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Opening Extract from...

Wake Up, Sir!

Written by Jonathan Ames

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WAKE UP, SIR!

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"Live and don't learn—that's my motto."

—Alan Blair

PART I



Montclair, New Jersey

CHAPTER 1

Jeeves, my valet, sounds the alarm * A physical description of my uncle Irwin, the gun fanatic, and a rundown of his morning regimen * I rush through my toilet and yoga * A delayed ejaculation of fear

"Wake up, sir. Wake up," said Jeeves.

"What? What is it, Jeeves?" I said, floating out of the mists of Lethe. I had been dreaming of a gray cat, who, like some heavy in a film noir, was throttling in its fists a white mouse. "I was dreaming of a gray cat, Jeeves. Quite the bully."

"Very good, sir."

I started slipping back into that cat-and-mouse confrontation. I wanted to see the little white fellow escape. It had very sweet, pleading eyes. But Jeeves cleared his throat respectfully, and I sensed an unusual urgency to his hovering presence which demanded that the young master rally himself from the luscious pull of dreams. Poor mouse would have to go unsaved. No happy ending.

"What's going on, Jeeves?" I asked, casting a sleepy eye at his kind but inscrutable face.

"There are indications, sir, that your uncle Irwin is no longer asleep."

It was only under these alarming circumstances that Jeeves would interrupt my eight hours of needed unconsciousness. He knew that the happiness of my morning was dependent on having as little contact with said uncle as possible.

"Groans from the bedroom, Jeeves? He no longer dreams—probably of firearms—and is staring at the ceiling summoning the courage to blight another day?"

"His progression into the morning is further along than that, sir."

"You heard his feet hit the floor and he's sitting on the edge of the bed in a stupor?"

"He's on his stationary bicycle and he's davening, sir." Jeeves had picked up the Anglicization of the Yiddish from me, adding the *ing* to *daven* (to pray) as I did.

"Good God!" I said. "This is desperate, Jeeves. Calamitous!"

Coming fully awake and now nearly at the height of my sensory powers, I could make out the spinning of the bicycle's tires, as well as my uncle's off-key Hebraic singing—his bedroom was just fifteen feet away down the hall.

"Do you think there's time, Jeeves?"

"There is very little room for error, sir."

I am usually unflappable and rather hard-boiled, if I may say so, but this predicament first thing in the morning shook me to the core. For several months now, with rigorous discipline, I had just about managed never to see my uncle before noon.

"How has this happened?" I asked. I didn't want to fault Jeeves, but he had never before let my uncle get so far as the stationary bicycle without awakening me.

"Your uncle has risen quite early, sir. It is only eight-thirty. If you'll excuse me for saying so, but I was performing my own toilet during the first stages of his morning program."

"I see, Jeeves. Perfectly understandable." I couldn't expect utter vigilance from the man—after all, he was my valet, not a member of the Queen's Guard—*and* my uncle had thrown everything off by getting out of bed more than two hours ahead of schedule. This was an anomaly beyond the palest pale, and so our best defense—Jeeves's keen eavesdropping—had been wanting.

Well, I was in a bad way, but I like to think of myself as a man of action when shaken to the core, and so I threw back my blankets. Jeeves, anticipating my every move, handed me my bath towel, materializing it from his person, the way he is apt to materialize things from his person when they are needed, and so I dashed out of my lair, wearing only my boxer shorts, and shot myself into the bathroom, which is right next to my uncle's bedroom.

I had my own morning program to adhere to, but I was going to

have to rush through it if I wanted to avoid my nemesis. Hurrying did not appeal to me—I would probably feel anxious the whole day—but an encounter with the ancient relative before noon would be worse. Then all my nerves would be completely unraveled and the day would be lost.

To avoid such an eventuality, Jeeves and I had memorized, in order to map out my every move, my uncle's morning schedule, which was as follows:

(1) Uncle Irwin's wife, my aunt Florence—my late mother's sister—would leave at dawn to go teach special education at the local high school, and she did this year-round, teaching summer school, as well. She was in her early sixties, but still working very hard—an angel in human form. My uncle would say good-bye to her each morning but immediately fall back to sleep. He was in his early seventies and a retired salesman of textile chemicals, though in the afternoons he peddled ultrasonic gun-cleaning equipment to police stations.

My uncle was a firearms expert and the house was equipped with a small arsenal. He was ready for another Kristallnacht or a siege by the FBI if there was a repeal of the Second Amendment. In case of a surprise attack, guns were hidden all over the place—behind shutters, in heating ducts—and he often wore a gun in the house, utilizing a special hip-holster. He called this *packing,* which has metaphorical resonance, I understand, in the homosexual community as well as in the NRA, which makes perfect sense since there is nothing more phallic than a gun; even phalluses seem less phallic, though, of course, the phallus did precede the firearm.

(2) Around ten-thirty each morning my uncle would awaken. He would groan several times and yawn lustily—his large stomach acted acoustically as a sort of bellows. He was a short, round man with a coal black mustache and a very white beard, and this unusual bifurcated arrangement of his facial hair gave him an uncanny resemblance, despite his Jewish origins, to a Catholic saint-in-waiting—a certain Padre Pio. This was discovered when a sweet and pious Italian woman nearly fainted at the local

Grand Union and pressed upon my Uncle Irwin a laminated card with an image of this Pio. My uncle then wrote to a Catholic organization and got his own such card, which he kept in his wallet as a form of identification, flashing it if he was in a playful mood at the synagogue or the shooting range or any of his other haunts. Pio was on the verge of sainthood due to his having stigmata—bleeding from the palms—and my uncle said that his carpal tunnel syndrome, brought on by years of clutching a steering wheel as a traveling salesman, was his stigmata.

(3) So after two to three minutes of these nerve-rattling, church-bellish yawns, whose purpose was to deliver oxygen to his organism, the blankets were thrown off. He would then turn on a small mustard-colored radio, which only picked up one station—a round-the-clock government weather report. The broadcaster's voice was dreary and unintelligible, and it enthralled my uncle for a good five to ten minutes each morning.

(4) Having then been apprised of the current meteorological conditions, he would go to the bathroom and pass water.

(5) After flushing, he'd come back to his room and begin to pray—on average about fifteen minutes.

(6) After prayer, he bathed—ten minutes.

(7) After bathing, around 11 A.M., he was down to the kitchen for his breakfast: microwaved oatmeal, banana in sour cream, hot water with lemon. He ate this hearty meal while reading *The New York Times* and listening to CBS news on the kitchen radio, which was played at maximum volume. The breakfast, due to the enormity of *The New York Times,* sometimes lasted as long as two hours, at which point he'd head out for the day to mix with the constabulary and speak of the benefits of keeping the barrel of one's gun free of dust and oil.

Well, that's the schedule—so if I played my cards right, I had bathed, breakfasted, and was safely sequestered back in my room before he even reached the kitchen table. Granted, the explosive radio-playing of CBS was unnerving and did not respect the boundary of my bedroom door, but at least there was no physical contact between myself and the relative. To feel properly aligned, mentally

and physically, not to mention avoiding being shot or pistol-whipped, I needed solitude in the morning. You see, solitude is essential to producing art, and art in my case was literature: I was writing a roman à clef and needed to be left alone. Jeeves was about, but Jeeves was trained to be invisible. They teach you that at valet school.

Sometimes, though, if I was a little off my program, my uncle and I would pass each other on the three-step staircase that led from the kitchen to the bedrooms—it was a small, two-story, Montclair, New Jersey, house—and this was disquieting, but not the end of the world. He'd shoot me a withering glance full of disapproval, but the lighting was poor on that staircase, and so his mien undid me a little but not completely.

What was bad—avoided at all costs—was to be in the kitchen when he began to eat. Not only would he paralyze me with numerous withering glances, his eyes exuding all the compassion of iced oysters, but he generated in me an irrational reaction to the concussive sounds of his chewing. Without any doubt, the noises he made were obscene, but my response was uncalled for. I was his houseguest—well, practically a permanent resident for the last few months; he and the aunt had taken me in during a difficult time, acting like parents; I was only thirty, relatively young, but my mother and father had been deceased for many years—and so I should have been more tolerant of Uncle Irwin, but I found myself completely unraveled by the slurping cries of a sour-cream-soaked banana meeting its doom between his crushing molars and lashing tongue. Listening to him eat, my spine turned to jelly and I couldn't think straight for hours, which is why I had so precisely mapped out his schedule—the relative had to be avoided!

So, on the morning in question, the third Monday in the month of July, year 1995, I was in the bathroom, massaging my chin, and I decided I didn't have time to shave because of the crisis at hand, though it would be the fourth day I hadn't shaved—the old spirits had been a bit low, and when the spirits are low, I seem to lack the moral wherewithal to remove my whiskers—and a reddish beard was beginning to announce its presence. Meanwhile, my uncle was still singing and the bicycle wheels were whooshing.

But I wonder if I'm being clear about this bicycle business. I

should explain that it was an eccentricity of my uncle's that he did his davening while on his stationary bicycle, which was actually a blue girl's bicycle that he had found at a garage sale and which had some kind of apparatus restraining its wheels so they didn't touch the carpeting of his bedroom floor. It was a speedless two-wheeler and provided very little resistance or exercise. He had been pedaling on it for years and was as stout as ever. But at least he made an effort. And he prayed. And though he wasn't an Orthodox Jew, he wore official davening gear: about his shoulders was his silky, white tallith with its blue stripes and fringes, and on his left arm and on his forehead were his tefillin—the leather boxes and straps favored by Jews for their morning prayers. The boxes, like a mezuzah, contain the Shema, God's directions to Moses, found in Deuteronomy. One of the lost directions, according to Jewish lore, is "Don't go out with a wet head!" Luckily, this important health command has been orally maintained for thousands of years.

So my uncle was bicycling and praying, and his tallith, had he been on a real bicycle facing the wind and the elements, would have been flapping behind him like a cape. I estimated that he was halfway through his prayers, and I quickly doused myself in the shower. Usually, I enjoyed lolling in the tub for a good fifteen minutes—a meditative Epsom-salts bath was the first station of *my* morning schedule—but this had to be forsaken.

With limbs still damp, I then sprinted to my room, towel wrapped around me, and just as I was closing my bedroom door, my uncle's door opened and in he went to the bathroom. A narrow escape.

Jeeves had laid out my clothes on the bed—soft khaki pants, green Brooks Brothers tie designed with floating fountain pens, and white shirt. My usual writing garments.

"Thank you, Jeeves," I said.

"You're welcome, sir."

"Nearly collided with the relative in the hallway, don't you know. Another thirty seconds in the shower, and all would have been different. Interesting the way fate works that way, isn't it, Jeeves?"

"Yes, sir."

I sensed a certain chilliness in the man, but pressed on with my

theory. "All our lives we're saved from the hangman's noose by mere seconds, Jeeves."

"Yes, sir. If I may point out, sir, you have not shaved for four days." The source of his glacial attitude was revealed.

"I would have shaved today, Jeeves, but I'm economizing my every movement. We have at best ten to fifteen minutes in which to operate." I could see that Jeeves was still wounded. I tried to explain: "My uncle has thrown everything off by rudely changing his schedule. I'll shave tomorrow, I promise."

"Very good, sir."

I had soothed the fellow, and then I quickly pasted on my raiment, but I eschewed the tie.

"Your necktie, sir," Jeeves said.

"There's no time, Jeeves."

"There is always time for your necktie, sir."

"I can't risk it," I said.

"Your uncle is only just now drawing his bath, sir. I believe there is time enough."

"No, Jeeves," I said. "Also I've been meaning to tell you that I don't like doing my yoga while wearing my tie. Especially this time of year with the heat. From now on, I will put on the tie after breakfast."

"Yes, sir," said Jeeves. First the shaving and now the necktie. The man was cut to the quick, injured at his valet core. This was clearly a rough morning in our domestic life, poor old Jeeves, but he was going to have to show more sangfroid.

I flung open my door, raced down the stairs, flew through the kitchen, and ejected myself out the front door onto the small patio.

It was here that I performed my yogic exercises. My whole morning regimen (bath, yoga, no contact with uncle) was about achieving the right frame of mind—the correct mental pH, as it were—to toil at my novel. Usually, I did ten sun salutations. These really get the blood sloshing. You're continually going from standing upright to lying on your belly, then standing up again. What I would do was face east, prostrating myself to the sun, which penetrated through the tops of the summer trees, lighting up thousands of green, eye-shaped leaves. My uncle's house was nestled quite nicely in a bit of secluded woods—

very beautiful New Jersey, I've always said, a most unfair reputation. Of course, I'm biased, having grown up in the Garden State.

Due to the crisis that morning, I reduced the number of salutations to one. Then I lay on my back on the patio, which my aunt swept frequently, so there was no danger that my pants would be soiled. I closed my eyes and counted ten breaths. I always do this after sun salutations. I find that meditating on the back is more conducive to peaceful feelings than sitting in the lotus position.

I would like it, though, if I could sit in meditation like Douglas Fairbanks Jr., with my legs crossed at the knee, a thin mustache on my lip, and myself looking very dashing, but I don't think the soul, which operates like a chimney flue, has much draw when the legs are crossed like that.

Anyway, braced by my one sun salutation and my ten seconds or so of meditation, I went into the kitchen and Jeeves was there, beaming in at the precise moment that I made my entrance, which he's very good at. He's always appearing and disintegrating and reappearing just when the stage directions call for him.

"What's the status of the opposition, Jeeves?" I asked.

"Your uncle is dressing, sir. His attitude is that of one who has an appointment of some sort for which he is expected shortly."

"You mean to say that he's rushing off somewhere?"

"Yes, sir."

"No doubt some emergency meeting of the National Rifle Association or the Jewish Defense League."

"Perhaps, sir."

"I think I'll have to dine in my room, Jeeves. It's not pleasant, I know. But it's our only chance."

"I am in agreement, sir."

All I liked to have in the mornings in New Jersey was a cup of coffee, toast with butter, a glass of water, and the sports section of *The New York Times*—not to eat, naturally, but to read. I enjoy nothing more than to sit peacefully at a kitchen table, memorize the baseball statistics, and nibble my humble piece of toast. But this morning that would have to be sacrificed.

My aunt Florence, as she often did, had left a pot of coffee for me, and so I quickly filled my favorite blue Fiestaware mug and then

tucked the sports section under my elbow—my uncle didn't read the sports and so he wouldn't notice its absence. Jeeves gathered a plate with some cold bread and butter. From the kitchen we charged up the three small stairs, myself in the lead, Jeeves picking up the rear of the formation. I was nearing the summit, on the second step, quite close to safety—my room just one more step and a yard away—but my uncle, unseen by me, was also thrusting toward the head of the stairs from stage right. And so it was only a mere half second later—into the hangman's noose after all!—that the unfortunate congress took place.

The physics was this: my head, in the lead of my body, was rising up the stairs, breaking the plane of the landing, just as my uncle was hanging a hard and hurried left down the stairs, with his belly, in the lead of his body, breaking the same plane. Two broken planes. A midair collision.

The nose of my plane went into his fuselage with not a little force. The wind was knocked from him, he breathed in caustically, and while his stomach collapsed a little, my neck, weak stem that it is, was forcefully and painfully shoved down into the shoulders. I also took right into my nostrils a dusting of baby powder which was emitted from his person, like a toad of the Amazon squirting poison when stepped on. The relative, you see, liked to generously coat himself with Johnson's powder after being in the tub, and I had grown to be mildly nauseated by its aroma. So taking that powder directly into the nostrils, right to the center of my olfactory glands, was quite the blow. Somehow, though, I righted myself on the second step, shakily holding the small banister, and miraculously, my coffee had not been spilled. Jeeves transported himself back into the kitchen.

"You idiot!" my uncle aspirated out of his Padre Pio beard. "You klutz!"

Then I, as often happens to me in moments of extreme stress, had a delayed spasm and ejaculation of fear. Whenever I'm scared, I register the scary thing for an instant rather calmly or sleepily: Oh, look, a rat has raced up my leg, I'll remark to myself—which actually happened to me one time in New York City, a trauma I've never quite recovered from—and after the rat reverses direction, having discerned that I am a person and not a drainage pipe, and runs

away, I suddenly realize what has transpired and scream at the top of my lungs.

So about two seconds *after* my uncle bellowed "You klutz!" when essentially the coast was clear, it was then that I responded:

"Noooo!" I yowled inanely, and threw my arms up to protect myself, much too late, and discharged from my person—behaving like my uncle's baby powder—was my cup of hot coffee, undoing the miracle of just moments before. The coffee spread itself like a searing, brown blanket on his yellow sport shirt, which, because of its thin material, did not prevent him from being scalded.

"Goddammit!" he cried in pain, pawing at his belly.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, mounting the last step, while my uncle recoiled.

"Am I burned?" he half demanded, half whimpered, as he pulled off his shirt. No one deserves to be showered with coffee. Not even frightening uncles.

I bent toward his belly to observe, and there was a thick, protective covering of hair on the stomach, much of it gray and a good deal of it white from the powder, and the skin beneath the hair and the powder seemed to be fine. A little pink, perhaps, but not the violent red of a serious burn.

"I think you're all right," I said, wanting to beg for forgiveness, but he retreated to the bathroom, his shirt in his fist like a rag, and I trailed behind like a fool. He regarded himself in the mirror and took a wet washcloth and held it to his stomach. He was rallying rather quickly. Hardy old thing. We regarded each other in the mirror. My thinning blond-red hair looked very frail, matching my mental state, and his mustache, like a mood ring from my 1970s youth, seemed to blacken further. And his eyes were as small as a lobster's, which is very small. Out of them shot death rays. Usually, as I indicated earlier, his preference was to have eyes that resembled chilled oysters, which was bad enough. So for him to switch over to lobster eyes was not a good sign—his repertoire of withering glances, taken from the worlds of mollusks and crustaceans, was expanding to keep up with his antipathy for me.

"I'm sorry I'm such an idiot," I whispered, and then I oozed down the hall to hide in my room.