

“Eyes Upon Waking”

written by
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Taren Foley, 30's, pretty but sad, sits on the edge of her bed. She is a tiny, still figure surrounded by darkness. Taren calmly and peacefully swallows an entire bottle of little white pills, crying silently. Her moments in preparation for death are intercut with images of medical personnel battling to save her life in the emergency room - Taren struggles and kicks atop a gurney, her body spasming wildly. An ER Doctor forces a tube down her throat. In the bedroom, Taren lies down with her arms crossed, closes her eyes, and waits to die. A short time later she vomits violently onto the carpet, stumbles and crawls to the door, then passes out. She wakes in a hospital room, alone and in restraints, an IV in her arm and a tube in her throat. In her weakened state, unconsciousness overtakes her.

While recovering in the hospital, Taren is told by a nurse “We thought you were a goner for sure.” Still in restraints, Taren awakes one night to discover her IV tube has come loose and she is bleeding out. Initially concerned, Taren quickly realizes this is what she wants, and happily lies back, again waiting to die...until the nurse comes in and reattaches the tube. Taren cries, her death prevented once again.

The next day, the ER Doctor informs Taren she is stable enough not to die for any medical reason, and will be transferred to another facility for a required three to five days of observation. Taren would still rather not be alive, and couldn't care less where she's being sent or why. She's past the point of being upset, and is simply too tired to care or to fight. She has not, however, lost her sharp tongue - which amuses the Doctor, who has seen it all and remains unaffected emotionally.

Taren rides unrestrained in the back of a hospital van, traveling along a desert highway. She is out of hospital garb and into her own clothes. As a man in a tailgating car stares at Taren through the window, her initial indifference turns to shame. It's as if he knows what she's done, and she's embarrassed.

Arriving at the hospital-like observation facility, Taren objects to being referred to as an S-A: suicide attempt. While signing her in like a package, the van driver says to Taren “Fine, you're an angel wannabe.” Taren ignores the genuine politeness of Nurse Gomez, and is shown to her room by attendant Benny. He provides her with general information about the facility - she's locked in, but free to spend her time however she pleases - and leaves her alone. Taren unpacks

her clothes and climbs into bed, cries softly while buried under the covers.

Taren is woken twice during the night by Nurse Gomez, once to draw blood and again to take her pulse. An exhausted Taren becomes aware of Emma, a teenage girl crying in the other bed, before falling back to sleep. Come daytime, Emma is gone, and Taren explores the facility. She walks slowly, not knowing what to expect around each corner or behind any door. Yet she encounters no one.

Taren happens upon the cafeteria during lunchtime. She enters with some trepidation, as this is the first interaction she's had with other patients. Many of these patients are bandaged in different ways, and seem lost in their own world. Taren avoids eye contact, but is compelled to look. Carlos, 40's, is easily noticed in the crowd due to his loud voice, bandaged head, and exuberant nature - he is also the only patient in a wheelchair. Taren enters the line and accepts a tray of food, then spots Emma, sitting alone. Taren avoids her and sits by herself, isolated from the other patients. She tries to eat, but can't.

After lunch, the patients leave in a group, and Taren goes the other way. On her continued search of the facility, she is met by Dr. Angela Kepler, 50's, at the nurses station. Dr. Kepler is warm but direct, informs Taren she's been assigned to her during her stay. Taren sits in Dr. Kepler's office, where the doctor attempts to converse with Taren about her suicide. Taren is less than cooperative, and mainly disinterested - she is simply not inclined to discuss it. She refuses medication to help her sleep, citing the drugs administered at the hospital as the cause of her current lethargy. Taren ends the discussion before it has properly begun, preferring to continue it later.

Taren takes a much-needed shower, relishing the sensation of steaming hot water. She notices one of the metal shower curtain rings is broken, with a jagged edge. Holding it in her hand, she flashes back to her first suicide attempt: cutting her wrists with a dull kitchen knife, taking every pill she can find in a medicine cabinet, being discovered in a daze, and hearing from a doctor through her drug-induced stupor, "Next time get a huge bottle of Tylenol." Back in the shower, Taren weeps in misery on the tile floor, and throws away the jagged metal piece.

Now fresh and clean, but with no trace of emotion or expression, Taren sits in the facility's rec room, stares at a TV without really watching it. Other patients occupy themselves with low-key activities. Carlos rolls up next to Taren and tries to start a conversation. She ignores him at first, then makes fun of his head injury, which he explains is the reason for the wheelchair - he can walk, but it's a liability issue. Taren becomes insulted by his comments and conjecture about her reasons for being there - she doesn't want to admit he's right. Carlos proves himself affable in the face of her ire, leaves her to her silent contemplation. Too annoyed to remain still, Taren hops off her folding chair.

Taren packs her things and searches for a way out of the facility, finding only locked windows and doors. She does, however, discover an adjacent facility of elderly and debilitated patients. She encounters frail, wheelchair-bound Mrs. Kelly, 70's, who can't find her keys and is sure she and Taren went to school together. Taren politely extracts herself from the conversation and returns to the observation facility. Walking the halls with nowhere to go, she is spotted by Dr.

Kepler, who simply smiles and says nothing. Taren realizes this is not a situation she can avoid forever.

Back in her office, Dr. Kepler tries to understand Taren's reasons for her suicide attempts. Taren explains how they were conscious, rational decisions - they weren't a call for help, she simply wanted to die. She defends her right to end her life when she sees no value in it, even if others do - it's her life, and they're wrong. Dr. Kepler tries to convince Taren that comparing the negative aspects of one's life to the positive nature one wishes were present is a sure way to find oneself disappointed - but Taren discounts the value of perspective. For Taren, bad is bad, and a rotten life should be discarded.

Changing direction, Dr. Kepler asks if Taren was abused as a child. A quick flashback shows images of a young Taren suffering at the hands of her immediate family, but her only response to Dr. Kepler is "Yes." She tells the story of two boys attempting to rape her when she was fourteen, while staying with their family after she left home. Another flashback shows the reason she left - her mother chasing up the stairs with a large knife - but all she says to Dr. Kepler is "I decided it was time to get out."

Taren refuses to discuss this topic any further, so Dr. Kepler changes the subject to Taren's general health and appearance - which Taren attributes to having spent the last two weeks in different hospitals, nothing more. Dr. Kepler comes right to the point, asking why Taren took pills if she really wanted to die. Taren defends her choice, as it was her intent to die beautiful, and peacefully...she didn't know the reality of it; she truly thought it would kill her.

The ongoing discussion covers the need for forgiveness - which Taren feels is unnecessary, as she tried to kill herself, not anyone else - and how god had given her much more than she can handle, despite biblical statements to the contrary. When Dr. Kepler informs Taren "You signed yourself in, you can sign yourself out," Taren's unspoken reluctance to face the world comes to the surface - however strong a person she is, Taren remains powerless in the face of her greatest fears.

Ending the session, Dr. Kepler asks Taren to speak with another doctor tomorrow, as she has a prior professional commitment and won't be at the facility. She also writes Taren a prescription, but Taren adamantly refuses medication to help her sleep. That night, Taren lies awake while the rest of the facility is silent. With nothing better to do, she watches an old movie on the rec room TV. She remains there until morning, once again ignores Carlos while staring out the window. This time, however, his persistent annoyance stirs Taren's interest in the chosen methods of suicide attempted by himself and the other patients.

Over lunch, Carlos provides details on his four suicide attempts, plus those of several patients, and invites Taren to afternoon group therapy despite her disinterest. In group, she is bored by Emma's call-for-help story, but finds something interesting in the plight of an awkward young man Carlos refers to as Smoky Joe. Group facilitator Shelley, 40's, asks Taren if she'd like to talk about her experience, to which Taren responds by asking Shelley for a cigarette.

Taren smokes outside, in an enclosed courtyard. She is joined by attendant Benny, out for some

fresh air. He jokes that smoking is just long-term suicide, to which Taren responds “Life is a terminal illness, pal. Might as well enjoy it while it’s killin’ ya.” This prompts her to ask him about the adjacent facility, which he says is mainly Alzheimer’s patients, and others who can’t care for themselves anymore.

Taren visits Mrs. Kelly in the Elder Care day room, and she seems much more lucid today. After teaching Taren tidbits of trivia, they take a stroll around the facility, Taren pushing Mrs. Kelly in her wheelchair. Mrs. Kelly talks about once being more adventurous, racing cars with her husband in their youth - before he died in the war. They return to the day room, where Elder Care attendant Larry says it’s time for Mrs. Kelly’s meds and takes her away, being rude to Taren.

Taren returns to the observation facility to see Emma being released, met by her mom. Taren has a flashback to her youth, when her own mother said “I wish Janie was my daughter and not you!” Emma’s Mom holds her close, and Taren continues on to the rec room. She talks with Smoky Joe, telling him she understands how he feels about wanting to be dead, and is sorry it didn’t work out for him. This is not what he was expecting to hear.

At dinner, Taren sits alone, forcing herself to eat. Dennis, 40’s, a patient with one eye bandaged due to gunshot injury, sits across from her and attempts a conversation - she neither ignores nor engages him. That night, Taren is unable to sleep and uncomfortable in her bed. She re-makes the bed with clean sheets from the other bed, now that Emma’s gone, then showers off, lies on top of the covers, and closes her eyes.

The next day - Friday - Taren meets with Dr. Kepler, who is interested in Taren’s reason for not speaking with another doctor the day before. Taren, all business, claims she was too busy. Dr. Kepler then questions Taren’s state of mind during her suicide attempts. Taren states she was clear-headed and intent on dying. Dr. Kepler gets stuck on this issue, feeling it conflicts with her professional experience, and as she continues to rephrase the same question again and again, Taren abruptly leaves the office.

Taren walks through the Elder Care facility, looking for Mrs. Kelly - someone who actually listens, instead of badgering her. She recognizes the attendant Larry and asks where Mrs. Kelly’s room is. He informs her that Mrs. Kelly has Alzheimer’s and can’t recognize her, but Taren ignores this and repeats her question. Upon finding Mrs. Kelly in her room, Taren is confronted with the unfortunate truth that today, at least, Larry is right - Mrs. Kelly seems to believe they went to school together. Feeling empty, Taren returns to the observation facility.

Having missed lunch, Taren joins afternoon group, already underway. Her appearance flusters Dennis, who gives up on what he was saying, so Shelly asks Taren if she’d like to talk to the group today. When Taren claims she is not in the mood, Shelly says “I’ll give you a cigarette.” While the joke is intended as harmless, Taren feels insulted and storms out. She reads a book in the rec room as patients return from group, and insults Carlos when he tries to start a conversation.

Taren goes to the nurses station to call a cab, but Nurse Gomez informs her she can’t check out

of the facility without orders from a doctor - all of whom have left for the day. Taren accepts, without emotion, that she has no choice but to stay - and has yet to admit her fear of returning to the world outside. She enters the rec room in search of something to occupy her, but has no interest in any of the books, videos, or boardgames. She ambles about aimlessly, finds herself at the cafeteria, discovers spray cleaner and paper towels left out. With nothing better to do, she cleans, and goes to bed after the sun is up.

Taren is later woken by Carlos, to prevent her from missing yet another meal. Actually hungry, and more genial than usual, Taren thanks him, then chases him out. At lunch, she meets Maria, 20's, a new patient whose lively personality Taren truly appreciates, and who affects all the patients positively. Taren chats with Maria in the rec room, despite Maria's limited English, and intends to seek out a doctor to see if she'll be at the facility long enough for Maria to teach her Spanish. Carlos informs Taren, however, that it's Saturday, and there's no medical staff on the weekends. He pulls a stunt in his wheelchair, giving Taren an idea - she visits Mrs. Kelly, and asks: "Feeling adventurous?"

They race wheelchairs in the hallway, all the patients cheering them on and having a good time. Taren pushes Mrs. Kelly, who loves every minute of it. Returning Mrs. Kelly to her room, Taren is confronted by Larry, who insists Taren is wasting her time with an old woman who doesn't know her. Taren disagrees - there is a light in Mrs. Kelly's eyes when she sees Taren, and that means something. Larry insults them both, angering Taren, who tells him off and goes in search of Maria - but none of the other patients know where she is.

Sitting in the rec room, bored, Taren asks Heather, 20's, "So what's your story?" Heather talks about her depression, and this leads to a montage of conversations with other patients Taren had previously seen but never spoken to: nerdy & hen-pecked Ferdinand (40's) and emotionally isolated Virginia (40's), plus Dennis and more with Heather. They discuss the reasons they attempted suicide, their medication, and other issues in their lives.

The time Taren spends with everyone creates a feeling of community, and the patients eat dinner as a group, with no one left out - even Maria has reappeared. Afterwards, everyone but Taren takes their meds and heads off to bed, leaving Taren alone. Feeling isolated, Taren sits outside under the stars. In the morning, she wakes to Maria jumping on her bed, full of energy. Maria takes Taren to the rec room, where she shows her some aerobic moves - she is in fact an aerobics instructor - then gets others to join in the fun, including Benny the attendant.

After lunch, most of the patients receive visiting family members - all but Carlos and Taren, neither of whom want to see their family, and so did not invite them. Instead, they compare emotional scars by trying to one-up each other with humorously stated anecdotes of parental abuse; his father versus her mother. In the end, Carlos gives in - Taren's mother is worse. As he takes off for dinner, Taren happens upon a scene of Maria sitting through a verbal onslaught, in Spanish, by her mother and brother, Benny in attendance. Benny shuts the door, and Taren moves on.

She sits with Mrs. Kelly in the older woman's room, discussing their lack of visitors, and why Taren doesn't want anyone to see her like this. Mrs. Kelly says there's no shame in being sick,

“We’re only human.” When Taren informs her she isn’t sick, Mrs. Kelly fails to understand why the doctors won’t let her go home. Taren confesses her emotions, her fears she’s kept to herself all this time - about facing the outside world, the judgement, the lack of understanding about why she did what she did to herself. When she sees Mrs. Kelly is falling asleep, she wonders why no one has come by to help her into bed.

Investigating the lack of nearby attendants, Taren discovers the cause: Maria, struggling and fighting in a feral rage, screaming and yelling in the midst of a major freakout, her family standing to the side in fear. Benny tells her it’s under control, while Larry orders Taren to her room. She complies, too in shock to sleep. In the morning, she joins the group for breakfast, for the first time since she arrived. Carlos goofs on her, tries to drive her from her funk, but she’s having none of it. In the rec room, Heather says she wants to do aerobics again, but Taren only responds “Why are you asking me?”

Dr. Kepler locates Taren, informs her they need to meet one more time before she can provide release forms. Taren begins this session asking what happened to Maria, but Dr. Kepler claims patient confidentiality. Taren informs Dr. Kepler she has no plans to kill herself again - two was her limit - but that doing so was not giving up, that it was not selfish because the pain she was in was too horrible to go on living. She explains that Dr. Kepler, having never attempted suicide herself, can never fully understand the will to die. Dr. Kepler mentions she had a son near Taren’s age who died after two suicide attempts. Taren tries to get the doctor to understand that sometimes, nothing you can do for someone is enough to keep them from wanting to die - and it’s not her fault that he did.

Getting back to Taren, Dr. Kepler asks what could have stopped Taren from wanting to end her life, tries to get her to see the value in herself. Taren responds “When someone tells you every day of your life that you’re completely worthless, it kinda sinks in.” Dr. Kepler wants to know if Taren still speaks to her mother, causing Taren to regret broaching the subject. She simply answers in the negative, hoping that will be the end of it.

However, upon further questioning - with Dr. Kepler almost badgering her into saying it - Taren breaks down, sobbing, admits she wanted to die so her mother couldn’t find her anymore, wouldn’t be able to hurt her ever again. Once Taren calms down, Dr. Kepler tells her “You can’t let a monster like that control your life.” She encourages Taren to find a way to address her needs, to deal with her issues before they consume her.

Taren visits Mrs. Kelly to say goodbye - and finds her not only lucid, but in full memory of a conversation which took place days earlier. While Taren is happy to leave her new friend on a good note, Mrs. Kelly apologizes for her inconsistent mind: “I had hoped it might get better, but...I don’t think it’s going to.” As Taren packs up her clothes, Heather appears in the doorway, tells Taren she’ll miss her. Taren warns Heather that if she continues on this path, she will eventually succeed in dying.

Taren signs out at the nurses stations, asks Nurse Gomez if there’s a volunteer program - she’d like to help out future patients, in Observation and in Elder Care - but Nurse Gomez informs her that’s simply not allowed. Benny unlocks the main door, holds it open for her. She still has fear

in her eyes, but he looks at her with confidence. She steps out to face the world.

Outside the facility, Taren smokes a cigarette near the parking lot. Carlos walks out, free of his wheelchair - he's also leaving today - and works up the courage to share some of his own personal feelings with Taren, for the first time. He quotes a short poem of his, adding "Everybody's wounds are their own. But there's gotta be a way to heal. Right?" Taren responds, "A lot of hours in a day, Carlos. Anything can happen."

As Taren gets in a cab and is taken away, back into the world, words appear on the screen:

Taren Foley

Born 1977 -

The screen fades to black, yet the words remain.

These words FADE OUT and are replaced by others:

BASED ON A TRUE STORY