

Never End a Story with "And then he Awakes"

by Sean Lovelace

Stuart and his friends are standing in a tiny kitchen. The electricity has been cut off, so the room is lit with four candles. All around are empty Pop Tart boxes, crushed beer cans, balls of paper. On the table lies a dead Labrador Retriever. He's been there for over 24 hours. Near his head sit an open can of generic dog food, a rawhide bone, and a full bowl of water.

His owner, Joshua, stands at the head of the table. His shadow fills the wall. He has an unlit joint in his mouth.

"I don't have the money for the vet," he says.

"Don't worry about it," Stuart answers.

"I don't have the cash. I'm short, man."

Stuart's friends look at one another. Stuart steps forward.

"He's dead, Josh."

The dog is lying with his head wrapped in toilet paper. An entire roll. His legs stick out sideways, stiff. Congealed blood stains the paper, but the dog was dead when Joshua found him in the street last night.

Leaning toward Joshua, Stuart says softly, "Take it easy, okay? We'll bury him. He shouldn't be left here, in your kitchen."

Joshua glares. "Don't you fucking move him."

One of his friends, Mike, catches Stuart's eye. Stuart shrugs. Mike joins the other friend in taking a warm beer from the refrigerator. Stuart gets two beers and hands Joshua one. He just holds it, so Stuart takes it back and opens it. Joshua sips the beer, staring at the dog.

Stuart smokes the joint with Joshua, and tells him he needs to rest. He's been up all night, in the kitchen. Stuart leads him to the living room couch.

"I thought I could at least keep a dog," Joshua whispers.

"It's all right. Wasn't your fault."

Joshua groans and turns to his side. Stuart picks a faded sleeping bag from the floor and throws it over Joshua's body.

"I'm going to drop out. I'm failing my classes."

"Don't talk, Josh. Take it easy."

"It's not fun anymore. I'm just failing."

"Take it easy."

Joshua pulls the cover over his face.

"I can't afford the vet," he says through the cloth. Then he passes out.

Stuart sighs and look around the room. A dusty computer monitor in the corner. A sprawling pile of crumpled papers. A single gray dumbbell. Two flickering candles melted to the hardwood floor.

He can hear his friends on the porch murmuring. He gets them and they take the dog. They bury it right across the street, behind an abandoned Dairy Queen, beneath a water meter. Before filling in the hole, they add the chew bone and water dish.

Then they return to Joshua's house. On the living room floor, they sit in a close circle, silently playing hearts.

Asleep, Joshua fidgets beneath the sleeping bag, legs kinetic.

"Man, he's going to kill us," Mike says.

"Shut up," Stuart says.

"Kill us," he repeats. He glances worriedly at Joshua.

They finish the beer. Joshua finally kicks the bag off his body, and lets out a long, eerie howl. Everyone freezes. And then he awakes.

