Our children are Mary, Harry and James.’ The names helped, summoning up the casual atmosphere of their Surrey house, along with the strange mix of village life and busy traffic of southeast England... Then, just as suddenly, the comfort evaporated, leaving him with a strange feeling about the children, even about Alison.

They were unmistakably recent memories, but at the same time felt weirdly distanced. This conflict between the sequence of memory and the feeling of being separated from his family was startling. Such a flood of visions – if not reassuring – might well drive him back into the horrible confusion he had just left... he contented himself with summoning his children in his head; they were playing in the sun-filled back garden while Alison brought out a tray of drinks from the kitchen. Surely the image of his children was real... he felt as if he was now burrowing dangerously near layers of panic but the longer the darkness went on the more he conjectured the worst.

‘Is anybody there?’ he cried, feeling rather foolish. The lack of response seemed a deafening weight in this darkness. Not even his own voice echoed to greet him.

Ignored, Andrew forced himself to focus on the environment, much like a prison cell. Any normal cell would have a monitoring system, he reasoned; if so, somebody would come soon, unless they were intent on observing his reactions. Or unless he was on an infrared monitoring system. He stirred, uneasy at the thought – cellblocks were normally noisy with walls and corridors, unless the walls were soundproofed, or the other inhabitants afraid to respond.

Andrew’s imagination – always vivid – flashed back to various news stories: hostages, kidnaps, crop circles, the lunatic fringe. Yet he wasn’t the type of person to travel riskily, nor did he possess wealth enough to be ransomed. Besides, his surroundings seemed a bit too clinical to fit any such scenario. He shoved the soles of his feet against the floor to reassure himself of the smooth cool surface beneath. He would have given a lot for the feeblest light.

He clung to the end of each second, until the strain of listening evaporated into hopelessness. Perhaps he would simply have to accept his

situation until someone was prepared to impart some explanation – even light – into the room. His intuition was that he would be interrogated in some way, as there seemed nothing wrong with him, apart from a groggy sensation in his head. As he speculated, it struck him that he was just feeding his fears to no useful purpose, and determined to distract himself by finding out more about his surroundings.

The bed felt reassuringly solid and, unable to tell the extent of his surroundings, he decided to count and measure his steps. He longed for some cord or rope as a guide, suddenly and almost guiltily realising how tough life must be, day-in and day-out for the blind. Again he rubbed his eyes, but this time took care to note every detail of his skin, lashes and lids. There seemed no obvious wound or sensitivity, so he still felt reasonably sure that they were still seeking into the inky blackness around him.

His hands brushed across the bed, but it seemed very standard, almost sterile with its crisp pillow and laundered sheets. As his hand ran across the top, he felt the change from the cotton of the fold to the thicker blanket on top. He recalled that he had awoken on top of the blankets, as if not intended to be there that for long (from somewhere, he remembered the last time he had awoken displaced, but lovingly tucked in, as a small boy). Yet his environment still gave him a comforting sense of order, with his change of clothes and precisely made bed.

Standing, he carefully positioned his calves evenly against the side of the bed in order to square his direction. He ventured into the darkness, using small, calculated paces, his hands gently circling the space directly before him. Six or seven feet onwards, his thigh hit a horizontal strip of contact like a solid bar. His fingers flickered over the obstacle. Hard and rectangular, it resembled a table, but he was disappointed to find nothing resembling a lamp on its surface – or, indeed, any object at all. Working his hands around the outside edges he discovered a chair-back, tight to the far side edge. It was positioned as if to observe the bed, rather than to be used by its inhabitant, which felt unsettling.

He decided to risk a turn and had explored at least twenty feet without encountering anything before he decided to head back to the table. Miscalculating with his increased confidence heading back, his toes cracked into the table a full step before he expected. He put his weight on to the table, testing his toes gingerly to reassure himself that the damage was slight.

Waiting for the pain to subside, he worked his way along the table to stand behind the chair, as if to face the bed in this mire of blindness, though this too was unsettling, as he kept imagining infrared cameras blinking towards him... where would the door be? Roused to stubbornness, he set off again, determined to set his position and map it in his head. He was almost prepared to give up as before when his left fingers touched a plain smooth wall, something strangely comforting in this dark dream-like place... he felt his way along until his right hand suddenly slid into thin air, and he halted as if the wall had slipped out from under his hand.

Just a metre from the corner, the tip of his fingers hit a new flat surface, with an outline quickly confirmed as the size and shape of a doorway. He covered every inch in methodical detail in search of a handle without locating one. However, the mere fact that there was a door eased his mind. With renewed hope, he felt all round the walls either side of the door, in full expectation there must be – somewhere – a light switch, or else a control for the door. Several times he searched, in growing disbelief that there was nothing there. With every movement of his hands the warmth of finding the door was eroded, until the smooth blank recess in the wall became an object of frustration that he irrationally longed to kick, to injure.

Taking a long step back, he threw his full weight on to the door, the sides of his fists thumping hard into it. He had expected it to flex at least, or hear an echo of impact on the other side. Instead, there was a thud as if it was made of brick or concrete, with an accompanying ache in his flesh and bones.

Pausing for a few seconds, he clutched at the prospect that perhaps it was a disused doorway and that on that principle there would be another, most probably at the other end. This time he had a reference point, so returning to the corner of the doorway, he reset his confidence and returned his position so as to bisect desk and bed. Sure enough, this time he allowed more for his confidence in returning, and soon touched the bed.

In the end he gave up. 'A waiting game,' he thought. 'I can do that.' Staring into the darkness, he battled with his eyelids as they tried to close, repeatedly shaking his head to force them open, but it was weariness that eventually prevailed.

His mind was now laced with dream-like flashes: fragments of real memory or

simply dreams echoing in his head? Picture upon picture scanned past as if lit by sheet lightning, but one continually recurred: a hospital bed surrounded by surgical equipment, but he couldn't see the patient. The frustration of not knowing needled him into wakefulness.

When his eyelids flashed open, the first thing he noticed was a soft creamy light coming from the doorway. Then he shot bolt upright as he took in his surroundings.

‘What the bloody –’ Not that the walls around him were unexpected, but he felt sure that he had felt and walked much further – at least six or seven metres further – than could have been possible. The room was almost empty, its walls, ceiling and floor strangely metallic; it was impossible to tell whether it might even be some type of granite by its sheen. The door looked like frosted glass and was improbably thin, compared to the memory of its impact against his fists, while the light – from some distant source – enabled the faintest outline of a long corridor to be distinguishable. As he peered into the blurred distance, he could sense something emerging from the centre of the light. With every movement towards the door, the light in the room also gathered strength, warming from a dull moony colour into warm clarity, and he realised that the shape of a person was walking quietly towards him.

2

Awakening (1990)

As Caittie turned over in bed for the umpteenth time, she knew that the despairing trend of her thoughts must have permeated her dreams; waking stressed was now a habit.

The red glare of the clock indicated 5.05 and only the faintest glimmer of dawn showed through the gap in the curtains. It wouldn't be light for some time and she knew how annoyed Keith would get if disturbed. These rules (which he set and she inevitably followed) meant that her whole life sometimes felt like nothing more than some small sub-clause of his. It wasn't that anything he expected was unreasonable so much as rigid and unnecessary. Any change of routine ranked as a mortal sin, springing from his deep need for control. Then there were the meltdowns: hopeless of resolution, because, no matter how long she spent explaining the needless hurtfulness of his actions, he was unrepentant. His attitude towards her, which had long since lost any justification of being born of concern, was every day scorching away the love she had once felt for him, as it showed such a total lack of respect and regard for her.

For the hundredth time, Caittie asked herself what she had seen in him in the first place – yet, in those early days, Keith had been very different. It was only once they became a couple when his abruptness assumed priority, as if by right. She had become, metaphorically, his comfy pair of slippers – which his dark arts had turned into cast-iron fetters.

Of course, they had met when she was still running away from her past. Yet she still seemed addicted to repeating the negatives, as if trapped in her own perpetual groundhog day. Cocooned in a life of seeming security, courted by Dr Jekyll yet living with Mr. Hyde, her heart felt heavier by the day. How gradually Keith had chipped away at every corner of their lives! Like a child with scissors sharper than he could handle, the pleasure of the cut seemed more important than the very fabric of her life. Each week his comments sliced deeper, as if

tailoring her into the shape he wanted. The years she had spent trying to make these things better – only to find new barriers always erected, so that she could never feel the complete person she longed to be! Had she not suffered from a naturally affectionate disposition, she would surely have hated him by this time.

He had stolen her life and her freedom, but because she knew he couldn't help himself she still felt something like pity for him. Though, whatever this feeling really was, it was ebbing fast. Like grains of sand, the more she tried to grasp them, the swifter they seemed to slip through the fingers. And then, whenever he realised she was unhappy, there was always the sex card, which she would fall for every time. Because the sex worked, she invariably hoped it would prove a new beginning... even though it always ended in emptiness.

And yet. If Keith was never to be the one to fill this space, was it too daunting to consider an alternative? Though the very prospect of escaping from Keith would surely turn his verbal butchery into wholesale slaughter... this question nagged her like desire, especially in the dead of night.

She felt a dark slouch of a cat near the bottom of the bed. Keith's precious cat, always taking pride of place! Yet Caittie eased her leg back, frightened to wake Tinkerbelle, as the first thing the cat would be likely to do would be to reclaim Keith, awakening him. How pathetic, she thought, always letting the cat win! She liked animals, but not on beds; and if at any time the cat got pushed off, however accidentally, she had committed yet another sin. In the house, Tinkerbelle reigned: the supreme being, electing to sleep on Caittie's half of the bed as by divine right.

The irony was that it was Caittie's flat, and Caittie's bed, and that Keith had brought Tinkerbelle with him when he moved in: a move rather too premature for her liking. She had to laugh at the length of time it had taken her to realize that when Keith came home, it was Tinkerbelle he greeted first, virtually every time. In fact, it had taken her absurdly long to work out that the ideals of equality that Keith had so enthused about when they first met bore no resemblance to the actual reality.

It was now 6.45, and fresh air and a cleared head seemed still more alluring. Slipping out of bed, Caittie swiftly gathered up her clothes. It had been ages since she had gone for an early morning jog, as Keith

hated anything that disturbed his routine. In the hall, throwing her clothes on, she flicked back her dark blonde hair and gathered up it in her hand, fixing it in a loose ponytail. She crossed the hall with caution and the click of the latch provided a starting pistol to set her dashing down the stairs. She had reached the bottom and hardly drawn breath before making any attempt to put her shoes on.

The crisp morning air struck her bed-warm face pleasantly as her breathing started to catch up with the stressed pace she had first set. She soon slipped into a jog, relaxing after shaking off a predator. All this, and for what? Just to avoid some ear bashing from Keith? Still, the thought of causing pain – her guilt doubled by the subsequent pain of confrontation.

With the flow of endorphins in her veins, she remembered again why she loved to run. The situation with Keith, the issues with her father, her being in-between jobs, all these stresses loosened with the regular thudding of her trainers on the ground.

The trust fund her father had left her mother and Caittie meant that neither would have to work again unless they chose to – and her mother at least did not intend to. The combination of her salary and the trust income had allowed her to save a considerable amount since university – something which seemed to grate on Keith. He had a well-paid position working for a government research department, but she still paid all the household expenses. He was only spending a minute portion of his salary on living expense, yet always claimed to be short for his next big expenditure, most recently an Italian sports car.

She was just starting to feel the incline biting into her thighs as her doubts made her pace quicken. ‘Here I am,’ she thought: ‘a mentally and physically strong person reduced to feeling fearful, because I’m trying to hold on to a destructive relationship. Why?’ Her feet beat out a crisp ‘no more, no more, no more’, but her breathing became heavier as she ploughed through the steepest part of the hill. Reaching the brow, she suddenly remembered.

‘The box!’ she cried, unaware that a man in a business suit on the other side of the road was staring at her, almost offended, before deciding that she was a lunatic. The downward jar through her legs vibrated through her body as she tried to control her downhill pace. The box: of course. Why hadn’t she thought of it before?

The box had been left to her by her father – something she’d always subconsciously rebelled against – but suddenly it alone seemed

to fulfill her need to rid herself of ghosts, both past and present. Her determination to access its secrets made more and more sense with every stride. Venting these issues would set her free to be herself. It would provide distance from Keith, further her understanding of her still-shadowy father and just might prove a strong enough motive to overcome her mother's desire that Caittie would succumb to their wishes in the end, as she had always done before.

Luckily, after reading her father's letter on her twenty-first, she had summoned up sufficient commonsense to do as he had said and left the box wrapped. No one – not even Mother – knew what was inside the parcel or where she had hidden it, as the letter had suggested that anyone with such knowledge might be mysteriously at risk. Her mother's house had been burgled a couple of times since then, but the key to the safety deposit box was well hidden and remained undisturbed. Interestingly, her mother took such invasions well in her stride, as they had happened still more frequently while Caittie's father was still alive (as a renowned archeologist, her father's home seemed irresistible to those wondering whether he had ever succeeded in capturing treasure trove, whether illicit or not).

As for the box, occasionally at family gatherings the question would arise – half joking, half serious *'Well, haven't you opened it yet?'* – a query which had commanded Keith's attention. So much so that, upon moving in, he had immediately asked Caittie about it. His insistence that there should be no secrets between them was met by an equal determination on her side that he would have to trust her, as she would betray her father's words to no one. In short: this was one battle of wills she was never going to lose.

Suddenly, the weight of her life seemed self-inflicted: she had so little to tie her down. Plus, as much as she was grateful for her father's money, it had proved a bitter pill to swallow, coming from the world that had kept her father away for so much of the time, ensuring that she never truly knew him... nor had the lustre of his reputation generally been to her advantage. When after university she assisted on expeditions to different parts of the world, just the mention of his name sent the principal archeologists into huddled conversations, after which she was never quite treated with the same casualness again. The question always remained, in the back of her mind, as to what had happened to her father – and why.

She knew where the answers lay – in the box, the box left to her,

which had been presented on her twenty-first birthday by the family's solicitor. How well she recalled her anger upon reading his accompanying letter and trying to not let it show as the family watched, attempting to appear casual and unconcerned.

'By the time you read this, you will be well towards finishing your degree – if I am right, it will be in History or Archeology,' it had begun and 'How dare you!' had trembled on her lips. The anger and frustration she felt that he could think he would know what she would do, when he didn't know her at all!

'Dearest Caittie, I don't know what you're thinking right now, but all I can assume is that you have decided it is time to follow my work. First and most crucially, I have to warn you that you're being followed. No matter how careful you have been or cautious with my earlier warnings, you are being watched and followed. I know this because I have been followed myself the last few years and the fact they have not yet gotten hold of this information suggests that they will without doubt be after you similarly. In fact, almost as soon as they know you've accessed this box, they will be on to you.'

And so: who are these people? I wish that I could say for sure, but they're certainly government sponsored, whether of one government or from several.

And now for your instructions: do not take this information out of the safety deposit box room for any reason. Instead, memorise what you need to and destroy everything you make notes on as soon as you have used it.

Draw out as much cash as you can: other transactions are far too traceable. If you must use the phone, never use one where you are staying and try not to use it until you are about to leave any place for good. In addition: keep it short, calls become traceable faster with each passing year. Mobiles – believe me – are still more dangerous.

And now I should fill you in on what this is all about, in hopes that you might succeed where I must have failed.

At university, I met up with several men, who – though from rather different fields – shared a common interest in unexplained phenomena. If you remember, they used to come to the house when you were small, as we created and built up our post-university business, which was to prove surprisingly lucrative. If you can't recall them: Frank is American, Michael rather exotic, of Greek extraction, and George the very apologetically overweight Englishman. It seems a bit childish now, but we used to conduct all our notes under the acronym

of GAMF (our initials). Yet still, as we began to investigate one subject in particular, strange things started to happen, and we began to realise that we were being watched.

Naturally, we'd suspected that we might be rooting about the edge of government secrets, but I still can't imagine why our research could be of any more special interest than that of many other such groups.

At any rate, George (to be honest, probably our least effective member) suddenly disappeared. Frank, who had connections – never really explained – immediately warned Michael that he was likely to be framed on a murder charge, and advised that he go into hiding. I still doubt whether Frank ever told us all he knew, but he was always trying to impress, so it was hard to know what to believe sometimes. In short, what you have in your hands – rather than being the whole facts – is truly only all that I know. But first you might wonder why I didn't choose to confide in the others completely.

My disappearance – your possession of this letter – is proof that I must not have been careful enough. Knowing that I might not live to see you grow up was – and indeed is – very hard for me, but as you will discover, in the end I discovered that I had no choice.

In this box, you will find two more envelopes and inside them the key to what has consumed me. The envelope marked 2 shouldn't be opened until you're sure you're ready to start. The package is sealed in your last birthday wrapping paper, which you might remember as a one-off: my strange wrapping style should make it very evident if anyone tampers with it.

The letter and her father's words had filled her with anger – so much so that, for many years, she couldn't contemplate venturing further with it and the recollection torched inside of her, unforgotten, just under the edge of her consciousness. Also, being so many years since his disappearance, the warnings seemed ridiculous within the normality of her life and the temper of that day had initially resolved her not to believe until something showed itself.

Although furious at her abandonment, she had secured the box safely, feeling that she could never grieve completely for her father until this task (his last?) had been completed. Perhaps it was now time to find out – perhaps she had kept him waiting long enough. It was more than nerves that gave her pause: it was the risk of finding out whether she could believe her father's actions justified. After all, in terms of his memory, she still had a lot to lose.

She had completed the hill and jogged through the small local

park. By half-seven, the traffic was picking up with retail workers and those early Saturday morning shoppers desperate to claim the first bargain... the bustle made it hard to concentrate on working out a plan in her head. How to get at the box without arousing Keith's suspicions – and then what? Suddenly, Caittie remembered: Monday. Keith would be at work and she could arrange to go to her mum's. Her decision formed, it seemed sensible to steel herself against Keith for the next two days.

First, and most crucially, she knew the box must be kept out of the way from everyone close to her – she might need a safe house or hotel to work from, in case her father's warnings proved well-founded. She might need to fabricate some cover stories and even some means to enable her to travel, if necessary, without exciting too much worry or suspicion. She summoned to mind colleagues who had once offered her positions on 'digs', old university friends, ex-flatmates continually proposing that she drop everything and visit them.

The strangest part was the excitement of what she was contemplating, mixed with the heady endorphins rushing through her from the exercise. She was startled to recognise the prospect of danger as a life-giving force. Perhaps her father understood that this quality would eventually make the challenge irresistible. Her current life, especially her life with Keith, was beginning to remind her of suffering in a pair of shoes too small for a time, and she began to long for the comfort of her old friendly, worn-in boots... surely there comes a point where one changes simply because there is no other choice?

Nearing the apartment block, however, reality started hitting home. ('Must keep cool. Keith must not know; Mum must not know. I need to keep everything normal – although Keith will get possessive, just as he always does when I least need it.') Although she was still sparking with energy, she found the need to pull herself up the stairs via the handrail, as if her legs were affected by the trepidation starting to well up inside of her.

There were noises in the kitchen. Caittie shut the door quietly behind her.

'Where the bloody hell have you been?' came from the kitchen, in tight tones.

'I was just – running!'

'You never said anything about going out at this sort of time, did you?'

‘You know how you loathe it when I wake you up.’

There was a dark line underscored between his eyes. ‘I needed to know where you were! You might at least have left a note!’

He wanted her to give way. Yet she was still holding onto that firm and determined Caittie that had been allowed to surface whilst she was running.

‘What do you mean by “needed”?’

‘It would just be nice to be kept informed.’

‘That’s not what you said – *needed* is what you said. I could understand your being worried for my safety, but *needed* means something else. That’s all about you and your needs.’

He was visibly discomfited by her new assurance. ‘Bollocks! You sneak out, knowing would upset me and now, hey, it’s *my* fault?’

‘We’re two adults sharing a flat – which I happen to own, incidentally – and I took an adult decision about leaving quietly in order to have a run – but either way, I didn’t want to disturb you.’

‘Two adults sharing a flat, what kind of crap is that? We’re meant to be partners!’ Keith had switched from sarcasm to defence: the emotion card.

Caittie could see that she’d pushed him into unfamiliar territory. ‘Perhaps because you treat me as a possession.’

‘Oh Caittie! You know how much I love and care for you.’ Keith’s voice had changed again, and yet this hurt tone seemed as false as it was unfamiliar.

‘No, you need me. You need me to be in certain places at certain times. You need me to live around your life. Anything you love is – is the *idea* of me, you have no concept of me personally, or of what I might need.’ Sensing that this was getting bitter, too near the bone, she lightened the tone. ‘You see, if you were tuned into my needs, you’d have poured me a coffee by now, instead of standing there enjoying your own.’

The rest of the weekend was a game of avoidance, with them both dancing round each other, each sensing that any further discussion of this topic could spill over and end everything. She phoned her mum later that morning and all was set – even a meal in the freezer for Keith’s tea with the taped-on heating instruction. How the time dragged, but how the thoughts and hopes of what might lay ahead swirled round her head in the weekend’s long silences!