

AWAKE

The Place

The bedroom of a farmhouse in south-central Missouri.

The Time

Just after four o'clock on a morning in late February.

The Characters

Amelia – 50, the daughter

Ethel – 76, the mother

The Dialect

Both women speak with dialects appropriate to the Ozark region of southern Missouri, although Amelia's dialect is much less pronounced than Ethel's. Phonetic pronunciations of specific words have been included in the text; however, it is important that the dialects not interfere with intelligibility and absolutely never make these women into caricatures in any way.

The Setting

The bedroom is on the second floor of the story-and-a-half farmhouse, tucked under the sloping rafters of the roof. The walls, wood floor and slat ceiling were whitewashed long ago.

The house itself was built in the 1830s, and is nestled in a grove of cottonwood trees on more than 50 acres of once rich Ozark farmland. A long dirt driveway leads from the farmhouse to a paved two-lane road connecting two major highways and is a favorite shortcut for interstate truckers. The next farm over is two miles east and the nearest town is another nine.

Most prominent in the bedroom is a black three-quarter size wrought-iron bed, covered by two wool blankets over a chenille spread hiding white cotton sheets. At the foot of the bed is a cedar blanket chest, on which are stacked three or four folded quilts, patchwork and not.

Next to the bed is a round pedestal table holding a 1920s slag glass lamp, a collection of vintage alarm clocks, several cloth-bound books, and matching tortoise shell hairbrush and comb. Across the room, in an alcove, are side by side double-hung windows dressed with sheer bridal lace curtains.

Beneath the windows, recessed in the alcove, is a window seat over a radiator. Several needlepoint pillows line the bench seat. Upstage of the alcove is a 19th century double-door mahogany armoire. On top of the armoire are arranged several glass canning jars that hold a collection of seashells. The only other piece of furniture in the room is an upholstered platform rocking chair. There is no phone, no television and no radio.

On the walls, yellowed family photos and small paintings of rural landscapes hang from picture rails. Above the bed hangs a framed poster of Mikhail Baryshnikov, circa 1977; it's the only item in the room that appears to have been introduced in the last half-century.

A single door with a black porcelain knob leads to the hallway, a bathroom, other bedrooms, and the world beyond.

The collection of alarm clocks beside the bed keep real time, and are set at 4:02 when the play begins.

The action is continuous. There is no intermission.

AWAKE

Shortly after four o'clock in the morning. The darkened bedroom.

A long, long silence.

An owl.

More silence.

In back of the house, a garbage can is overturned. A dog barks.

Silence.

Silence.

On the road, two hundred yards from the house, an 18-wheeler lumbers past.

More silence.

Parting clouds permit a shaft of moonlight through the window, revealing the room and AMELIA, 50, in bed. Asleep.

More silence.

Three soft, separate knocks on the bedroom door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

AMELIA doesn't stir.

The knocks come again. A bit more insistent.

A few seconds pass, then AMELIA moves quickly up to one elbow, raising her head to listen.

She waits.

Hearing nothing, she lies back down.

Silence.

The staggered knocking comes again and AMELIA sits straight up, her eyes on the bedroom door.

ETHEL (a whisper): Amelia?

AMELIA: M-Mother?

ETHEL: Ya 'wake?

AMELIA: You scared me to—

ETHEL: —I come in?

AMELIA: Course.

The bedroom door opens and ETHEL enters. She is 76, frail and white haired, wearing a fleece robe over a flannel nightgown with wool socks and slipper boots.

ETHEL: What in tarnation?! It's Harrison's meat locker!

AMELIA: Radiator's busted. I told you. Why were you knockin like that?

ETHEL: Like what?

AMELIA: Like Marley's ghost.

ETHEL removes a quilt from the top of the blanket chest and drapes it over her shoulders.

AMELIA is still bundled up in bed.

ETHEL: I fig'rd ya might be sleepin.

AMELIA: Course I was *sleepin*, Mother. It's ... four in the mornin. What's wrong?

ETHEL: Ya wanna quilt?

AMELIA: No.

ETHEL: I can see my breath.

ETHEL exhales in short bursts, several times.

ETHEL: See?

AMELIA: No.

ETHEL: Look at me!

AMELIA: Mother, I'm tired. And cold. Can it wait?

ETHEL: I was sittin in Gideon's room.

AMELIA: When?

ETHEL: Jis' now.

AMELIA: Doin what?

ETHEL: Thinkin. Fer a spell. Jis thinkin.

AMELIA flops back onto the bed, turning away from ETHEL, and pulls the blankets up to her chin.

AMELIA: That's very interestin.

ETHEL: It's a might warmer in there. Queer, huh? Ain't been a body in that room fer purt-near twen'y years an' it's still warmer than this-here room ya pract'y *lives* in. Ain't that sump'n?

AMELIA: Giddy's room is next to the chimney. Always been warmer in the winter. And cooler in the summer.

ETHEL: The chimbley ain't got nothin to do with it.

ETHEL doesn't move for several moments, then she walks over to the rocking chair. She sits.

Silence. A very long silence as no one moves. An entire minute might not be too long.

Then ETHEL begins rocking.

AMELIA: What.

ETHEL: Nothin. Ssshhh. Get yourse'f back to sleep.

AMELIA: I can't with you sittin there.

ETHEL: I ain't makin a sound.

AMELIA: You're rockin.

Another long silence broken only by the sounds of the rocking chair.

ETHEL: I 'member a time when ya liketa *begged* me to rock here til ya went asleep.

AMELIA: Forty-somethin *years* ago.

ETHEL: Ya want I should read to ya?

Silence.

AMELIA: What's wrong, Mother? Is it the sciatica?

ETHEL: No. I was better, but I got over it. Won't be seein the sun come up fer purt-near three hours yet. (*pause*) *More'n* three.

AMELIA: Sooner than that. Unfortunately.

ETHEL: Seven twen'y-seven.

AMELIA: I'm not gonna argue with you.

ETHEL looks out the window for awhile.

ETHEL: That-there moon is purty 'nough to make a rabbit smooch a hound dog.

They are silent once more.

AMELIA is still, but far from asleep.

ETHEL: I could sing.

AMELIA: Oh, please don't.

ETHEL: Ya useta like it when I'd sing to ya. (*no response*)
"Band Played On." "Beautiful Dreamer." 'member?

AMELIA: Barely.

Another long silence.

ETHEL: I aim to sell the farm. (*no response*) Melie, ya hear what—

AMELIA: —Mother, please go back to your room. I have to work tomorrow. Today.

ETHEL: I said I'm a-fixin to sell this place.

AMELIA: I heard you.

ETHEL: An' it don't concern ya none? Best to start packin'. (*no response*) Gonna sell it next week.

AMELIA reaches over and switches on the lamp. It takes a moment for the women's eyes to adjust.

AMELIA (*sitting up*): No. You're not.

ETHEL: I am.

AMELIA: You're not. You say this every winter.

ETHEL: An' I fig'rd it was only fair to tell ya.

AMELIA: You've told me plenty of times.

ETHEL: 'tain't true.

AMELIA: Sure it is.

ETHEL: You're plumb crazy.

AMELIA: Prob'ly.

ETHEL: Crazier'n a bag o' greased weasels.

AMELIA (*confirming*): You don't remember havin' this conversation before.

ETHEL: 'at's right. (*curiosity gets the best of her*) When?

AMELIA: Many times.

ETHEL: Not with me, ya ain't.

AMELIA: Think back. Start with last January. I came home from the plant to find you'd packed up all my things in boxes. I remember, 'cause it was my birthday.

ETHEL: Nope. Never happen'. An' if'n it did, we're still here, ain't we?

AMELIA: And we'll be here next winter. And the next.

ETHEL: Naw, this time I done made up my mind. Spoke to that Mr. Whitaker.

AMELIA: At the bank. When?

ETHEL: Las' week.

AMELIA: When last week? What day?

ETHEL: Frid'y.

AMELIA: You were—

ETHEL: —Wednesd'y. We spoke Wednesd'y.

AMELIA: You went to town?

ETHEL: You were a-workin at the plant. José took me. We did lunch at the hotel.

AMELIA: You and José.

ETHEL (*with a snort*): Naw! Mr. *Whitaker*! What would José an' I be doin eatin at the hotel?!

A moment, as AMELIA sizes up her mother. This wouldn't be the first tall tale told in this house.

AMELIA (*confirming*): Wednesday.

ETHEL: Yup.

AMELIA: And you had lunch with—

ETHEL: —Ordered their pork chops. Myrtle Davis swears by 'em, but I found 'em a might dry. José et the—

AMELIA: —So if I ask José, he'll confirm this story.

ETHEL: If I let 'im. But I sworn 'im to secrecy. Mex'cans is good at keepin' secrets. That's why we lost the Alamo. Ya gotta pilluh fer my back?

AMELIA takes a pillow from the bed and tosses it to ETHEL.

ETHEL: Don't *throw* it at me! What're ya *thinkin*?

AMELIA: Don't say such things about Mexicans.

ETHEL: I said they's *good* at keepin secrets!

AMELIA weighs this story's likelihood.

AMELIA: So what did you and Mr. *Whitaker* talk about?

ETHEL: Mos' ever'thin. This is too fluffy. Fetch my little red pilluh.

AMELIA: It's freezin cold, Mother. If you need your own pillow, maybe you should be in your own bed. Anythin you wanna talk about can wait 'til tomorrow. Later. Tonight.

Both women sit silently for awhile, not speaking or looking at the other.

ETHEL: Mr. Whitaker, he was askin 'bout ya.

AMELIA (*without sincerity*): That's nice.

ETHEL: Always did think 'e was sweet on ya.

AMELIA: Please.

ETHEL: Naw, I could tell. He asked what ya been up to, will ya be attendin the church doin's next week, questions like that.

AMELIA: This is *Vernon* Whitaker you're talkin about? Nearly old as you, fat and bald?

ETHEL: You're overlookin his consid'able better qualities. Like bein a widderer. An' pres'dent o' the bank.

AMELIA: He's not the president, Mother. He's a clerk or, at best, a loan officer or somethin.

ETHEL: Well, 'e ain't a *teller*.

AMELIA: No, he's not a teller. But he *is* ugly.

ETHEL: He ain't ugly. He jis' looks better from 'cross the street.

AMELIA: Did you really have lunch with Mr. Whitaker?

ETHEL: Is ya *deaf*?! What've I been *sayin*? My little red pilluh's on my bed.

AMELIA: Why didn't you mention any of this before now?

ETHEL: I been contemplatin on it.

AMELIA: And you discussed sellin the farm.

ETHEL: If ya now got a hankerin fer me to set a spell, I'll be needin my pilluh.

AMELIA: No, I can wait 'til mornin. *After* I speak to José.

ETHEL: Ya don't wanna know? 'bout me sellin the farm?

AMELIA: Kills you, don't it?

Several moments pass in silence, both women motionless. AMELIA waits, confident ETHEL will return to her room.

ETHEL thinks. Then she starts rocking in earnest.

AMELIA: I thought you needed your red pillow.

ETHEL: I do. This is liketa par'lyze me.

AMELIA: Your choice.

AMELIA lies down on the bed, the blankets pulled up to cover most of her head.

ETHEL keeps up the energetic rocking, then begins to tire. But she's determined.

ETHEL: Mr. Whitaker said—

AMELIA reaches out and snaps off the lamp.

ETHEL: —Amelia Louise! Ya turn up that lamp! *(no response)*
I'm talkin to ya! *(no response)* Ya hear me?

AMELIA switches on the lamp.

ETHEL: 'at's better! I won't rock if it puts ya out, but I ain't a-gonna sit here in the dark. Now that we're both good an' 'wake.

AMELIA: *I'm* not awake! But just keep talkin and I should nod off quick enough.

ETHEL: Well, who licked the red off *your* candy? Opal Hastin's don't believe when I tells her how ya talks to me.

AMELIA: I can only imagine.

ETHEL: Opal says if'n ya keep it up, ya ain't too old to suck on a bar o' soap.

AMELIA (“*the very idea*”): Right.

ETHEL: Her daughter wouldn’t *think* o’ speakin to Opal the way ya does to me.

AMELIA: That’s ’cause Opal Hasting’s daughter is a retard, and is therefore incapable of puttin’ two words together that make a lick o’ sense.

ETHEL: That ain’t true and ya knows it. (*grudgingly*) But she *is* dumber ’an a sack o’ toes.

AMELIA: Mother, it’s late and I’ve got a headache. We can resume this fascinatin conversation tonight over supper.

ETHEL: Ya bowl t’night.

AMELIA: Not tonight. Tomorrow.

ETHEL: Ya sure?

AMELIA: Course I’m sure. Mondays and Thursdays. Eleven years.

ETHEL: ’s’it been that long? How’s your team doin’?

AMELIA: Same as always. Goodnight.

ETHEL: Ya wanna aspirin’?

AMELIA: Why?

ETHEL: Fer your headache. I’ll get ya one.

AMELIA; No, I just need a few more hours sleep.

ETHEL: I don’t mind. Only take a minute.

AMELIA: Not necessary. I’m fine.

ETHEL: You’ll sleep sounder.

ETHEL stands and, bundled in the quilt, exits the bedroom toward the bathroom.