

Awaken

By Michael Parra

Zeke's day starts off on the wrong foot, specifically someone else's. A shoe kicks at his left buttocks. The prod is adamant and hard edged. Hard too is the cement alleyway where Zeke spent the night and now curls on his side, eyes pinched tight against an intrusive dawn. Besides him a layered mound of newspapers undulates and snores.

Zeke squints, recognizes the rusted, grocery cart stockpiled high with castoff treasures. He sniffs. Paper whites, dew damp fragrance of spring, grace the air. Someone maintains this little garden path next to the Church. Apparently First Christian is not abandoned, just broke and in disrepair.

The curbside bouquet fails to mask a familiar perfume of tequila, salsa roja and stale urine. That slumbering mass beneath the newspaper must be his buddy Tio. The persistent hip jab becomes harder still, feels like a steel-toed work boot.

"Come on Dude. You guys can't sleep here. We've got to get to work. Move along now."

Zeke groans, swears then rolls away from the boot and sprawls face down where his sunrise erection meets the concrete.

An angel shouldn't wake up with a hard-on, but what are you gonna do? Like the first rain falling upon a desiccated riverbed, the floodgates of heaven unbolt in his mind. Zeke quivers as ancient memories trickle through his body. Centuries swell into violent, reckless waves of convulsion.

Two men in Comcast Cable uniform hastily withdraw stacks of orange cones from around his thrashing form.

"What the Fuck? Hey Man, something's up with this guy! He's sick or something."

Within seconds Zeke quiets, though his ribs continue to heave with effort. He is drenched with sweat, foul smelling as a garbage dump, nose down amid crushed narcissus blooms and utterly flaccid.

Ezekiel – the strength of God.

"Dude, what do you think? Maybe we better call 911."

A hand shakes his shoulder, "Hey Man, are you alright?"

Zeke flips over. He stares up into endless sky and the matching, azure eyes of a young cable technician.

"Jesus! I think this guy just pissed himself."

Warmth trickles into Zeke's pant creases, then down his inner thighs. He has indeed pissed himself, and not for the first time. He searches the face of the repairman...disgust, curiosity, concern. This fellow looks more like a cherub than Zeke ever did. The word "Frank" is embroidered over the man's pocket. Is the name significant, a clue, perhaps a reference to Saint Francis?

Zeke hates this part, the hunt for objective, his mission. He belches and Frank turns away from the rancid blast. The Comcast partner kneels to pinch Tio's newspapers between his finger tips. He mocks the homeless men with sarcasm as thick as his biceps.

“Good morning Sleeping Beauty. Time to get thee to the palace before the royal ball begins.” With one sharp snap of his hairy forearms he plucks away the makeshift blanket.

“*Chinga!*” Tio bellows. “Leave me the fuck alone!” Tio turns his back to his persecutor and shrugs a stained and tattered overcoat taut about his shoulders.

“Zip,” Tio yells at the church wall, “we ain’t hurtin’ nobody Man! Tell these *culos* to go fuck themselves.”

By the time Zeke achieves a standing posture, his head has stopped pounding and the world no longer spins. The green, plastic tarp that drapes over his shoulders like a grubby super hero cape offers little warmth. Zeke teeters as he savors the heat of the advancing morning. He envies the cable technician his sporty sunglasses. Frank the cherub tries to be helpful.

“Listen guys, you can’t hang out here. We’re going to jackhammer this part of the sidewalk. It’ll be loud and flying debris can be dangerous.”

Zeke looks down. His left pinky toe pokes through a hole in black Converse sneakers that are three sizes too big for him. Spray painted blue and orange lines squiggle beneath his feet. He scans the street for some indication that he should search the area for further signs, any kind of head’s up. Usually divine guidance starts with something inconspicuous like a series of letters that only he would recognize. It might be a cluster of fallen eucalyptus branches that spell “Ezekiel” in old Hebrew or an unraveled garden hose that scribbles his name in ancient Aramaic. These cable survey markings reveal nothing. You’ve got to be an engineer to render their mysteries.

The hairy Comcast guy shoves his boot against Tio’s shoulder.

“Come on Man. Move it!”

“Zip, tell these *ihos* to go to hell!”

“Gentlemen”, Zeke burps again, “respect our privacy please. When I was your age...” He stops mid-sentence because Zeke can’t remember ever being their age, or any age for that matter.

“How old are you Zip?” Frank asks.

“None of your God damned business!” Zeke says, wondering the answer himself. Zeke and the cable man look roughly similar, mid-thirties and blonde though the technician’s face is unweathered and his hair does not stick out in soiled clumps. Zeke can’t recall when he last shaved, but he remembers that his beard shows patches of grey. “And my name is Zeke.”

“Whatever you say, ZEKE; but your pal just called you Zip.”

Tio sits up and pivots on his haunches. It’s not an easy maneuver for a man his size. He’s at least twenty pounds overweight. He might be fifty years old, but it’s hard to tell with Latinos. Tio laughs so hard that he coughs. It’s half wheeze and half gurgle, an ominous sound.

“We call him Zip because his fly is always open!”

Zeke and Frank both drop their gaze to Zeke’s pants. Sure enough the front panel gapes.

“Ah, Hell man...that’s not my fault. The zipper is busted.”

“Right. Well okay, ZIP...it’s about time you boys found another home.”

Tio raises his arms and sits patiently with smudged hands in the air, a plea for Zip to help him to his feet. It's a well practiced pas de deux. Once upright Tio lumbers side to side like an old penguin. He steadies his labored gait with the shopping cart. The vagrants say nothing more to their evictors, but Tio is muttering Spanish obscenities as he and Zip wander toward their next sanctuary.

"Ya hungry?" Zip asks. He stoops to rescue a cigarette butt from the pavement. It's too soggy to light at the moment but there's plenty of tobacco hanging so he tucks it into his shirt pocket for later.

"Those things 'ill kill you *miho*," Tio chides with affection. Zip smiles.

"I'm not worried about that my friend. My arrangement is...kind of fixed."

"You don't say? Well, I'll see you in Hell then. Hey Amigo, speaking of *fix*, I need to go shopping." Tio pats his attaché case, the one that once housed his prized cutlery but now serves as the stash box for his heroine habit. "I'm dry Amigo."

He leans over his cart, retrieves a navy blue beanie from a large plastic garbage bag and wrestles it over his brown, balding scalp. Red and white letters sewn across the front of the cap proclaim "Obama-Biden '09".

"Where'd you get that?"

"Traded it for that umbrella we found at Happy Donuts last week. Obama...my man for President."

"Tio, I didn't figure you for the political type. Hey, did I tell ya I ran for office once?"

A sliver Mercedes cuts off their passage when it uses a driveway to make a three-point turn. The driver snatches a nearby parking space.

"Yeah, when did you manage that?" Tio nods at the pretty blonde locking her car. "I must have missed it."

"No, it was another life time, about seventeen hundred years ago. African tribal elders gathered in a wide, grass covered valley to choose a leader."

"Uh-huh." Tio stays put while the blonde lady crosses to the steps of 25-B Noe Street. Like Tio, she favors one knee.

"Alright," Tio humors his buddy. You get use to crazy talk on the street. Lord knows Tio has lost it a couple of times himself; and Zip is harmless enough. "Let me guess. Obama's 'Audacity of Hope' slogan was your idea."

"Nah, but just like him I was a black man running for Commander and Chief."

"Uh-huh, right. So how come you didn't win?"

"I was assassinated just before the election by one of my opponents."

"Ouch! Now there's a campaign strategy the Republicans haven't tried yet. Why'd it get so rough for you my friend?"

"I can only guess Bro." Zip shook his head in bewilderment. "You never get the reason, the whole story, or even any recognition that you did a good job. Information is granted strictly on a need-to-know basis, and even then it's limited to what one human body can hold."

Tio nods as though he understands what the Hell his friend is talking about.

“Yeah, life sucks, don’t it? Let’s head to the Hosanna Center and catch some chow.”

“Some incarnations you don’t even wake up to yourself. You hang around in a mortal stupor for your entire stay. Maybe your assignment gets completed or aborted before your role gets started. Maybe your life doesn’t even have a mission. Sometimes somebody higher up just wants you to get an education that only a particular life experience can provide. Who knows? We don’t get told shit!”

“Right.” Tio pushes the cart in silence for about ten paces. This fantasy of Zip’s is a new one. He turns to learn more of his friend’s delusion but Zip lags behind. He stands one driveway back, frozen in a crouch, transfixed like a cat that has sighted prey.

The Mercedes driver leans against an entrance gate and fidgets with the hem of an immaculately tailored jacket. Her gaze darts sideways at Zip whose eyes widen like saucers as he steps towards her. She pulls a shiny Prada handbag closer to her waist and stabs the gate buzzer three times in rapid succession.

“Nice scarf,” Zip says, to which she grants the thinnest of smiles. The cloth is an intricate paisley pattern in grey, lavender and an ocean of blues. Zip reads his name in the design as easily as though it were printed on a billboard. He looks her up and down, studying the woman as he would a map: diamond earrings, understated makeup, expensive wrist watch and shoes, but no obvious mission directives. Her hand quivers as she punches the intercom box and in a voice too loud implores admittance.

“Hello? Mike, it’s Virginia. Are you there?”

“Nice scarf,” Zip repeats as he steps closer.

“Uh, thank you. It’s Hermes,” she blurts as she jabs the gate buzzer again and again.

“I’m Zeke...Ezekiel,” he tells her slowly, carefully. When the door lock buzzes and the lock releases, Virginia almost falls through the portal. She hastily closes the gate behind her.

“Uh, bye now Zeke.”

He watches her rush down the corridor, through a courtyard garden with a hint of greenery to a cottage in the back. A door admits her but the shadowy occupant remains hidden. Zip squats on the steps, leans back and adjusts his plastic tarp like a hotel guest in a bathrobe awaiting room service. Tio wheels his cart around and painstakingly lowers himself by his buddy’s side.

“You okay Man? We don’t want to miss breakfast.”

“You go ahead without me Tio. I’ve been summoned. Did you hear her call that guy Michael? This could be a big job.”

“Claro. Well, is that a good thing? Lots of dudes are named Mike.”

“I dunno yet. I’ve never worked with an arch angel. The big boys don’t get involved unless the stakes are pretty high. There’s no room for error. A pal of mine served under Rafael once. He said it was a bitch.”

“Uh-huh. Well Amigo, why don’t we hit the Center for some grub? We got an hour until that lady comes back out.”

“How do you know?”

“Are you kidding me Man? We see that chick’s Mercedes all the time! She’s here like clockwork, Tuesday and Friday mornings.”

Zip searches Tio’s bloodshot, drug glazed eyes but finds no deception there. He looks again down the empty corridor, now quiet enough to hear his grumbling stomach.

“Okay, let’s eat. I’m coming back here right after though.”

It’s a short, downhill stroll to the Hosanna Celebration Center. Tio smiles at the familiar ravaged faces mingling out front, but he says nothing in greeting. These guys are crazier than Zip. None of them are likely to mess with his cart though, so he leaves it just outside the open double doors.

A biblical quotation overhangs the entrance; “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever...Hebrews 13:8”. Zip grins and points an upturned thumb at the sign.

“Verse two is better.”

“Come on Amigo, you don’t know shit about the bible.”

Zip shrugs and makes a beeline to one of the food serving tables where, opposite a steaming chaffing dish, an Asian woman wields a large spoon. Of the handful of volunteers serving breakfast, she is the only one wearing a scarf. It might be just a coincidence, but you never know. A clue is a clue.

Zip winks at the attendant. She nods and begins slinging eggs and sausage onto a white plastic plate for him.

“Nice scarf.” Zip says and beams a toothy smile at his hostess.

“*Ola Senorita*. Are these eggs from free-range chickens?” Tio asks as he forks a mouthful directly from the serving dish. “You know a bit more salt, chives and a pinch of tarragon would make this scramble sing.”

The woman straightens in response, sets her shoulders back and greets the men cheerily.

“Korean breakfast is very different. Do you know God loves you?” she asks.

“Well, I don’t know that I’d call it love exactly, “Zip reflects. “Let’s just say that we respect each other’s work.”

“Excuse me Miss,” Tio interrupts. He elbows Zip and gives him a smug, now-I’ll-show-you nod. “Do you know Hebrews, chapter thirteen, verse two?”

Their hostess reaches under the table to her purse and extracts a well worn bible. Her lips move as she scans chapter headings.

“Let’s see...ah, here it is...Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” Her expression is perplexed but she is persistent, “So gentlemen, do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?”

“Sure,” Zip says, “*Nanon utein salrum dulqwa mullon chal sagkumneeda.*”

The woman drops her serving spoon, covers her mouth with one hand and flees into the kitchen.

Tio gurgles a laugh and waves his empty plate at the departing figure. “*Mierda!* Hey Zip, how’d ya do that?”

“I was a Korean madam a couple of centuries ago. I ran a whore house south of Seoul. Not a bad gig until we got raided.”

“Okay, right. So what’d you say to her?”

“She asked if I was friends with Jesus. I said, ‘Certainly, I get along with most Jews’.”

“*Miho*, she cut out of here like you were the devil!”

“Ah Tio, that whole devil thing is a bunch of crap. Lucifer got a bum rap. I haven’t worked with him, but I know plenty of guys who have. That was a tough job, playing the bad guy. Look, it’s been millennia and he’s still catching shit for it.”

“Okay Buddy, so who’s running Hell then?”

“Hey, hey,” Zip laughs, “I heard your ex-mother in law was doing a good job.”

“No way Zip! That is one pious *senora*. *Eres loco*. You’re a crazy fuck. You know that?”

The two men join a dozen other gritty, forsaken souls at a long picnic table. Bright overhead fluorescents reflect off drab linoleum. It’s an unflattering milieu, but these breakfast companions abandoned vanity along with their possessions long ago.

Tio has the shakes. It takes him three tries to spear a roasted potato.

“You okay Buddy?” Zip asks. There’s a gray haired woman on Tio’s right in a San Francisco Forty-Niner’s jacket. She looks seventy but she could be half that age. She gives Tio a gap toothed grin and places a grimy but oddly manicured claw over his trembling hand.

“I can help you out.” She whispers and pats a threadbare, orange and black, day pack parked by her side. “Meet me in the lady’s restroom.”

The woman rises and daintily wipes her lips with a paper napkin. These folks take dignity wherever they can find it. Tio follows her out.

Zip’s plate is clean and he’s on this third cup of coffee and still no Tio. The gray haired, forty-niner fan is no where to be seen either. Zip drains the last of the bitter brew and finds the women’s lavatory. There is no answer to his knock, but he hears echoes...vomiting.

By the time Zip finds him balled up in the corner toilet stall, Tio has stopped moving altogether. His eyes have rolled back in his head and spittle drools down a swollen cheek. His entire frame is quivering as though angelic sentience has reclaimed him also.

“Unlikely”, Zip surmises as he contemplates his next move. Administering to his friend could delay his meeting the Mercedes driver. On the one hand Zip’s present incarnation clearly involves Tio and their alliance could be crucial to his mission. On the other hand, his buddy is mortal. They all die eventually no matter what you do.

Tio’s legs begin to twitch and bang against the porcelain. There isn’t much time.

In the end Zip chooses compassion and rides with his friend in the ambulance. He leaves the emergency room as soon as Tio stabilizes, but by then the silver Mercedes is long gone.

By Friday morning the Comcast guys have finished. The sidewalk is once again free territory. Tio and Zip are back to their old haunts, scrounging a few

bucks at the Safeway Recycling Station between meals at the Hosanna Celebration Center and AA meetings at Saint Francis Lutheran. The church is flanked by Block Buster Video and the neighborhood Pot Club.

Zip has kept a close watch on 25-B for the past three days. Visitors spend about an hour in the back cottage and leave sweaty and panting in workout gear. The mysterious Michael never shows himself. His trash barrel offers no further clues, other than that the man writes with a florid hand and apparently enjoys cabernet. Zip checks Michael's recycling bin next. Broken glass rattles beneath pizza delivery cardboard and empty nutritional supplement canisters. Zip searches for another sign, anything that might point to purpose as he awaits Virginia's arrival.

"Hey *miho*, what the Hell are you doing? That bottle you just lifted and put back is worth twenty cents!"

Zip shrugs and wholly submerges his head and arms into the rubbish bin, so he misses the silver Mercedes when it drives by the first time. She finds parking on her second go around. Zip is still half upside-down in the bin when Virginia heads for the gate. She wears yellow and black this morning. The new scarf catches the sun in shades of amber and gold. Tio spies her from the next door neighbor's trash bin, about fifty feet away, and announces her arrival.

Zip straightens, arms sliding up the inside of the bin. His heart is pounding. From a distance her scarf appears to display archaic Chinese characters. Zip hardly feels the jagged bottle edge. It's the warmth of his own blood spilling over his hand that he notices first.

"Uh-oh," is all he can think to say as he raises a torn and profusely bleeding wrist. The quantity of blood spurting from his forearm is truly astonishing. It quickly pools over his sneakers, obliterating the blue and orange paint squiggles on the pavement.

"Ziiiiiiiiiiiiip!" Tio yells when he sees his bloody friend sink to his knees. Tio almost knocks Virginia over in his hobbled rush. She puts a hand to her mouth, looks up and down the empty street and screams out for help but no one comes. Tio is on his knees and crying. Zip has collapsed into Tio's arms by the time Virginia gets to 25-B. She presses the intercom gate buzzer without answer.

"Oh my God, Michael, PLEASE be home. PLEASE answer!"

"*Madre de dios!* What are we gonna do? Somebody help!"

Virginia stabs 911 on her cell phone and is forced to slow her panic in order to answer the operator's questions.

"We have to bind the wound!" Virginia tells Tio as she relays information to the dispatcher, "Jesus, we're right across the street from Davies hospital. This is absurd! Get something to tie it off!"

Tio rips off part of his flannel shirt and starts to fold it into a wide strip.

"Don't use that; it's filthy!" Virginia tells him.

"It's all I have..."

"Oh my God, HERE!" She removes her Hermes scarf, and tries to tie a tourniquet but fumbles, "Oh! I don't know how to do this. I'm a restaurant owner, not a paramedic!"

“*Senora*, let me try. I use to be a chef. I’ve seen some bad kitchen knife cuts in my time.”

Zip gazes up to Tio’s earnest face and beyond him the Mercedes driver’s agitated eyes. She is dialing her cell phone again.

“Mike, are you there? I’m right outside your gate and there’s been an emergency. Please pick up!” Her image passes from Zip’s sight as the world fades to black, but he sees her place a comforting hand on Tio’s sobbing shoulder.

“Thank God. Listen!”

A siren screams in the distance. It’s getting louder.

“Just do the best you can. Help is on the way!”

Tio wraps the scarf twice just slightly higher up Zip’s forearm from the gash. He’s about to tighten the knot and tie it off when he glimpses something beyond belief. With a blood-spattered hand he wipes tears from his eyes and bows close to the cut for a better look.

“*Mira chica*. The bleeding has stopped! The wound has closed! It’s a miracle!”