

Awake

by
Benjamin Jardine

To whom it may concern, et al:

What lies before you is a script excerpt from the upcoming, *Awake: An American Elegy* (Columbia/Spinning Plates), written by Amos Denali-Böhm. This film, the Board of American Directors (West) does harmonize, adheres to each criterion listed on your open-call for “Rising Stars”. We believe the film and its dealings confront major current issues felt by the people of Los Angeles (LA). We believe the film encourages social change through daily experience. We believe citizens wish to be treated with respect, and that safety should be the city’s top priority. Lastly, we believe the film makes an effective argument for the revamping of LA’s light rail system—a hot-button in recent months. As artists and creators, we must accept that only through our collective artistic vision can we make true, progressive change.

Your late night, talk-oriented program is the perfect vehicle for our movie. Your studio’s location on Hollywood Blvd. stands not far from the Metro stop in question. Mr. Denali-Böhm can get to the taping free of charge, but we ask for his safety he his transported by car and driver post-taping.

He requires one hot meal (Vegetarian) and one sparkling water upon arrival at the taping.

It would mean the most to us if this film were to be shared with the LA public, when the time is right. In trust, we have attached Act the First. Please read at your discretion, and be excised from the gazes of passersby.

Irrevocably,

The Board of American Directors (West), Mgmt.

~~~

INT METRO RED STOP, "Hollywood / Highland" - DAY

Rain is falling just outside the Metro entrance. Passengers run into cover holding briefcases, purses, and jackets above their heads. Some have umbrellas. They hustle through turnstiles and wait patiently for train traffic. The gruff voice of a man:

VOICE OVER

Underground trains. The "subway"  
to most places; the Metro in Los  
Angeles. When newspapers publish  
lists announcing "The Best US  
Public Transportation", Los  
Angeles is never featured.

We sweep along the ground of the Metro station. An Information booth at the Hollywood and Highland Metro stop sits behind two massive video cameras. These statues of industry tower over commuters and point towards giant pyramids in either corner of the great entrance hall. Ceramic film reels line the ceiling. Homeless people line the floor and edges.

VOICE OVER

Folks are never at ease here.  
Those who try to sleep get  
thrown out before they can shut  
an eye. The place feels fake,  
dingy, like some producer's lost  
blueprint for a film studio. Not  
the place you take visitors.

Tourists in large groups wander into the station to escape rain but soon enough turn back to wait in the station's eaves outside. Strident commuters--some sopping wet, some rattling umbrellas--are the only people coming through the turnstiles. A MAN--white, early sixties--stands before a luminous rail map of Los Angeles.

VOICE OVER

The rail system begins and ends  
in downtown. You've got you the  
Orange Line, which runs from  
North Hollywood through Laurel  
Canyon and on up to Ventura. The

Blue, like that eyesore the  
River, extends from the gum-  
pattied streets of Downtown to  
the ocean.

The man has on a bright red leather jacket, red corduroys, and a pair of red alligator skin loafers. A Boston Terrier, yaps, follows him with patience as he walks through the station.

The Red Line was mine. Carving a  
path straight through the  
Boulevard and the Hills, it  
served as my vessel to work. My  
commute home.

The man checks his wrist with a side-glance, to a watch that reads 3:46 PM.

I never did get the hang of the  
other lines.

INT METRO RED STOP PLATFORM ("H/H")

A train car glides to a stop at the busy station. Star Trek doors slide open all along its side. Passengers get on; passengers get off.

Foot tapping, the old man waits at the platform as the train closes its doors and departs.

The camera pans to an Information booth, which stands in the middle of a busy, underground Metro station. Two rows of turnstiles spread out on either side of the booth. Commuters constantly filter through. Several trains glide through the station yet the man in red still stands, tapping his foot to some unheard rhythm.

But the Red Line? I know a thing  
or two about the Red. I know the  
people. I know the spirit. I  
know the ins, the outs.

Inside the booth, the empty husk of an In-N-Out wrapper, oily and sticky with cheese, sits on a napkin on a mostly empty desk. MONA BOUNT, a woman mid-30s, is the booth operator. She has on a Metro vest, and underneath that a fur coat. Her eyes are fixed to a puddle just thirty yards or so from the booth. We pan to see it's the size of a car tire, growing larger and larger by the minute.

She wonders what the protocol for this kind of thing is. Cone first? Dial Maintenance first? She settles on cone first, rummages around in the depths of the cupboard under her desk, and recovers a miniature traffic cone. Perhaps just shy of two feet in height, the cone would only cause people to stumble; and stumble, into a puddle of Metro-ceiling runoff. Mona needed a bucket.

We dissolve to see her on the telephone to maintenance. The VOICE OF DON on the other end of the line, tells her a bucket just wouldn't be possible. He offers up an empty trashcan.

"Any damage from this leak will be on my head, Don. This trashcan will have to do."

"Yes, Miss Mona, the trashcan will work."

When without words to read, Mona watches water weep from the ceiling. She wants to ensure the trashcan does not get knocked, or worse, stolen.

Two children the size of penguins wave their hands just out of Mona's view. The glass rattles. "Pardon," comes the sound of a man's voice from the other side of the partition. "Can you tell me how to get to Santa Monica?" Mid-thirties, the man wears a black visor, which covers his face with shadow. Mona slides the glass window open to see him better.

"Red Line to 7<sup>th</sup> Street Metro Center. Expo to Santa Monica."

She notices his attention shift downwards. "Nein, nein," he mutters to his children. "And how long will that take?"

Mona glances at the clock again. 4.07 PM. "Hour and a half. At this time, maybe longer."

He tuts tight t-sounds, tells Mona that he can leave his house in Cologne and get to Brussels in that time. "We are going to a concert on the pier," he says, "which starts at 6 pm, and we wish to be there very soon."

Mona tells him, “Well, this is LA, sir, and a lot of people have a lot of places to be. That’s just the way it is,” she says, “but we used to have it worse.” The father frowns, curses her “typical American rudeness”, and pushes his *kinder* along to the ticket machines on the opposite side of the station. Mona draws her eyes back to the drip in the ceiling.

Save for the rattle of turnstiles and the sudden whoosh of air from incoming trains, the station is, for the next few moments, mostly quiet. Commuters stroll mindlessly to the waiting doors of train cars. Drops of water dribble one after another into the lone trashcan. Minutes earlier, an elderly man dressed in a suit the color of a setting sun, had kicked over a trashcan in anger. He claimed his TAP Card held a lifetime supply of rides. Mona told him no one on Earth has a lifetime supply of rides. The trashcan he had kicked was identical to the one half full of rainwater. This made Mona nervous.

Newspapers, napkins, plastic shopping bags, float in the air with each passing train. A tap rattles the glass in front of her. She glances up, “Look, do you need a map?”

McKinley—a man, mid-twenties—wavers at her open booth window. He has on a white undershirt and black Dickies. A nervous expression plagues his face. He stares into her eyes, into her soul.

After a lengthy sigh: “Let me stop you before you even start.”

“Your hair looks nice today. Did, did you put something in it?”

“Stop,” with emphasis on the ultima.

“I’m dead serious.”

“McKinley, there are much more important things for me to do than sit here and be your source of entertainment. Please get on a train, or get out of the station.”

As if on command, his head does a 180 degree swivel. He finds no one in line behind him and no one on this side of the turnstiles except Don and the German family. Don has the mop out, trying his best to retain as much of the liquid as possible. The father and his sandy blond boys are having trouble getting the ticket machine to work. The father presses on buttons with subdued anger, unable to get the screen to progress. Even Mona can catch echoes of grunts from the German's whittling spirit.

"It looks like you can spare a minute," says McKinley. She holds his gaze long enough for McKinley to understand he has a chance, before turning in the direction of the filling trashcan.

McKinley is in awe. Under the burning yellow carbon light above them, her skin glows a most magnificent saddle color. As if caught in a current, her hair shines with electricity. A lock falls across her forehead and McKinley feels the urge to brush it behind her triple-pierced ear. He looks at her with soft eyes, the texture of velvet; so soft that if Mona would only look up to meet his gaze she would be braced with burdening love for him. Surprised she even offered time to hear what he had to say, he would have to make these next chosen words count.

"Listen...I took a risk, and it didn't pay off the way we'd hoped. Too many people got in the way. Things got complicated. But we're moving business to the IE. My buddy Bona has a place over there. A couple of guys at this firm he says can really help us out. Says they're the best around when it comes to fixed loans."

Mona doesn't react at all to this news, prefers instead to watch Don figure out the best method for cleaning up this puddle just in front of the information booth. The

German trio have succeeded in buying tickets, and now the boys' father ushers them through turnstiles.

“The point is, I’m willing to try again—willing to make it work for us, baby. Cos I love you. More than I love money and business out together.” He moves closer to her little window. “I wanna provide.” Closer still. “I wanna be your man”. Then, he drops to one knee and retrieves a shimmering orb of light refraction set into a thin-banded ring. “What do you say? You wanna give The Dream another chance?”

The German father looks towards McKinley as he rolls through the turnstile.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She slams the window shut.

From years of use and neglect, this window between them is opaque. A yellow carbon light is shining from the top of the Information booth and onto McKinley’s head. To Mon, he looks like an insect frozen in amber. A muffled, incomprehensible sentence is his response.

Mona Bount slides the partition open fast. Her words pierce McKinley’s heart-armor like knives, and she, “No, McKinley. Get out of the station. Get out of my life.”

Distraught, McKinley doesn’t even TAP, just jumps the turnstile. He kicks at an empty Cup Noodles pot, which soars onto the tracks. Hood pulled up and over his forehead for fear of Mona’s eyes pinned to his back.

He would have felt worse had a train bound for Union Station, by way of Pershing Square, not come immediately. McKinley boards the train behind this German family. The father whistles the tune from “La Marseillaise”. His children tug at his jacket.

Mostly dark, the train is sparse with people. The German family settles into their seats and gaze around at various film posters and Metro PSAs. Other passengers mostly

keep to themselves. McKinley has managed to secure himself a window, with an open seat beside him. When he sits, the tension in his legs is miraculously relieved and for a moment the Metro seat feels like a throne.

For most of the journey before Vermont/Sunset, McKinley eyes the window on his side. He stares not at his reflection, but at someone's etching "All you need is...", followed by a wonky heart, into the thick glass. The words are phrased, cropped perhaps, so squarely upon McKinley's forehead, tucked in the shadow beneath his hood, that it looks as if they have been forced there in permanence.

The train glides along for a few moments before McKinley spots an old man. He is dressed in a dazzling red leather jacket, shoes that dizzy in the train's fluorescent lights. McKinley watches him struggle against gravity up the train car. The man holds a terrier in his one hand and, as he horizontally climbs, various handholds in the other. Among the countless seats sitting empty, McKinley watches the man search for the perfect seat. McKinley moves his body into the center of the seat bench. The man makes eye contact, smiles, says, "Oh no, you don't want to do that." His face is heavily wrinkled. The center of protractors, his eyes had lines spread out in multiple directions. "You'd be guiding the infinite possibilities of this train ride into directions I'm not sure you want them to go."

McKinley stares at the man in a confused, skeptical haze. "The hell you talking about?"

He drops himself into the seat in front of McKinley's. "I'm talking," he says, and removes his eyeglasses to huff warm air on their lenses, "about sliding doors." He wipes the fog clear with emphasis. McKinley notices his actions appear exaggerated, as if the

red suit has an influence over his every movement. “Entrance through one door closes another, and choice, fate, cannot be mastered. Humankind is an infinite potentiality; for I am not the Captain of my soul, rather, a noisy passenger.”

McKinley turns back to the window and adds. He has far more on his mind than these man’s slogans. “What is that, Buddha? I’m not interested.”

“Now is not the time to be complacent, boy!” The man’s face animates itself. His hands fly up into the air. All throughout the train car, heads turn to see what action is taking place on the Metro today. Just an old man dressed in vibrant vermilion discussing the restraints of human existence.

“Look, I know you’re told never to accept life advice from strangers. But in life, friendships can be *made* by keeping an open seat next to you. The front door always slightly ajar. Life sweeps us into some uncharted waters, but when you’re out there, in oceanic depths, any seahand or driftwood has the potential to save your life.”

McKinley held Mona in his thoughts. He imagined her sitting on her own train home, to her place in North Hollywood. He thought about nights spent with her in an eternal embrace in her puffed sheets, and couldn’t help realize how those memories now felt like a speck on a rear-view mirror horizon. He thought about his existence, about how he could bring about greater fulfillment to his boring life. He thought about if anyone else on the train was thinking about their existence too. Stoic, he breathes, “Go on”.

The man asks McKinley for a down payment on his fortune. Just a few dollars, a couple miserly Lincolns. “Your future,” he says in justification, “is worth far more in years.”

He continues: “Don’t keep your head in the sand. Today you can immortalize your life, if you’d only pull your head out of the sand.”

McKinley asks why he should take the man’s word for it.

“Aww, Christ kid, I don’t think you’re ready for this. But lo and behold it’s happening anyway. Listen, a couple of guys are about to get on this train at the next stop. Real pieces of work. One of them, the bigger of the two, will have a black eye—colossal, purple, swollen thing—and he’ll complain of a brawl he had this morning. The other one, the dimmer of the two, he’ll have the State Bear inked on his neck.”

For McKinley, the specificity of these descriptions checked out. But at the exact moment a question that would serve to interrogate this old man’s claims further was forming on his lips, the train began to slow down. A passive, robotic, voice echoes from the intercom, announcing the train’s rapid Vermont/Sunset approach.

Sure enough, two fellows do get on board the train at this Los Feliz stop. Both dressed in loose blue-shirts, hanging to their waists, they survey the crowd with rapacious grins. Surer enough, the bigger guy has a quarter face twice the size as the rest of it, plus a fat lip. And sure surer enough, the paler, punier of the two has a somber grizzly bear tattoo on his jugular, contorting with each movement of his neck.

“This is my stop, McKinley,” he says as he rises from his seat suddenly. His hand, palm surface shiny and smooth, extends upturned. McKinley concedes and thumbs two Lincolns out of his pocket. Lifeless, the President’s eyes are fixed in a permanent leftward gaze in McKinley’s direction. McKinley stares right back. He is unsure whether his decision to accept the man’s deal is the right one. That money, intended for his

proposal dinner with Mona, leaves a gaping hole in his heart and right pocket. McKinley shuts his eyes in regret.

When he opens them again, the man has vanished.

McKinley wonders how the man came to know him by name, why the man desired to single him out on the train in the first place, and why he should keep the chair open. Did he look vulnerable? McKinley admits often to himself that he looks much younger than he is in years. Maybe behind those wrinkles the man could see weakness. Youthful innocence. Lamblike optimism. Finance was never his strong suit, but he liked to think he was endowed with a perceptive eye.

Commotion erupts from the front of the train car. One blue fellow, the bigger one, has one of the German children in his arms and refuses to let go. The boy's father screams in hysterics. He bargains with the bigger man, offers to pay him cash for the boys return. Father lifts his shirt up and unzips a money pouch, cumberbund-strapped around his waist. He shells out several Franklins, and McKinley can taste the desperation in his expression.

McKinley watches the two men with caution. The grizzly bear follows the bigger man's turn, and starts to demand other valuables. He lifts his shirt to reveal a knife, tucked into the waistband—the perfect incentive to hurry processions along. Father unbuckles his watch after the Big Man asks what else he got. As the Small Man turns to help Father remove his watch, McKinley pursues an opening. He takes flight, runs at both men and family. He should have thought twice before an attempt to disarm an assailant with so many civilians around. Bursting with confidence yet McKinley has no plan. Just before he closes in on the smaller man, a sharp pain expands in McKinley's abdomen.

Like a towel soaked with water, McKinley feels his insides become more wet by the second. He had been stabbed; the blade lodged firmly between his ribs. McKinley's world rippled like television static.

Doors slide open at Vermont / Santa Monica and the bigger man shoves Father's child forward. The family retreat to the opposite door; the child screams and holds his father close. The family's assailants leap off the train and onto the platform. McKinley watches them saunter off down the platform, one man showing off the watch he'd snatched.

McKinley wishes for cell service, a closed-circuit camera, or someone with a badge. McKinley wishes for now to be over. McKinley wishes for tomorrow.

~

“So, Amos, you've written this script—you wrote it, is this true, on the back of Chinese delivery menus?”

“Yes, yes, that's correct.”

“What, uh, what drove you to do that?”

“Well, Jimmy, it was hunger mostly. I found that several times a day, when in the thick grasp of the writer's flow, I would acquire a deep satiating desire for Chow-Fun.”

“Oh yeah? You have much Fun writing this movie, then?”

“I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, we did *not* rehearse that.”

“Oh come on, we'd have a great two-man show: Denali-Böhm & Kimmel. Has a ring doesn't it?”

“Ah, Jimmy, you and I both know neither of us are cut out for comedy.”

“Wait a second, wait a second, I’m not cut out for comedy? You’re looking at a two-time Emmy host, pal.”

“But an Emmy winner?”

“Ok ok, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. Tut-tut-tut-tut, let’s see...Now...Explain this to me like I’m five years old: this movie, what’s it about? I mean, what’s with the title—are you trying to be funny?”

“Well, Jimmy, the film uses the terribly inefficient Los Angeles Metro system to propel our characters into a deeply expository look at race and class in America. We watch as a man goes from romantic rejection to a savior of the innocent, a martyr for the weak. This film is more than a series of lights and sounds. It’s a film that makes you think, Jimmy. It, uh, it delivers a message that makes you want to reach out and hug your Uber driver, or, uh, kiss your dry cleaner. We’re a fascinating species, how we both coexist and don’t, with and without one another. How we’re merely specks in an unrecognizably vast universe, yet each one of us feels the great burden of responsibility for our actions. It’s a film about love in any century, in any space or time space—on any moon or planet, across civilizations and generations.”

“Quite the ambitious premise for a fourteen minute movie.”

“That’s a good observation, Jimmy. As I, and a lot of others see it, the American dream has become a nightmare. The time has come where, if we are to make strides as a progressive society, we must think for the average American and acknowledge our shared history. We must accept that, in this day and age, any one person can identify as any race, gender, sexuality, creed, or opinion with gumption. It’s time we stop dreaming, open our eyes from the haze, and work towards a brighter reality.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Hey listen, do you think you can stick around? We have to take a break.”

Kimmel straightens his cards, taps a pen a few times on the desk, and grins at Camera 3. “Screenwriter Amos Denali-Böhm everybody! Thanks for being on the show. Go see his new short film, ahem, *Awake*, out Friday in picture rooms everywhere! Stay tuned, when we return we’ll be chatting more with Amos about the future of our country. And don’t forget next week’s “Rising Stars” will feature Miguel Ramos’s film on pre-K education in LA schools.”

The rain hangs in the air like curtains, shrouding the hills of North Hollywood and Pershing Square is covered in rain. Falling lightly at first, the rain brought people out of their homes, who had been craving to feel anything different. Now, murky like bathwater, the rain falls with weight all over Southern California. The clouds themselves invisible hands, wringing water from La Cañada to Laguna Niguel. Newspapers and weathermen were right: inches of rainfall all over Los Angeles. And it didn’t look like letting up.

Rain. Rain, which brought dewy drops to the parched palm trees that line major boulevards. Rain, which left the thirsty, treeless hills sopping wet and coated in an aqueous sheen. Rain, which washes cigarette butts from the grime-pedaled streets of Oakwood and Hollywood through sewers lined with Ziploc bags and shit. Rough seas batter the Ventura Pier and patrollers up at Big Bear prepare for fresh powder.

For once in his life, Amos is seated in the back of a limousine. He watches drops of water float past the streetlights. He hears them softly patter at the windshield, and asks the driver how much longer the rain is predicted to hold up. The studio had left him

another voicemail that morning. Kimmel gushed in passing how much he enjoyed the writer, and said he would help fund the production out of pocket. The studio moved ahead with a press tour. Script rewrites would show up in Amos's mailbox later that week.

Later on, as he looked over these copies, Amos would develop an empty dread. Real issues were being skirted around, avoided due to volatility and profits. Amos shuddered under the weight of two studios, each with their distinct budgetary expectations. His reputation sat strapped atop this motion picture, and he, without arms or reins with which to grasp hold of the pacey world beneath him. Limelight, for now, tasted sweet—yet, Amos could sense in it layer upon layer of bitterness.