

1st Place, Fiction

Awake from Darkness

by Robert Bennett

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I've never been one of those people who looks at others and says, 'there but for the grace of God...' Children never think about what life would be like if they were deaf or blind or in any other way disabled. Over the past month I've had plenty of time to think about these things, now that I'm blind.

Douglas sat in the back seat of his friend Eddie Hatch's car. He had barely spoken a word since the old man picked him up from the Hecksher Rehabilitation Campus. In fact, he didn't even know Eddie could drive. Maybe he couldn't. As Douglas thought about it, he realized he might be sitting in an auto-drive car. There was no way to know and, at the moment, he supposed it didn't really matter.

He had been deemed "medically fit" to go home. The therapists and counselors said he could resume his life, with the tools and techniques he'd been taught at the rehab facility. But, what did all that mean in a practical sense? Being told you could do something and actually doing it were two very different things. For the first time in a very long time Douglas felt scared. Life would never be the same. As the car sped down the highway toward the rest of his life, he held a symbol of that change tightly in his hand. The wooden object felt hard, cold and lifeless in his hand. Would the rest of his life feel this way too? From now on he'd have to rely on the use of this cane to tell him what potential obstacles his environment held. He'd have to listen for bangs and scratches, and an assortment of other noises. A shiver ran down his spine as he closed his dead eyes and clenched his teeth.

"Eddie, I hate to trouble you after you've been so kind to me..."

"Forget it, Mr. Abletan. It's the least I could do. It should've been me who took that bullet."

"We've talked about that, Eddie. You're the one who is always going on about fate and such. In that vein, couldn't it be the bullet hit its intended target? Nothing could have been done. Anyway, as I was saying, do you know if anyone has been to my home since my ... accident? Do you know what condition my apartment is in?"

The old man shook his head.

“Um, no. As far as I know no one has been there. I’m sorry, Mr. Abletan. I should have thought about that. I should have thought you’d need things arranged a certain way. Those folks at the hospital didn’t say nothing either. Seems a bit irresponsible if you ask me. Letting you go home without thinking about, or telling me to think about, what you might need when you got there.”

“Irresponsible indeed, but don’t worry about it, Eddie. It is not in any way your fault. In any case, I’m sure I will manage just fine. The one thing you can do for me though, and I’ve been telling you this for a long time now, is to please call me Douglas. We’ve known each other far too long for you to continue addressing me so formally.”

“I’ll try, and you’re right about us being friends for a long while, but it just don’t roll off my tongue easily.”

After opening the door to his apartment, Douglas instinctively reached for the light switch. As he flipped it, he noted the soft clicking noise, something he had never paid much attention to before.

He’d have to start paying closer attention to such sounds. Sound would be his new vision. As he withdrew his hand he chuckled. Turning on the lights would no longer be necessary, not when he was home alone anyway. It would be odd, he thought, walking from room to room in total darkness, and any voyeurs might be upset. But, he’d save money on the electric bill at least. That had to count for something.

“It might be best if you enter the room before me, Eddie. You can sort of clear the way for me.”

“Sure thing, just don’t smack me in the backside with that nice new cane of yours.”

Douglas smiled impishly, then gently tapped his friend.

“Funny!”

“I’m not sure what I have to offer you, but why don’t you check the refrigerator. Then, if you would, lead me around the apartment. I need to get a feel for the space, to

learn where everything is so when I'm alone I don't injure myself doing something as simple as going to the restroom."

"Maybe you can get someone to stay with you for a while, just until you get settled? Someone from the place you just left maybe?"

Strange, no one at the Campus offered me that service. "I'm a bit of a loner, Eddie. I like being by myself. I don't want some stranger waiting on me."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Abletan."

Douglas listened to the soft padding of footfalls moving away from him as Eddie walked toward the kitchen. After a moment he heard a 'pop' and then a quick rush of moving air.

"It doesn't look like you've got much in your fridge, Mr. Abletan. Some milk, which I'm guessin' must be sour by now, a carton of lemonade, an opened bottle of wine, and a couple beers. What'll you have?"

Ah, the remnants of a typical New York lifestyle. I eat out a lot, as I'm sure many of my fellow residents do. I don't usually like to drink alcohol in the middle of the day, but it has been a hard one today, so why don't you grab the beers?"

Glass clinked. Footfalls approached. After a few minutes Douglas felt a heavy presence next to him. Eddie's slightly sour breath hit his face and a cold, damp object was pushed into his hand.

"Thank you. Now, if you don't mind, help me find my way around the apartment."

Without another word from his friend, Douglas felt a strong pressure on his elbow.

What the hell!

"It might be best, Eddie, if you'd let me take hold of your arm while you lead me. You steer while I drive, so to speak."

"I'm sorry, Mr...Douglas. Did I hurt you?"

"It's quite all right, my friend. No harm done. One of the things I learned at the Campus, people are going to have to be taught how to help me, just as I am going to

have to learn how to properly accept the help. Apparently the proper form for both parties doesn't come naturally."

"Yup. I can see there'd be a lot to learn. It ain't going to be easy, is it?"

"I'm afraid not, Eddie. In fact, I'm not even sure how to get to work on Monday morning. Nor do I know what I will do once I get there."

"Same way I got you home, I guess, one of them self-drive cabs. Or maybe someone from the rehab can come help you. Wish I could help you myself, but I got to set up my cart before the morning rush."

"You've done quite enough for me already, Eddie. Besides, I wouldn't want to prevent the vendor of the best hot dogs in New York from being set up on time."

For the next ninety minutes Douglas and Eddie walked around the spacious apartment. At every opportunity, Douglas reached out his hand to feel his surroundings. He listened to even the tiniest of sounds and sniffed the air, trying to create a map in his mind triggered by the various sensations. He felt as if he were exploring the rooms for the first time. With every turn, in each room, sensations he'd never fully appreciated before presented themselves. The pine-tinged aroma of cleaner in the bathroom. The slowly dripping water from the sink and the bouquet of scents from various spices in the kitchen.

During his sighted life, some of these sounds and smells might have disturbed, even irritated, him. Now, while asking Eddie for explanations of those he didn't recognize, he welcomed them as invitations to an entirely new world he needed to appreciate and study in order to survive.

After Eddie left, Douglas found himself alone for the first time since before his accident, terrified at the prospect. Challenges were one thing. He usually welcomed them, as long as they were under his control. But, this challenge wasn't his to control, at least not yet. Now he truly had to settle in to life as a blind man.

The first task, making a mental map of his living space, to prevent damage to either himself or his environment, began with Eddie's help. Now, using only his cane as a guide, he slowly walked from room to room, tapping the side and end of the device against different objects to get a feel for their location and sturdiness. He listened

attentively to the sound resonating from each object as he hit it. The process was both exhausting and infuriating.

Crash! Bang!

Though he walked slowly and methodically, there was no way to prevent accidents from happening while he learned the topography of his environment. Ceramic and glass shattered around him. Each mistaken movement brought a growl to his throat and a curse to his lips; something he'd done a great deal of while at the Campus. He realized he'd have to be careful not to walk barefoot until he found some way to clean up the mess.

At the Campus there'd always been someone to clean up after these little accidents. Now on his own, he'd have to consider hiring a housekeeper. The idea infuriated him. He'd always been an independent soul. Having someone in the apartment to clean up after him, or in any way help him, smacked of taking away some of that independence. Fortunately he didn't have to make a decision right away.

Douglas spent the weekend trying to implement a few of the techniques he'd been taught at the Campus. He'd asked a couple of his neighbors in the building for help. Several men rearranged his furniture until he felt he had safely negotiable paths. One kind woman spent an entire afternoon helping to label things in Braille. When it was all over he finally felt secure and comfortable in his own home. But with Monday quickly approaching, he had to deal with his office. Both excited and fearful, he made plans to return to DataScan.

When Douglas opened the door to Carl Lawson's office in the accounting department of DataScan he immediately noticed something odd. The man didn't smoke, yet the distinct odor of tobacco wafted through the air. His eyes began to tear and burn.

"Good to see you back, Douglas."

"Wish I could say the same."

"Um, yes."

Douglas chuckled when he smelled the tangy-salty aroma of perspiration mingle into the tobacco cloud.

The man never did have a sense of humor! “Anyway, it’s good to be back. Getting shot and being hospitalized is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I’m sure. Anyway, I know we talked a few times on the phone about you coming back to work, and we’ve missed you, but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about your situation...”

Uh oh! Here it comes.

Douglas felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise as a boulder formed in the pit of his stomach.

“Carl, I’ve been with DataScan a long time, and I’m anxious to get to work. It’s not my fault some freak accident left me blinded.”

Douglas wasn’t sure he liked where this conversation was leading. Despite his conversations with Carl while still at the Campus, and the man’s assurances, he’d suspected there would be a change in his work status.

“Of course not. Relax, Douglas. No one is thinking of letting you go.”

“That’s good to know. You had me worried for a moment.”

“Understandable, but there really is no need. In your absence I took the issue upstairs, and they agreed with me. You’ve been too valuable to the company to let you go. We just needed to find a suitable place for you. I’m afraid it means I’m going to lose you. But, I think we’ve come up with a great solution.”

“Oh? Do tell?”

“You’re always talking about ways to make the company more efficient. About new technology doing all sorts of amazing things. In fact, if I didn’t know better I’d say you wanted to close down this department and let some machines take over our job.”

“I don’t recall ever saying anything of the sort, but what’s this got to do with your conversation upstairs?”

“Well, to answer that let me introduce the gorilla in the room, so to speak.”

“I was wondering when you started smoking, Carl.”

Douglas felt a strong hand take hold of his arm and then clasp his hand in a vise-like grip.

“And I was wondering when he would introduce me, though I don’t think I’m much of a gorilla. Doug, I’m Sid Coltrane.” The man’s voice was high-pitched and squeaky. “I head up the IT department. I hear you’re just a whiz with all things electronic. I’d like you to come see what we do at IT.”

It was bad enough Douglas didn’t seem to have a choice where he was going to work, at least not if he wanted to continue working at DataScan. The decision had been made for him. But he hated being called *Doug*, hated it since childhood, and he hated being around people who smoke. Now he seemed stuck with both. And, to make matters worse, this man, who apparently would be his new boss, had a voice that hurt his sensitive ears.

The next few weeks proved difficult. Aside from feeling like a child learning new tasks, Douglas had hoped to be able to get right back into his old life. He hadn’t wanted to be seen as *that blind man*, with all the bigotry and sympathy, real or false, the label entailed. Unfortunately his condition couldn’t easily be hidden. The damned cane acted like a magnet for a host of comments and questions he didn’t feel like dealing with. And, even if he didn’t have to use the hunk of wood, he now had to rely on others to help him with the most mundane of tasks. There had to be a way to rise above these challenges.

His new job at DataScan was a different type of challenge. Much to his surprise, there were aspects of the reassignment he liked, a lot. He’d been given the task of using his computer skills to find software solutions to hardware problems. So, every project became a new puzzle to solve, and a new toy to play with. He’d always loved playing with technological toys and solving puzzles. And, because both the higher-ups of the company, and Sid Coltrane, wanted Douglas to be comfortable in his new position, they were extremely generous, providing any adaptive tool he could dream up.

On the other hand, Douglas wasn’t so sure the puzzle of his new boss could be solved. There were several things about the man he simply did not like. Chief among those were his nicotine addiction, which he flaunted at every opportunity, and his inability to remember how his new employee wished to be addressed. Every time Sid thought up a new assignment he called *Doug* into his office. The few steps from his

desk to along the path made him sweat every time. A toxic cloud hovered in the small room, like a deadly specter threatening to choke the life out of him.

“Hey Doug,” the mouse-like voice began. “How would you like to get out of the office for a while? I’ve got a job I think is right up your alley.”

“I could use some fresh air.” Douglas coughed to add emphasis to his need.

“Great! There’s a perfume factory called International Flavors and Fragrances Incorporated. It’s having trouble with one of its computers. They have a machine that normally can sniff the individual components comprising a particular fragrance.”

Wonderful! I’ll bet the whole place reeks. As if dealing with Sid’s cigarettes weren’t bad enough.

“Fascinating, but that’s not exactly what I meant by fresh air.”

“Well, apparently we built the thing a while back. Now they want us to fix it. We’ve sent tech guys out but they can’t figure out what’s wrong. So, I’m thinking you might be able to write some kind of code to work around the mechanical problem.”

“I’ll see what I can do. I trust it’s ok if I take a cab and expense it?”

“Of course.”

When Douglas arrived at the corner of Fifty-Seventh Street and Tenth Avenue, he fed the auto-drive cab his credit card, pulled out a receipt and waited until the door opened. Once it did, the aroma of spiced lilacs greeted him.

“Ah, you must be Monsieur Ableidan. I am Constance Desmarais,” a deeply accented voice said. “Your employer, Monsieur Coltrane, told us to expect you. He said you were a miracle worker who could help us with our little sniffer.”

“Little sniffer?”

“Forgive me Monsieur. It is a silly thing, but that is what we call our scent analyzing machine. I’m afraid she has developed a slight cold.”

Cute. “I’m not sure how I can help, but I will certainly take a look and see what I can do.”

“But how can you ‘take a look?’ You are blind, no?”

“I was speaking metaphorically of course, Madam.”

“Ah oui. I meant no disrespect. The nuances of English sometimes escape me. Perhaps Monsieur Coltrane sent you to us because you *are* blind, so our beautiful fragrances could grace your nose without being interrupted by the disarray of our factory? Shall we go inside and, as you say, take a look?”

Inside the factory the air felt almost syrupy, so thick were the myriad fragrances. There were sweet florals, the heavy scent of wet animals, the tangy sweetness of fruits, and the acrid aroma of rotten eggs. Each one hit Douglas’ nostrils like a bullet and each presented him with hints of tastes and almost visual images of something from his sighted life.

Douglas drew in a deep breath. “Hmm, it smells like you deal with quite a variety of scents. I can count, umm, roughly thirty distinct aromas.”

“You have a very sensitive nose, it seems, Monsieur. In our business we must attempt to recreate as many of the world’s natural scents as possible, along with some unnatural ones of course. Our clientele is quite, how you say, diverse.”

“I see. Well, to business then. I understand our technicians were not able to fix the flaw in the device itself.”

“Oui. That is true. It came as a surprise. Your company designed her in the first place, no?”

“Yes. But, I’m afraid I can not explain. I have not been with this part of the company for long. And, the inner workings of machinery is not, strictly speaking, my expertise. I’ll need the schematics of your Little Sniffer, as well as a description of how the device is supposed to work. I should be able to design a subroutine to reroute that specific function of the device.”

“Ah magnifique!”

“I have to admit I am rather intrigued with your company, and with this device of yours. As I’m sure you understand, once I lost my sight I became more dependant on my other senses. Now I have to learn what things feel like, and what they smell like, things for which I previously only paid attention to their appearance.

“I don’t mean to sound indelicate but, might I ask how you lost your sight?”

“It’s not a problem. I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that people will always ask. I was struck by a stray bullet while I was waiting for my lunch at a cart outside my office building.”

“Mon Dieu! I am sorry! We do live in a dangerous world these days, no? Anyway, here at IFF we need to know exactly how things smell; our business is the make-up of every aroma of the natural, and sometimes the unnatural, world. We need to know how aromas mingle, how they entice or repel. Our customers demand perfection in our creations. Our Little Sniffer helps us. We used to employ hyperosmiacs...”

“Excuse me?”

“Individuals with a very acute sense of smell. Comprenez?”

“Yes, I see.”

“Alas, such individuals are harder and harder to find. It became more effective, and frankly less costly, to have a machine built.”

“Machines do end up being less expensive than people sometimes, for some jobs. What I don’t yet understand, is how this device of yours is supposed to function. If you could give me a brief explanation, which I’m sure the documentation will expand upon once I get back to DataScan, I would appreciate it.”

For the next twenty minutes Madam Desmarais tried to explain how the scent analyzer did its job, isolating various aromas into their component parts. She told him about the structure of the human nose, and how the machine was designed to mimic the excitation of nasal nerve receptors. She described how individual molecules have scents the device’s hardware, when it functioned properly, detected. For the most part the woman’s words went over Douglas’s head. So much so that, periodically, he shook his head, asked her to stop and repeat one detail or another, before allowing her to continue.

Finally, after absorbing as much information as he could, much more information than he needed to do his job in fact, Douglas decided he needed to beat a retreat before his head exploded. Both his ability to take in information, and his tolerance for the assault on his nose, had reached their limit. He reached down to his wrist. Clicking open the watch his fingers found there, he gingerly ran his fingertips over the face.

“Thank you for the tour of your facilities. You’ve been a charming hostess, and you’ve taught me a great deal. I never realized the world of creating aromas was so vast and complex. Unfortunately, I must be going now. If you could ship the materials I asked for to my office at DataScan, I will set to work immediately on your Little Sniffer’s ‘cold.’”

Back at the office, Douglas searched through company records for any information pertaining to International Flavors and Fragrances Incorporated or the Little Sniffer device DataScan’s hardware department apparently had created for them. After waiting an agonizingly long time, a melodious male voice told him there were company biographies, histories, design parameters and schematics available. He narrowed down the search to focus on the scent analyzer device itself. For the next several hours, broken up only by his questions, the computer spit out more than he possibly needed to know. First he learned how the sense of smell worked in living creatures. Not being a biologist, the information was difficult to grasp, but he needed to understand it in order to write algorithms to simulate this process. From there, the voice instructed him on the theory behind the device, and the connection between it and the anatomical equivalents he’d just learned about. Finally it told him the physical mechanics behind how the device was designed to work. With all of this information in hand he felt sure there was a software work-around he could create to bypass whatever broken circuitry the techs hadn’t been able to find. The solution, he reasoned, shouldn’t take him more than a week. It didn’t. Six days after his visit to International Flavors and Fragrances he handed Sid his work.

A month after leaving the Campus, hoping never to return, Douglas found himself back sitting in his former therapist’s office. Several days earlier he’d received a phone call from Alicia Mills advising him the evaluation was a necessary and standard procedure. He’d argued that he neither wanted nor needed the evaluation, but the woman would not be denied. Despite his initial refusal to return to the place, he’d finally acquiesced when Alicia informed him she’d acquired a device she was sure would make his life much easier.

“So, tell me how you’ve been getting along,” the woman began. “Any problems reintegrating into your life?”

“It has not been easy, Alicia. I’m sorry to say I don’t feel like the staff at the Campus fully trained me for all I’d have to deal with.”

“It will take time, Douglas. You must be patient.”

Douglas laughed. “In all the time we spent together, you should’ve realized I’m not very good at doing that.”

“I did, but I don’t think you have much choice now. Adaptation takes time.”

“I sometimes feel like a child again, having to learn how to live my life all over again.”

“Can you give me an example, Douglas?”

Douglas thought for a moment, trying to decide on the best examples of how his life has been in shambles. There were so many to choose from, at home and at DataScan.

“First off, getting a cab in this city was never easy. Try to do it as a blind man though. It’s a good thing we have these driverless things because the drivers of the normal cabs just ignore people with any sort of disability. It’s frankly disgusting how they act.”

“I agree. People still get uncomfortable about those with disabilities and they don’t know how to act. I don’t think many of them realize how rude and disrespectful they are. And we both know how rude New York cabbies can be even under the best of circumstances.”

Both Douglas and Alicia laughed.

“What about at home. How are you getting along? We spent a lot of time together going through the mock apartment so you could get accustomed to navigating around your own place.”

“You know, my friend Eddie Hatch...”

“What a nice man, I remember when you introduced me to him.”

“Thank you. Anyway, we discussed this when he brought me home. No one from this facility ever offered to help me get home, or to rearrange my apartment to make it easier to negotiate.”

“Yes. I hear that a lot. Unfortunately, we simply don’t have the staff. That’s why we spend so much time taking patients like yourself through the mock-up we have on Campus. Of course it can’t really mimic your home.”

“Fortunately several of my neighbors helped out. They moved furniture and helped me label things with Braille tags. It’s gotten a lot easier to move around my apartment since then.”

“I’ve found that people can be very gracious and helpful, if you allow them to be.”

“Yes, well, work is another issue all together. Initially quite an annoying one, to be honest. They reassigned me to a different department. My bosses didn’t think I could do the same job anymore. You remember, I was an accountant?”

“I’m sure they tried to accommodate you. I’m sure they thought reassigning you would be better than letting you go. Again, it’s a question of most people not understanding what a blind man is capable of doing. Dealing with numbers, in their minds, must seem impossible for a blind man. What do they have you doing now?”

Douglas grumbled. *They were wrong!*

“I’m in the IT department now, working with software. It’s actually pretty interesting work. I still miss the numbers though. They were relaxing. Numbers present a sense of order in an otherwise disordered world.

“I see.”

“But, at least I’m still working out puzzles, trying to figure out how to get hardware to work in different ways than it was designed to, when it breaks down.”

“That sounds fascinating, and I remember how much you like solving puzzles. I’ve never met a more determined man.”

“Unfortunately, my new boss, a man named Sid Coltrane, will also take some getting used to.”

“What do you mean?”

Douglas thought for a moment before answering. Sid wasn’t great, but he didn’t want to get the man in any trouble.

I'd best not mention the smoking. That could cause a lot of trouble

"He's a bit of a hard-nose. And he keeps calling me Doug! You know from experience how I hate that name."

"Oh yes, I remember!" She chuckled. "Give it time, Douglas. It took you and me a while to reach a good working relationship, you know. You yelled at me plenty if I remember correctly."

"I remember."

"Anyway, I may have found something to help you with at least one of your difficulties, navigating around places. Have you heard of the BTI Systems' Navigators?"

"The things that are installed in the auto-vehicles?"

"Yes. But did you know the company is also developing personal-use units?"

Douglas shook his head, then fixed his dead eyes on the woman sitting opposite him. She took his hand and placed something cold in it.

"This is one of them. It's a prototype of a device that, like those in the auto-drives, uses the global positioning satellites and mapping software stored in a computer. They've put the software into a wearable component and added virtual sound technology. I'm not terribly familiar with how the device works, but, if you want, I'll set you up with someone who can train you on it. Basically, the satellites "see" you, fix your position on the mapping software, and assign various sounds to potential obstacles around you. So, it helps you navigate around them, hence the device's name."

"That sounds marvelous."

Wow, no more bumping into things every few feet. I could get used to that! Who knows, I may become some sort of new age blind traveler.