

"I can't imagine any woman reading this without feeling seen, inspired, and totally empowered." —**MEL ROBBINS**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Let Them Theory*

# AWAKE

*a memoir*

## JEN

# HATMAKER

*New York Times* bestselling author

More praise for  
**AWAKE**

“*Awake* is Jen Hatmaker at her rawest and most courageous. This memoir isn’t just a story; it’s a lifeline for anyone navigating life’s hardest chapters. With unflinching honesty and signature wit, Jen shows how to rebuild when life falls apart—stronger, more authentic, and beautifully awake. This book doesn’t just speak to your heart; it revives it.”

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“*Awake* is as profoundly kind as it is honest. By chronicling her own story of awakening and coming home to herself, Jen Hatmaker does what all our best teachers do: she clears a path for us to find our own awakening. This is a mature book, a hard-won story, and it’s glorious.”

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“Wow. What Jen Hatmaker has done here is stunning, not just in its bravery but also in its wisdom and generosity. The trick of memoir is to write something deeply specific and personal—set in one place, one house, one body—that becomes somehow so much more than that: something for all of us. This book is a lifeline, an open door, a vision for a new way to be a woman in our world.”

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# AWAKE

*A Memoir*

Jen Hatmaker

AVID READER PRESS

*New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London*  
*Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi*

*This book is for my people who saw me through.*

*Your names are all in here.*

*You are the great loves of my life.*

*You are my forever.*

## *Author's Note*

To protect the privacy of individuals involved and streamline the chronology, some names, identifying details, and dates in this memoir have been altered while remaining true to the core experiences.

Also, it must be said that in any narrative, the story belongs to the storyteller. I am deeply aware that this is my story, my version, my experience. I am deciding what to include and exclude. Some choices I am making for the sake of someone else's privacy, as not everything is mine to tell, even though the partiality leaves a few holes in the story.

It is not only possible but certain that at some inflection point, someone else will say, "That's not how I remember that." Or "I have a different perspective." Childhood memories vary wildly from child to child, even inside the same family. One marriage, two people, two stories, or at least two nuanced versions.

I am also wary of defaulting to uncomplicated categories: the hero, the victim, the villain. My story in its starkest terms lends itself to those, and it is tempting to use them. You'd probably forgive me. "That makes sense," you would say. "Those are just the facts." And yes, they are, but the picture must be zoomed out to be, not accurate per se, but *more* accurate.

Alas, the memoirist's dilemma. I can only tell my version. It is what I know. It is what I remember. It is what I felt. Trying to include everyone's disparate versions would fragment this story beyond usefulness and, for me, truth. So I am left with the uncomfortable task of calling it like I saw it, knowing no two people in this story would tell it the exact same way.

So, reader, the story you have here? Is mine.

*my heart woke me crying last night  
how can i help i begged  
my heart said  
write the book*

—Rupi Kaur, *Prologue* from *Milk and Honey*



*part one*

**THE END**

# Over.

At 2:30 a.m. on July 11, 2020, out of a dead sleep, I hear five whispered words not meant for me: “I just can’t quit you.” My husband of twenty-six years is voice-texting his girlfriend next to me in our bed.

It is the end of my life as I know it.

The next four hours are chaos. While he eventually passes out from a treacherous combination of booze and exposure, I follow a trail of betrayal on his computer, an entire other life. My body is frozen. I can’t even cry. My whole world is slipping away click by click. I float above myself watching my brain absorb the impossible, watching my heart splinter. So this is what it looks like when a life unravels in real time. It is quieter than I expected.

The kids are upstairs asleep, unaware that their story has just split in half. They went to bed in the hazy, lazy days of summer polluted by a four-month-old COVID outbreak but otherwise sleeping the comfortable sleep of kids whose parents will always be just downstairs; family disruption might come from outside but never from within. Not ours anyway. I keep thinking: “They don’t know. I don’t want to know. I want to go upstairs with them and not know.”

At 6:30 a.m., having endured as much discovery as a soul can take in four middle-of-the-night hours, I wake him up and ask for the full truth and nothing less. He is unwilling. I tell him to pack his shit and get out.

It is the last night he ever spends at our house.

I text my parents and sisters and brother: I need you at Mom’s house right now. No one asks for an explanation. This type of summons signals a crisis, and everyone is there by 7:00 a.m. I pull into their driveway, and Mom is waiting

outside. She has no idea what has happened, but she opens her arms with tears streaming and I finally collapse. I scream like a wounded animal. I can't stop. I've lost all sense of time and space. I feel my siblings throw their arms around me, but I am gone.

# Dead Rose

I am a high school freshman attending the first session of True Love Waits at my church. This course, the leaders tell our parents, will teach us teenagers about purity and how to stave off our burgeoning sexuality. There is nothing more precious than (a girl's) virginity, so the deacons and their wives would discuss the perils of heavy petting and spaghetti straps; they'd been trained on the curriculum.

Before they separate the guys and girls into Sunday school classrooms, the student pastor walks to the front of the dingy youth room holding a fresh red rose: "Isn't this flower beautiful, everyone?" We all agree that it is. So far, we are nailing our coursework. "Girls, right now, you are like this lovely rose. The most beautiful possible gift." I wonder why only the girls resemble the flower. I wonder who we are a gift for.

"This"—he holds out the blooming rose—"is like presenting yourself *pure* to your husband on your wedding night. Perfect and preserved! But when you start giving your body to your little boyfriends, you begin destroying the gift." At this alarming statement, he plucks the petals off the rose one at a time and lets them fall to the stained carpet:

"You let him touch your body." Pluck.

"You take off your clothes." Pluck.

"You engage in inappropriate acts." Pluck.

"You have sexual intercourse." Pluck.

We are frozen in our metal folding chairs. I have barely even kissed a boy. I feel wildly embarrassed but can't figure out why. All of a sudden, I am hyperaware of my body and burning with shame; did that first kiss with Gary

Whipple in seventh grade cost me a petal?? I glance nervously at the other girls, wondering if they knew we were such a problem. This was news to me. I can't look at the boys. I think maybe my Forenza shirt is too tight? It felt fine ten minutes ago. My cheeks are flushed with humiliation.

"... until all you have to offer your husband on your wedding night is this..." At this point the pastor holds up the barren, dead stick plucked of its petals, a pauper's gift if I ever saw one.

This is as confusing as it is denigrating. According to the indictment, didn't boys pluck those petals off? Were they also some sort of flower gradually losing their bloom? Or is sexual purity just the girls' responsibility and requirement? I scan the room with insider knowledge of high school behavior; some petals here have definitely been plucked, and frankly, I'd like to lose a few if I'm being honest. But apparently there is no coming back from being a slutty, stripped rose. Good luck finding a man who wants to marry a ruined stick.

At the onset of adolescent sexuality, I hear:

Girls' bodies are a problem and need to be heavily policed.

Girls' bodies are an offering for boys.

Girls' bodies are easily ruined.

Girls are responsible for a pure bedroom.

So our sexual deviance was our fault, and the boys' sexual deviance was our fault.

Got it.

# Budget

It is July 1993. I am not yet nineteen, and my boyfriend and I are sitting across from my parents at their kitchen table explaining in reasonable terms why we should get married in December as a college sophomore and senior. We slide over a few numbers on a yellow legal pad and make our case:

“Between my job at the YMCA and his at the Western Outfitters, we will make almost \$800 a month. That is more than enough to cover all our bills.”

“Here is our budget. I think you’ll find it extremely thorough.”

“We one hundred percent plan to finish college. We will actually study *more* by living together.”

Miraculously, my parents don’t laugh. They look at our accounting and pretend to take it seriously. We will earn under \$11,000 in a calendar year. We are playing at adulthood with as much earnestness as Baby Jesus in the manger. We have the trump card of my parents’ story: They got married at twenty and twenty-four, so they have no leg to stand on.

We are wildly in love. We have dated a whopping ten months. Although I gave up a few petals, we are committed to (renewed) celibacy until December. We will get married in the godly-ish order so we can shag with impunity. This, we are told, is the right thing to do. It doesn’t occur to us to just date, or be free young kids, or live together, or grow up, or discover who we are, or get more than two years away from prom before matrimony. We are in a conservative Baptist bubble where half the student body gets married before graduation. Being a teenage bride doesn’t even seem weird.

My parents acquiesce. They say later I would have done what I wanted, so why make it harder? I can’t remember *any adult* suggesting a college

sophomore was perhaps not emotionally or mentally or relationally ready to be a wife. No one urged me to just be young, to live and grow and experience the world. I don't recall a shocked face, a suspicious response, a cautious warning. The community that raised me placed little premium on healthy young evolution.

He is going to be a student pastor and I am going to be a teacher and we are eager to sacrifice young adulthood for marriage.

We couldn't be happier.

Even then, even as a literal teenager, my hopes for the future are as deep as the ocean. We are in love, obsessed with each other. We plan to build a beautiful life. We will be faithful and serve God and be shining, twinkling lights in this dark world. He will be the leader of our family and I will be the best wingwoman ever.

We write love letters and make homemade cards and give care packages and make out in our cars. We two-step at the Tumbleweed in Stillwater. We stay on the phone until 4:00 a.m. and dream about our future. We practice being youth pastors at a tiny local church where I am the students' actual peer. Our love: bottomless. Our devotion: incorruptible. Our loyalty: unquestionable.

I see the road ahead, and it is full of mutual adoration and meaningful ministry, tiny blond babies and a sweet little house. We will love our students and host Bunco with our neighbors. He will keep a meticulous yard, and I will wallpaper our dining room up to the chair rail. I will learn to cook like my grandma and use fresh garlic. We will build a family and a ministry and a whole life. One day we will walk our children down the aisle and rock our grandbabies on the porch. We will be lifers like both our parents. I will try so hard. We both will.

I am nineteen. He is twenty-one. On December 30, 1993, we hand over the keys to young adulthood and walk down the same church aisle my parents did. I am not old enough to drink at my reception.

## Mrs. Landerson

I am a sixth grader, the worst time to be a human person in the span of a life. My body is hopeless, I cannot crack the hair code, Mom won't let me pierce my ears, everything feels rigged. I want to speak the language of the popular, but I am too awkward, too cerebral. I don't understand their dialect.

I am stunned at my classmates' natural charm. Notably, I study the way Laura Morgan walks and practice it in my full-length mirror; it involves curling your right fingers gently into your palm and slightly bending back your wrist. I don't understand this particular mannerism but its effect on me is undeniable. Plus, Laura is Catholic, which adds to her mystique. Her whole walking operation involves a casual gait while the posed right hand does a very specific *sashay*. It is a complicated endeavor, and I work on it, essentially, around the clock. Every Monday morning, I decide to debut my new walk at Mulberry School but I lose my nerve on the bus.

Through some twist of luck, this is the year I discover I am a little funny. Humor is my dad's native tongue, so I guess I absorbed it by proximity. This small emerging superpower is all I have. Style, money, looks, charisma—none, none, none, none. I can't do Laura's walk. We don't have cable, so I don't know the right shows. Mom refuses to buy me Guess jeans. My plastic glasses are a genuine tragedy. I have no other assets. But I learn to inject witty responses into the sixth-grade zeitgeist, and shockingly, astonishingly, the other kids laugh.

Unfamiliar with the concept of restraint, I put my new currency into high rotation. I stay hypervigilant for opportunities to demonstrate my comedy prowess. I find the middle of class an optimal time; I am hoping to impress



Mrs. Landerson too. All I have ever been is smart and quiet. Being funny is fun. I haven't had many friends really, well, ever. The approval of my classmates is a stunning turn of events. My social anxiety begins fraying at the edges; a minuscule kernel of confidence takes root. My parents notice the change. They tell me later they are relieved. They'd wiped my many, many tears of loneliness.

I am at recess when a group of Cute Girls walks toward me in tandem:

"Jennifer, you'll never believe what Mrs. Landerson just said to us."

I mine my brain for a sharp witticism; a teacher deep cut always plays well.

"She pulled us all together in the hallway and asked why we even wanted to be friends with you! She said you were—what was the word she used, you guys? *Domineering*. She kept going on and on. She was really mean about it."

I am paralyzed. I stand there mute. My system is overloaded with shock.

Mrs. Landerson thinks badly of me? She finds me domineering? She doesn't know why anyone likes me? She is talking ugly about me to my new friends? I cannot get any of it to make sense. In eight seconds, I am handed a new story about myself, a thought I had never considered once:

I am too much.

I ache with humiliation and sorrow. For a few seconds, I try to pretend this doesn't bother me, but I start sobbing and run to the nurse's office. I lay on the sick cot and cover my head with a blanket. I am inconsolable. She has to call my parents. I am eleven.

## Addendum: Dad

Let me explain something to you about Larry King, dad of Jen, Lindsay, Cortney, and Drew. In most ways, he will suffer a fool well past their merit. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I submit as evidence the Haysville Police Department surrounding the house Dad rented to two “private dancers” who were six months behind in rent and apparently harboring a murderer. What I am saying is there were warning signs. Dad has a real bleeding heart in most cases, which makes him a disastrous landlord but a pretty good human.

There is one notable exception to his mercy: any offense to the aforementioned Jen, Lindsay, Cortney, and Drew.

There isn't enough ink in America to list the teachers, principals, coaches, club sponsors, deans, youth pastors, bosses, and arresting officers who found themselves on the wrong end of Larry King after some “unjust” treatment of his kids (air quotes necessary in more than a few cases). Retribution was always swift. God's son Jesus as my witness, I am half a century old and Dad still offers to “make a call” on my behalf when something goes sideways.

All this to say, I don't want you thinking Mrs. Landerson didn't get her comeuppance. I can safely report Larry King made her regret talking shit about Jennifer King to those sixth-grade girls. If she thought *I* was too much, she hadn't yet seen my dad in action. The speed at which he raced our station wagon (the Gray Ghost) back to Mulberry School to defend my case that day, while certainly criminal, was definitely heroic.

Domineering? We'll give you domineering, Mrs. Landerson. She probably never uttered that word again for the rest of her living days. Sure, we are Bible-believing folk and know God will eventually right every wrong, but

while God is up there tarrying doing who knows what, Larry King will step in as his proxy. The King children don't have to wait for heaven's justice, and these are just the facts of the case, Your Honor.

# Lawyer

It has been one day since I found out my life is not true, and I am sitting in an attorney's office. It is a Sunday but she goes to my church and agrees to meet me in her empty building. My mom and sisters are in the waiting room. They don't know how to help me outside of just being within touching range; I don't go anywhere without one or all of them for six solid weeks. Cortney is watching old *SNL* clips of Kristen Wiig because only absurd things make sense right now.

I have never been in a lawyer's office. It is cozy, like its only visitors are suing or defending or divorcing, and we can only manage these horrible things on soft couches. I float up to the ceiling and watch myself describing what I know so far, like telling the clinical story of someone else's fucked-up life. What I have already discovered suggests there will be no coming back. I am talking about divorcing my attorney's pastor, so we are both having an out-of-body experience. Later, I think to be grateful for her gentle face, her capacity to let me use ten thousand words when one hundred would have sufficed. I'd never said these things before. I am unpracticed at the story of desertion.

It is only much later I wonder: Why did I run straight to a lawyer in the first thirty-six hours? What instinct drove me to an attorney instead of back to our marriage therapist? But I am not ready for this truth-telling yet. I was acting purely on intuition, which I only figured out later was the most trustworthy character in the play.