

ARNOLD THE UNDEAD

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Arnold Leadbetter had known better days. In fact, all his previous days had been better than the one which he was about to experience. He had never had a worse day in his life.

He woke up to hear a couple of house sparrows greeting a brand new frosty morning. He smiled at the birds' cheerful chirruping of joy at the realization that they had survived another cold night and that a fresh day beckoned.

Except, he didn't smile.

His eyes felt really dry and he blinked to allow his tears to wash over them and give him relief from the discomfort that he was feeling.

Except, he didn't blink. There were no comforting tears.

He couldn't smile.

He couldn't blink.

He couldn't do anything.

He couldn't move.

He looked straight up; he had no choice. He didn't recognize the ceiling. Where was his lampshade? The floral one that he didn't really like but had agreed to buy, as his wife had fallen in love with it at the store. In fact, where were the light-fitting and energy-saving bulb that the salesman had included in the purchase at no additional cost? Where was the light? There was supposed to be a light above his bed. There had always been a light above his bed.

Unless he wasn't in his bed.

Come to that – where was Gillian? Where was his wife of fifteen years? She should be in bed alongside him or, at least, in the kitchen making their morning coffee.

He turned to the right, to see if she was there beside him.

Except he didn't turn. He just kept looking up at the ceiling that wasn't his ceiling.

His eyes were starting to burn. He needed to blink, he was desperate to blink. In his mind, he brought his eyelids together and anticipated the refreshing release of moisture. In reality, nothing happened. He wanted to scream, to shout out – the pain was excruciating – but not a sound emitted from his body.

Please, somebody, do something about my eyes!

Who did he think he was calling out to? As far as Arnold knew, he was the only person in the room, a room that he didn't recognize. Perhaps Gillian was there. Perhaps not. He had no way of knowing. Was he alone? He hoped not.

A sudden thought crossed his mind.

Am I dead? Is this what being dead feels like?

He hoped he wasn't dead. He'd only just passed his fortieth birthday. Forty was still young. Wasn't it? He remembered that his grandfather had lived until the ripe old age of ninety-seven. His father was approaching seventy years of age but was as strong as an ox and twice as lively. The Leadbetters were made of strong stuff – no, he couldn't be dead.

He heard a door open and close.

That wasn't right. His bedroom door was on the left and that sound had come from the right. Their bedroom window was on the right. At least, it had been. Unless Gillian had rearranged the furniture whilst he'd been at work, and rotated the bed. That would explain the missing light. But, if that was the case, why hadn't he noticed it when he'd gone to bed?

Hang on!

He remembered going to bed. He had definitely got into his own bed in his own bedroom. The light fitting and lampshade had been above his head when he'd drifted off to sleep. But now, everything was different. Everything was wrong.

Suddenly a strange face loomed into view. It was an attractive face – not beautiful, but a face that was pretty enough. But it wasn't Gillian's face. He didn't know this face.

Artificial tears suddenly exploded into his eyes, first the left eye and then the right. The relief from the burning sensation was almost instantaneous. He tried to smile at the eyes that peered into his.

“That should help a little, Mr Leadbetter. It must be uncomfortable, your eyes being open all the time like that.”

Arnold thought he nodded his head but his head stayed still, exactly as it had done for the last three weeks.

Thank you, but who are you?

The nurse ignored him and fluffed his pillow a little.

“There. That’s better. Nothing worse than a pillow that loses its shape during the night.”

Based on his current circumstances, Arnold wanted to assure her that there were a lot of things a lot worse than a flattened pillow but said nothing, partly through politeness and partly through a complete inability to speak.

The face disappeared from view and he heard the door open and close again.

About thirty minutes later (it may have been thirty minutes, but it could have been any length of time – Arnold had no way of knowing) the door opened once more. This time he could hear three distinct voices. He recognized two of them, but the owner of the third – a male voice with an American accent – was a complete mystery to him. The voices became slightly louder as they approached his bed. He concentrated on hearing what the voices were saying – perhaps they’d throw some light on his current predicament.

“So, there’s really no hope for him?”

That was Gillian’s voice. It was wonderful to hear her voice – even though it sounded upset – but he didn’t like the sound of what she had just said. The stranger’s voice responded to her question.

“I’m sorry but, barring a miracle, I’m afraid your husband will never improve. Even if he did come out of this coma, he’d have suffered irreparable brain damage. He’d never be able to do anything for himself again. His quality of life would be virtually nil.”

A third voice entered the conversation.

“Mum. It’s only the machine that’s keeping him alive. Without that, we’d already have lost him.”

That was the voice of his twelve-year-old daughter, Keira. What she said explained the constant humming and pumping noise that he had heard since he had woken up. That, and the presence of the nurse who had administered the artificial tears, meant that he must be in a hospital.

Gillian turned to her daughter and clasped her hands in her own.

“But Dad’s only forty, Keira. I’m only thirty-eight. We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us.”

Arnold’s eyes tried to widen as he realised the ramifications of the conversation.

No. Please don’t do what I think you’re considering. I’m here. I’m alive. I’m not dead. I’m not dying.

The doctor contradicted the unspoken thoughts of his brain-dead patient.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Leadbetter, Miss Leadbetter. Mr Leadbetter appears to have contracted a particularly sudden and rampant form of ALS, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, – or, as you say on this side of the pond, Motor Neurone Disease. It has affected not only his voluntary muscle movement but also his involuntary muscle movement such as breathing. Typically ALS presents a gradual deterioration, a degeneration, and death of motor neurons, but this form took hold in a matter of hours. Mr Leadbetter is completely paralysed. His entire body is unable to function autonomously. We’ve tried all the treatments that we can think of – and even some that are, quite

frankly, experimental – and not one has shown even the slightest hint of helping to alleviate or reverse his condition.”

The doctor looked over at his patient, who heard every word but could say nothing to change the physician’s prognosis.

“We can’t even close his eyes. The best we can do is to hydrate his eyes at regular intervals. Without that hydration, he would be in incredible pain. That is, if he can still feel physical sensations.”

Of course I can feel. My eyes were killing me until that nurse put drops in my eyes.

Gillian accepted a tissue from the doctor and dabbed at her tears before returning to hold her daughter’s hands.

“Is there really no hope?”

The doctor shook his head.

“None, I’m afraid.”

Gillian squeezed Keira’s hands even tighter.

“We’re going to have to be strong, love – for each other and for your dad. We need to let him go. It’s what’s best for your father. It’ll just be me and you now.”

How about letting me decide what’s best for me?

Arnold wasn’t prone to panic – he was normally a very calm individual – but panic was the best word to describe what he felt when confronted with what he considered to be his impending execution. Yes, panic rampaged through Arnold’s now fragile veins.

No. You can’t do this. I’m here. I’m alive. Please don’t switch the machine off. Please don’t switch me off.

I'll get better. I promise. I'll get better.

The nurse had been outside the door, waiting for her cue to come into the room with the necessary forms to sign. Most next of kin who found themselves in this tragic situation eventually consented to turning off their loved one's life support machine. It was their final act of kindness, a final act of love.

Gillian took the clipboard and pen from the nurse and was about to sign the paperwork when Keira stopped her.

"Wait, mum. What about dad's organs? I'm sure he'd want to donate his organs to help others."

Arnold agreed – in principle. He tried to sit up and say something, but nothing happened.

If I was dead, I would. Yes. But I'm not dead. Not yet anyway. Not by a long chalk. I'm in here. I'm alive, and I want to stay alive.

The doctor shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Miss Leadbetter, but we'd be transplanting non-functioning and unhealthy organs, As much as there's a need for organs, it's not possible I'm afraid."

Gillian and Keira stood in silence for a moment, looking at Arnold. Gillian's hand gripped the pen tightly as she scribbled her signature on the assent form.

The tragic formalities out of the way, both wife and daughter gave Arnold a final kiss on the cheek and left the room in silence, leaving the medical staff to perform the emotionally difficult task of terminating a patient's life. Even though they had

done so many times before, the enormity of ending a human life was never easy.

The humming noise faded away and the flapping noise of the bellows of the respirator machine stopped abruptly. The few seconds before the beep of vital signs monitor turned into a long monotonous tone seemed like an eternity to everyone left in the room.

The doctor checked his watch.

“Time of death, zero seven fifty-seven.”

The room was empty once more, so quiet that if the proverbial pin dropped it would sound like dustbin lids crashing to the ground. Even the two sparrows had long since flown away. The silence was deafening.

A single unheard thought swirled around Arnold’s brain, unsure of what to do or where to go.

But I’m not dead.

Arnold wanted to go back to his bed in the hospital room. Even though he'd been hooked up to machines, at least he'd been safe there. Now, his face covered by a pale blue sheet and travelling through corridors on a gurney with a wobbly leg, he felt decidedly unsafe. He had no idea where he was going. Nobody bothered to tell the dead where they were going.

Even if, like Arnold, they weren't dead.

In the hospital morgue, Roger Rogerson was awaiting his new delivery eagerly; he'd already sold the body to a friend who made amateur porn movies. He didn't ask too much about what the corpse would be used for, although he did have a vivid imagination and had devised all kinds of potential fates for the cadaver. It was a porn movie after all. Whoever was the next stiff through the double-doors was worth seven hundred and fifty pounds to him. He'd tried to negotiate for one thousand pounds, but the fresh corpse market was very competitive and he needed the money.

The swing doors suddenly burst open and Arnold was pushed into the morgue. His escort, Ralph, a skinny wretch with acne scars, parked the gurney against the left-hand wall of the room and held his palm out to Roger, all the while staring at the mortician's neck. He couldn't help himself – Roger had the largest Adam's apple that Ralph had ever seen.

"We agreed 50/50. You owe me two hundred and

fifty quid, Roger. I could've taken it to St. Matthew's down the road."

Roger walked over to the trolley and lifted up the sheet that covered Arnold's face. Arnold's lifeless eyes stared back at him.

"Not exactly a looker, is he?"

Arnold felt affronted. He'd always considered himself quite good looking. Well, reasonably so. Not movie star material, sure, but he had seen a lot worse.

You're no Brad Pitt yourself.

Roger ignored the comment, as he hadn't heard it. The skinny one stood alongside Roger and stared at Arnold's face.

"What'd he die of, anyway?"

Roger shrugged.

"Who knows? Who cares?"

Arnold was losing patience.

I'm not dead. Look at me. Do I look dead?

The ludicrousness of what he thought he'd said out loud suddenly hit him. Of course he looked dead. He wasn't moving – in fact, he wasn't even breathing. He supposed that he should perhaps forgive the hospital staff for thinking he was dead. But that doctor – he should have known better.

Ralph, was still waiting for his money.

"So? Where's me dosh?"

Roger covered Arnold up again.

"You'll get it when I get it. The van's due in about an hour. I'll give it to you at tea-break."

Ralph did his best to sneer at the mortician, but his gesture looked more like a Jack Russell Terrier

trying to smile.

“Make sure you do, Rogerson. Don’t forget – I could take you.”

Roger smirked.

“In your dreams, mate. In your dreams.”

Ralph’s walkie-talkie crackled into life with an unintelligible message.

“Gotta go, Roger. Another croaker on level three. See you at tea-break.”

Roger liked his own company, which was just as well as it was difficult to find anyone to work with him. It wasn’t the job, per se. It wasn’t even that people didn’t get on with Roger. It was just that his Adam’s apple was so large that it was a distraction. One of his previous co-workers had even asked an oncologist if perhaps it was a tumour. Upon being told that it wasn’t, the woman had requested a transfer to a unit with less of an aesthetic inconvenience.

Arnold was getting bored with the light blue gauze that was diffusing his view and was quite grateful when Roger drew the sheet back again, allowing the light to enter his eyes again. The mortician looked at the tag that was attached to Arnold’s big toe.

“Arnold Leadbetter. Born 1 August 1979. Died 13 December 2019.”

He returned to the top end of the gurney.

“Forty years old. And you didn’t even make it to Christmas.”

In his mind, Arnold blinked.

"But I'm not dead. Why won't anyone believe me?"

Roger ignored the question that he hadn't heard. He pointed to a machine in the corner of the room.

"You know, you're quite lucky really. Usually, I'd be replacing your bodily fluids with embalming fluid from that box of tricks over there."

Arnold strained to move his head so that he could see what the mortician was pointing at, but all he could do was to look straight up at the ceiling. Roger continued his little speech.

"But you, my friend, you're going on to bigger things. You're going to be a movie star."

Arnold's brow tried to furrow.

What the hell are you on about?

Roger hadn't heard the question but answered it anyway.

"You're going to be a porn star."

Now Arnold was worried. He was a happily married man. He had no intention of being in a porn movie.

"I will NOT be exploited like this. I'm leaving."

He summoned up all his strength to hoist himself off the gurney and leave the room. But nothing happened. He could think of moving, but that's all it was – a thought.

Roger enjoyed his conversations with the dead. The dead never stared at his throat – not with seeing eyes anyway.

"You're probably wondering what your family will say. Well, don't worry. They'll get to bury you – at least, they'll bury someone they think is you. Your

family will never know – unless they're connoisseurs of commercial coitus. Do they watch porn, Arnold?"

No, they do not. And nor do I. And I absolutely refuse to take part in this spectacle.

"I imagine the movie people will get rid of your body after filming is finished. To be honest, I don't really care what happens to you, as long as they don't bring you back here. It'd mess up my accounting."

Well, I care what happens to me. I demand a second opinion. I'm still here, you know. I'm still alive.

A knock on the door interrupted Roger's one-way dialogue with the body on the gurney. He unlocked the external door and two men wearing matching black cable knit sweaters entered the room.

Roger looked at his wristwatch.

"You're early."

One of the men handed Roger a wad of notes.

"It happens. Deal with it. You got the goods?"

Roger led the two men to where Arnold was lying.

"Voila. One male, aged about thirty-five. Well, Arnold here is actually forty but I doubt it'll make much difference."

The second man stared at Arnold's face.

"He don't look well."

Roger rolled his eyes.

"Of course he doesn't look well. He's bloody dead. What d'you expect him to look like?"

"Dunno. A bit more alive, I suppose."

Roger felt he really was dealing with a couple of idiots.

"This is a morgue. This is where the hospital

brings dead people. The living ones are upstairs, in wards. The dead ones are down here. In drawers. You want living actors—“

The first man cut in.

“Props.”

Roger sighed.

“If you want living props, I suggest you go upstairs and find someone else.”

Arnold really didn't want to go with these two men.

There's been a terrible mistake. I'm not dead you see. It's all a misunderstanding.

His protestations didn't make any difference.

The taller of the two men took hold of his legs and the shorter hooked his forearms under Arnold's armpits. Together, they carried Arnold out of the morgue. The taller man called out as he pushed the exterior door open with his foot.

“Pleasure doing business with you Roger.”

Roger nodded.

“Anytime, Pete. Anytime.”

Arnold had no say in the matter as he was thrown haphazardly into the back of a ten-year-old Ford Transit van. He landed roughly but, surprisingly, didn't feel the pain of the impact.

“I guess I'm going with you then.”