

Wake Woke Awoken

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Maria Santos awoke slowly. Eyes resistant to movement felt like heavy weights being moved against their will. An unfamiliar fog in her vision made everything into a blur. Maria yawned and rubbed her eyes, finding them dry and scratchy. She'd slept terribly, her body was stiff and aching. All she wanted to do was return to sleep but a nagging feeling of unease told her to get up.

Maria rolled onto her back and stared lazily up at the ceiling. Something had punctured through the cheap popcorn surface. Maria scowled at the idea that her roof had broken during the night. It wasn't the first time the upstairs neighbor had knocked something loose into their apartment. As Maria's eyes slowly adjusted, though, she realized it wasn't something poking out of the ceiling, but something that had punctured into the ceiling. Maria sat up, the light blankets falling from her.

Piercing the ceiling above her was a crucifix.

Piercing the roof's surface was the wooden simulacrum of her faith. A wooden cross with a metal replica of the holy figure affixed upon it, the crucifix looked like it had been shot into the roof itself and lodged halfway up. Panic began to set into Maria. She looked around her room for further surprises.

The dresser was completely in disarray, the mirror broken. There was no broken glass anywhere, though there was a thin layer of dust all over the floor. Track marks through the dust were chaotic, especially around her bed. Two hung paintings had fallen, the wires broken, one frame in pieces. The fabric of the canvas was ripped. All her pictures were knocked over and toppled to the ground. The light overhead was off but the hard plastic frame over the bulb had cracked, a piece missing. The blind over the window was pulled tight and duct taped hastily but thoroughly.

Even her bed was in disrepair. The wooden frame was chipped and marred. The knobs at the foot of the bed were broken off, jagged edges showing nothing had been cut. Maria's headboard had been cracked, a long line of splintered wood running diagonally above her head.

Maria shoved the bunched up, sweat-soaked blankets from around her and got up. Her bed bowed in, as if the release of her slight weight was enough to give it the reprieve it had so long needed. Maria looked back at the sighing bed and shuddered. She turned to her bedroom door and fought to open it. The stiff door wouldn't move at first, requiring her to wiggle it until it succumbed and practically burst open.

Fresh air awaited her. As the door came open with a sudden sweep, Maria was greeted with the sweet smell of her family's apartment. She stopped at the doorway and inhaled like she hadn't smelled home in ages.

She opened her eyes and called, "Mama? What happened to my room?" Maria padded passed her parents' room and her brother's tiny closet of a room. Down the hall, she came to the living room and a family she knew but didn't recognize.

Maria's mother had graying hair, bound in a bun and set atop a face full of lines that hadn't been there the night before. Her father, once a healthy and vigorous man who carried sofas up and down the stairs of their urban apartment, now looked feeble and pot-bellied from stress eating. He'd grown a beard with speckles of gray where once only a mustache had rested. Maria's brother looked different as well. Leaner and with muscle she hadn't seen before, he rose when she came in the room. His hand rested on the pommel of a baseball bat she didn't recognize.

Maria's mother sat forward on their aged couch and looked desperately at her daughter. "Maria?" she asked, her hand over her heart.

Maria froze at the mouth of the hall, as if her mother hadn't recognized her. "Mama, what happened to you?" She looked at all three of her family. "What's going on? What happened to my room?" She snapped an eye at her brother. "Jose, I swear, if you're the one who broke my mirror..."

Rather than get a smart-aleck response, Maria watched her brother and parents look to each other. They all shared a tension-shattering laugh and then they rose. "BABY!" nearly shrieked Maria's mother as she lunged at her daughter. Maria squeaked in surprise as her mother yanked her close, hugging her tightly. "Baby!"

"We'd thought we'd lost you," her father said, stroking Maria's tangled, black hair as he hugged her along with her mother.

"Lost me?" Maria asked between her mother's shrieks. "Lost me where?" She wrestled free and looked incredulously at them. "I didn't go anywhere."

"You don't remember?" asked Jose. Unlike her parents, he seemed to be the only one looking at her like she was alive and not some treasure returned.

"Remember what?" she demanded.

"The coma," her father spouted out suddenly. "You got really ill."

"No I didn't," Maria argued instantly. "I was fine last night. I mean, I slept weird, but I figured that was fart-breath here banging on his drums or something." The jab at her brother made him smile with familiarity. "What's going on?!" Maria shouted at the family.

"Baby," her mother said with an old tone and an aged face. She took Maria's hands and held them dotingly as she looked into her eyes with the utmost earnest. "Baby, you have been sick. You've been in a coma for...for so long."

"A coma," Maria whispered, trying to reason through what she was being told. "But...then why is my room destroyed?"

"Your room?" her father swallowed.

Jose verbally leapt forward. "Look, it's been a crazy, uh, week. I, okay, I got a little carried away." Maria stared, unsure what he meant. "I missed you and, look, my temper got carried away."

"You did THAT to my room?!" Maria howled at him.

"I'm sorry," he nearly begged. She hauled off and hit him on his shoulder, the strike barely even registering.

"You're gonna fix my bed!" she yelled at him, furious. "It's all lumpy now and the frame is ruined. You knocked the posts off! And you broke the headboard! And my mirror!" She turned to her mother. "Oh momma, my mirror!"

"It's okay, baby," her mother said, grabbing her and cradling her head. Once she held her daughter though, she began to cry again. "We're just so glad to have you back."

Maria let herself be hugged by her mother, the statements of her family not sitting well with her.

A giant meal was spread out before Maria, a feast unlike any she could recall. Freshly showered and scrubbed thoroughly, she draped her still-damp hair against a towel she wore on her back like a cape as she sat down. "This looks wonderful!" she said. She reached for the pot of beans when her father spoke.

"Maria," he told her with an urgent look. Maria watched her family take hands around the table. Maria imitated, a little surprised by the formal prayer.

"Our father, who art in heaven," said her father with a strange passion. "Hallowed be thy name..."

Rather than keep her eyes closed like her family, Maria looked to her mother and brother. Both of them were repeating the prayer quietly, their lips moving in sync with her father's words. It was an act of religious piety that Maria couldn't recall having seen from her family.

The prayer over, however, the family nearly attacked the food like usual. For a moment, she forgot the mystery of her coma and was relieved to fight to grab the nearest pot or pan, the nearest serving spoon to load up her plate. The instant food was on her plate, Maria grabbed her fork and went at it. The instant food passed her lips, she groaned with delight. The beans were spicy and soft, a refreshing reminder of what bliss could be found in the comfort of food. She swallowed with utter delight and spooned another serving in, before she convulsed suddenly.

She clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from spewing the food out over the table. Dribbles of chewed, half-swallowed food spilled out between her fingers. She rushed to the bathroom and just barely made it to the commode before her stomach fully revolted. At the bathroom door, her family stopped before entering, unsure what to do.

Maria flopped onto the floor, groaning, this time with exhaustion. "Oh, what happened?" She clutched her stomach painfully and winced. "God, I'm so hungry!"

"Don't use the Lord's name in vain," her father urged his daughter.

"What's with you?" Maria said as she got up. She rinsed her hands thoroughly before she accepted a glass of water from her brother and hesitantly sipped. When it seemed to go down fine, she headed back to the dinner table, gulping down the water. Her stomach gurgled but accepted the fluid. The family returned to the feast, albeit cautiously. Maria tried a very cautious spoonful of beans and winced when her stomach fought against her. With calm and deliberate care, she managed to keep the food from returning. With slow, measured bites, she began to feed herself.

"What caused the coma?" Maria asked. She felt light-headed, she was so hungry.

"A fever," her mother answered quickly. She glanced at the others, then squeezed Maria's hand. "You don't remember getting sick? You had the flu, or, we thought it was the flu."

The wrinkles on her mother's hand worried Maria. "What did the doctor say?" When her brother and father didn't answer, her mother recoiled her hand, Maria pressed. "You did take me to the hospital, right?"

Her father seemed almost proud to say, "We knew we couldn't afford it."

"Couldn't afford it?!" Maria balked.

"We don't have health insurance," Maria's mother almost begged.

"Hermanita," her brother told her sweetly. "I asked a friend of mine, a nurse, to come look at you. Even though we don't have health insurance, we were ready to take you to the hospital. But you, you were so unresponsive," he said with a glance to their parents, like he was confirming with them. "We didn't know what to do. At times, we weren't even sure you were alive."

"What did your friend say?" Maria asked, distrust growing in her voice and her gaze.

Jose swallowed. "That we shouldn't take you," he told her. "She said that you would be put on life support, which might seem like a good idea, but that you would become dependent on it and that would actually decrease the likelihood that you would wake up. She said she'd seen cases like yours, where..." He fell silent and went to his plate, stirring his rice. "We're just glad you're ba...you're okay."

Maria looked distrustfully at her family, unsure what to think. She had another bite, her stomach both threatening her with its disapproval and grumbling in hunger. "Why do you all look so different?" she asked them. "You look like..." She looked at her mother and father especially. "You look so old." Both parents fell remorseful and quiet.

"It's been stressful," was her only answer, given by Jose.

Dinner continued, solemnly.

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The curtain was drawn back, a mesh grate separating the two booths. "Forgive me, father, I have sinned," said Maria as she crossed herself. She stared forward at the wooden paneling of the confessional booth and swished her lips. "Actually, I'm not sure I have. I took the Lord's name in vain a few times, but that seems..." She shrugged. "I dunno. I've been in a coma apparently. I'm not sure how much sinning I could have done."

"If you don't feel repentant, why did you come to confession?" asked the priest.

"My dad made me," Maria admitted. With a troubled look, she added, "He's gotten a lot more religious all of a sudden." She quickly defended, "Not that he wasn't faithful and stuff. Just...he didn't say the blessing before dinner. Now, every meal, he says the Lord's Prayer. He crosses himself all the time. I heard him last night, saying his prayers. He used to talk to god like they were friends, with respect, but friendly. Now, he talks to god like he's...I don't know."

"Your father has been through a lot," the priest acknowledged.

"I guess," Maria shrugged. A troubled expression washed over her face, followed by a suspicious one. "How do you know what my father's been through?"

The priest looked at Maria through the mesh. "I don't discuss other members of the flock." His eyes shook, try as he might to look calm. Maria saw sweat beading on his forehead, despite the only modest warmth, barely even heat.

Maria stared at the man of the cloth, his white collar visible to her. She saw a vein in his neck bulge, his pulse racing. "What's going on?" she asked the priest in a low tone. "What are they not telling me?" With a quick swipe of his hands, the father blessed her and exited the booth. "Hey, wait a minute!" Maria protested. She rushed from the booth and saw the young priest rushing away. "What's going on?" she shouted. Shushes for quiet came from different sides of the giant cathedral, but the priest only rushed on, desperate to remove himself from Maria's presence. She was left standing alone and no closer to the truth.

The tapping of her toe kept time with the phone ringing.

In the recliner, Maria looked nervously about, watching her empty apartment. Her parents and brother at work, she had the place to herself. The topic of returning to school hadn't been broached and in light of this mysterious coma, she was in no hurry.

The phone picked up after many rings and a voice as familiar yet different as her family's faces responded. "Maria?"

"Daphne?" Maria gasped. "Hey, i-it's me."

There was an awkward silence on the other end of the line, pensive and worried. "H-how are you?" Daphne was nervous, painfully so.

Sensing the nervousness, Maria couldn't help but tense up. "I'm...I'm good. I, uh, I've been sick."

"Yeah, no kidding." It was a biting remark.

Maria rose from the patched-up recliner and paced into the sunlight. The heat came through the windows despite the pulled blinds. "What do you mean? You knew about the coma?"

"Coma?" Daphne repeated. "I...I didn't...what? What coma?"

Maria glanced over at the clock over the stove, doing quick math to determine who would get home first. "Think I could persuade you to skip class? We can go get some lunch."

"I get off work in like an hour," she offered, almost like a compromise.

"Work?" Maria laughed. "School's letting people skip days to work now?"

"No," Daphne explained without a hint of humor. "I have classes in the evening." Maria's heart sank as the realization slowly hit. "Maria, I'm in college."

Daphne looked half a foot taller than Maria remembered her. A chubby girl in school, she'd clearly lost the Freshmen Fifteen as the veritable athlete sat down at the outdoor café. Maria watched her friend settle in and order a cafecito, genuinely intimidated in almost every way. Daphne was just as uncomfortable with the sight of the young girl she'd called friend, unchanged by time.

Once the waiter left, the pair sat in silence, only looking at each other. Daphne was leaned back, her arms crossed. Even her face was turned slightly away. Maria thought to ask how she was, how her life was going, but instead came, "What happened?"

Daphne shook her head. "I...I don't know. One day you stopped coming to school. Like, three days later, you call-bombed me. That was it."

"Call-bombed?" asked Maria.

Daphne nodded, as if residual anger still lingered over the event. "You called me like, eleven times in half an hour. You made all these...it was disgusting. It was scary." Disbelief covered Maria's face. "You don't remember this?" Maria shook her head. "It was gross. I was mad for a long time. When I finally got over it..."

"A long time," Maria repeated. "Daph, how long ago was that?"

Daphne shrugged. "Back in school."

"Daphne, I was in school yesterday!" Maria suddenly shouted with a sob. "Or, I mean, like two days ago." She grabbed her napkin and wiped her eyes, verging towards total breakdown. "I wake up from, from what I thought was a really bad night and my parents look old, you and Jose have lost weight and you look..." Maria sobbed and covered her face. Her crying was so loud, it made the waiter delivering Daphne's Cuban coffee an awkwardly brief exchange.

"Hey, hey," repeated Daphne as she leaned towards Maria. Human contact helped calm her friend. "It's...it's going to be okay," she tried to placate.

"What's going on?! Maria gasped as she tried to recover some control.

"What did your parents say?" asked Daphne, still rubbing Maria's shoulder.

"That I was in a coma," Maria answered before blowing her nose on the napkin. The waiter appeared behind Daphne, about to protest, but then thought better of it and instead turned away. "They say it was just for a little while, but it, it couldn't have been."

"And you would have wasted away," Daphne said.

The mental curiosity struck Maria. "What?"

"If you'd been in a coma all this time, your muscles would have atrophied," Daphne told her. "Wasted away," she clarified when Maria responded with a dumb look. This detail only added to Maria's confusion.

A thought struck Daphne and she said, "You know what?" She took out a tablet from her oversized purse. "Let's crowdsource solving this mystery."

"Wh-what?" Maria stammered.

Daphne was quiet for a moment as she worked on her tablet. "Okay, so, I know this forum where people talk about weird stuff. Aliens and that sort of thing, right?" Maria only nodded, totally lost. "I'm going to post," said the older girl as she typed with her thumbs. "So...high school girl woke up from a coma...or so parents say," she summarized as she wrote. "Is unaware of passage of time, even though three years has—"

"Three years?!" Maria shrieked.

Daphne kept typing. "Remains physically unchanged." She checked with Maria. "Sound right?" Maria was so far gone in confusion she only nodded deliriously. "Aaaand post." Daphne put away the tablet and smiled brightly at Maria, an expression that was familiar and comforting. "We'll get to the bottom of it," she promised before sipping on her coffee.

Dinner was a hollow affair. Maria was hungry but had little appetite. She watched her parents and brother eat, unable to see them as anything but liars. They knew a truth concerning her that they were keeping from

her. She couldn't bring herself to insist, seeing the wrinkles of stress and age on her mother's face. Her father's hands, as calloused as always, were a touch slower than they had been in the past. He was tired, that much was clear. Not merely physically tired. A life of hard work and providing for his family had taken a toll, but this was an exhaustion from within. Maria decided on a different approach. Not confrontation.

"Thank you," she whispered.

The meal fell silent as Jose and her parents looked up from their food. "Thank you, all three of you," she repeated stronger. "I'm...I know something's up," she told them tearfully. "I know...I know it wasn't a..." She left it at that. "I know," she stated. "I don't know what all you had to do for me, but thank you. Thank you." Her mother looked ready to cry with gratitude. She reached for her daughter's hand and squeezed it. Whatever truth they held onto, however, they still kept among each other.

Night.

Her window open to let in the sounds of the rumbling train echoing off the brick and cement of the urban world, hot gusts of smoke-stained air came blowing into Maria's room. The air, as fresh as could be expected, felt good to her. It felt strangely unique and new, like she'd grown accustomed to stale air.

As Maria sat at her dresser, brushing her hair in the broken glass of her mirror, her phone rang. She answered to Daphne. "Hey, Maria," said her renewed friend. She spoke in cautious tones, immediately setting Maria on edge. "Um...I've got something to show you."

Maria checked the time on her clock by the bed. "Uh, it's kind of late. I don't think my mom will let me—"

"I can send it," Daphne told her. "Look, this is...this is going to upset you. Like, a lot. I want to be there for you, but I also don't think this can wait."

Her heart racing, Maria put down the brush. "What is it?" Hesitant silence. "Daph, what is it?"

She heard Daphne take a deep breath. "It's a video of...of you."

Maria's heart felt like it was going to burst. "What video?" she asked, her mouth dry, her voice a whisper.

"I'm gonna send it now," Daphne warned. "Don't look at it yet," she insisted as Maria's phone chimed. It took strength for Maria not immediately

go for the new arrival. "So, you know I posted on the message board about your...about you?"

"Yeah," confirmed Maria, desperately.

"So a lot of people said you got abducted by aliens, that you had an out-of-body experience, the usual crap." Daphne waved it all away verbally like Maria was so used to. "Then one guy, he messaged me in private. He asked where you lived, like the city. I told him and he asked if you were Latina and how old you were. I started to get freaked out and I didn't answer him. I asked why and he said he might have an...Maria, it's you in the video. It's you and...oh god."

"What video?" Maria practically screamed.

"He's a hacker, I think," Daphne said. "He got it off your computer. Maybe your brother's computer? I don't know. It was off the webcam, and it's...god, Maria, it's you!" Daphne was crying, not sad but terrified. "Please, don't...just, please...call me afterwards, okay?" When Maria didn't answer, she insisted. "Okay? Call me afterwards."

"Okay," Maria answered distantly. They parted ways and Maria stared at her phone. The screen showed an announcement that she'd received an email. Her heart racing, the hot air outside circling in her room, she opened the email. No message, just the single video. Maria took a deep breath and hit play.

The screen hiccupped black for a moment and then it showed Jose's room. The second-hand desktop was left running most days, allowed to hibernate when not in use. The webcam atop the screen was still accessible though, revealing the room. For a brief moment, all Maria could think about was the invasion of privacy, the ease with which somebody could see what was going on in the room. She resolved to never leave her phone facing up again.

Movement appeared and Maria jumped. She walked into the room, dressed in her nightgown, just like the one she wore now. Maria on the screen entered the room with a bit of a shuffle, like she was sleep walking. She looked around the room with jerking head movements, then glanced at the camera. It was in that instant that Maria knew something was wrong. It was her eyes.

Maria's eyes were open and reflective, like shimmering mirrors. Her lips were curled up slightly in a sickly, evil-looking sort of sneer. Her head tilted like a dog as she looked at something beyond the screen but the reflection of the red light off the computer made her eyes glow as if entirely red. Maria shambled passed the computer, just off-screen and there was a crack. It was followed by another crack, then another, then a drawer from

Jose's chest went flying across the room, thrown with more force than Maria thought possible. It punctured the wall, cracking it from floor to ceiling.

A deep-seated growling came from off-screen. It sounded evil and pleased. Maria covered her mouth to keep from screaming. There was movement atop the screen and the camera shook. Thinking the computer about to fall, Maria was unprepared to see herself crawl across the roof. Moving like a spider, her legs were bent back the wrong way, yet she moved with a skittering ease. She crawled into the middle of the room and punched the light fixture. Glass shattered and sprinkled down and the monster on the screen bit the electrical wires, yanking them out of the ceiling by her teeth. She giggled with sick, detestable delight and turned around. She saw the computer and smiled with shining eyes. She skittered at the wall again and Maria lost it.

Dropping the phone and screamed hysterically. She looked at the mirror of the drawers and saw her face, as well as the face of the monster on the screen. Her hysterical screams echoed into the night.