

# ONE

OUT OF THE DARKNESS and into the dawn they came, one by one, in single file, but sometimes in pairs. Pale, gray-blue faces like mimes or marionettes from the grave, their glittery eyes and harsh, red-painted mouths grimacing, a testimony to their soulless past.

The young man dreamed of them often, these ghoulish dancing queens born from the darkest depths of his imagination. The hellish whores who came to lure him, to seduce him, and when one of them laid down on the cold marble floor, and spread her legs to receive him, the young man screamed as the long-dead face of his mother, Winona, emerged from the dark, gaping hole at the center.

The whore was giving birth.

Winona smiled at him as she broke through the blood-gorged placenta. She laughed as the young man screamed and screamed.

“What’s the matter, Stewart? Don’t you recognize me? Come to Mama, dear. Come in and die.”

Stewart’s body jerked as he awoke covered in sweat. He tried to sit up, but his movements were severely restricted. Strong hands held him firmly as he thrashed violently within their grip.

“No!” Stewart screamed. “I can’t go back! They’ll come!”

“Calm down, Mister Barclay,” a deep, male voice said. “It was only a bad dream. A nightmare. You’ve suffered a lot of stress lately. It’s to be expected.”

The lighting in the room was very dim, not quite dark. Stewart flinched as a harsh, white light flashed directly into his eyes.

“Do you know what year it is?” The voice asked.

Stewart wanted to respond, but his mouth was dry and his throat was parched. His head felt like two jackhammers were trying to bash his brains out.

“Do you know what year it is?” the man repeated. Stewart tried to close his eyes, but they were being held open by forceps connected to a strange metal machine. He could not close them, no matter how hard he tried. How then, had he been able to sleep?

“Do you know what year it is?” the voice repeated for the third time.

Something cold and wet dripped onto his corneas. Eye drops. Stewart tried to move his hands and feet and realized that he was firmly strapped down. His hands touched cold metal and then something firm, but soft. It dawned on him that he was laying on a hospital bed. A stiff, white sheet and a scratchy blanket covered his feverish body. An IV tube ran out of his right arm. Stewart nodded as the man repeated the question once again.

“What year is it? What century?”

“Two thousand - ten...the twenty-first century.”

“What country and state are you in?”

“The United States. I live in Washington, DC.”

“Who are you? What is your name?”

“Stew...Stewart Edward Barclay. I’m an artist.”

“Very good, Mister Barclay.”

The doctor turned off the offending flashlight. The cool, liquid eye drops dripped into his eyes every few seconds. Stewart tried to get his bearings, but as his mind attempted to piece together certain events, he realized that he had no recollection of anything that occurred during the past several days. He looked desperately at the doctor, a tall, middle-aged black man with chestnut skin and hazel eyes. His silver hair was a striking contrast to his brown skin. The doctor smiled reassuringly. “I don’t expect you to know where you are, Mister Barclay. You’ve been unconscious for several days. You’ve had us all extremely worried.”

“What’s going on?” Stewart’s voice sounded harsh and strange, even to his own ears. “What is this place?”

“You are in Saint Elizabeth Hospital, Mister Barclay.”

“Saint Elizabeth’s? You mean the nuthouse? You’ve got me locked up in the nuthouse?” Stewart was incredulous.

“We don’t like to refer to it as ‘the nuthouse,’ Mister Barclay. We are a respectable facility that is in the business of helping the mentally disturbed.”

Stewart was livid. “Now wait a minute, what is this? Is this some kind of joke? I’m not crazy. What the hell am I doing here?”

“Now, Mister Barclay, try not to think of yourself as ‘crazy.’ After all, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Eleventh Edition, you are not really psychotic. But you *are* very disturbed, Mister Barclay. You’ve been under a great deal of stress lately. Your mind and body just gave out, that’s all. It happens to the best of us.”

“You mean a nervous breakdown?” Stewart asked. “Are you saying that I had a nervous breakdown?”

The doctor paced in front of Stewart’s bed. He waved his hands as he spoke, his gestures depicting a man of quiet dignity and confidence. “Yes, Mister Barclay, you had a breakdown of some sort. Do you remember anything that happened within the last few days?”

“No, not at all.”

“A young woman found you lying unconscious in the bathtub of your apartment. The water was blood red, and your wrists were slashed. You tried to kill yourself, Mister Barclay.”

“No...no that can’t be right,” Stewart said. “I would never try to kill myself. There must be some mistake.”

“Mistake, Mister Barclay? Try to remember. Sometimes it’s common for the mind to screen out its most painful memories.”

As Stewart stared, it seemed that the doctor’s face began to transform itself; the man’s face and head began to stretch

grotesquely, until it morphed itself into what appeared to be a giant pair of scissors with eyes. The doctor continued to speak, but this time his voice took on a conspirator's tone.

"Tell me, what was it like, Mister Barclay?" he hissed. "The last moments before you decided to do it? The last few seconds before you climbed in, fully clothed, and brought the cold, shiny piece of glass down on your naked wrists?" And then, the Scissorman whispered, "Cut the ribbons of your mind. Leave them in pieces."

"Shut up!" Stewart shouted, but even as he focused, and Scissorman became the doctor once more, his mind began to slip into the past as he tried desperately to remember:

*The depression had hit him like a ton of bricks. Everywhere he looked, he saw the ugly faces of humanity, grimacing caricatures depicting the true nature of their personalities: greedy, envious, and most of all, afraid. Afraid of being pushed aside, and so the owners of these faces tried their hardest to push first, because they were so scared of being taken over or replaced. They manipulated and enslaved others to ensure their survival in the concrete jungle.*

*Stewart had always been an outsider and unwilling participant in the great game of life. Most people thought it was just because he was a "sensitive artist," and they never took his opinions about things that seriously. But Stewart felt betrayed and torn asunder - all because he lacked the skills that would make him a wolf in sheep's clothing, a master of disguise and deceit. Most people, especially his father, had told him to quit whining and to just "suck it up" if he expected to survive. But Stewart had never developed the proper social skills necessary for survival. He couldn't let the injustices and idiosyncrasies of life just "roll off his back." He was transparent, and he wore his emotions on his sleeve. He could no more pretend to be something he wasn't as he*

*could sprout wings and fly. He did not feel connected to the earth, whose very inhabitants were fast ensuring its rapid destruction in their relentless pursuit of control, money and power. Mother Nature had obviously retired, or perhaps she had given up, just like he had.*

*Stewart sat stiffly on the seat of the subway car, eyes closed. He pulled his long, black overcoat around him as he tried desperately to fight back the tears. He was overwhelmingly bitter, and in the course of his profound melancholia he had contemplated ending his life.*

*But he'd had these dark thoughts before.*

*When his wife and young son had perished in the fire, the one that had consumed his home, Stewart felt nothing but emptiness inside. His soul hurt, and he had been diagnosed with manic depression a long time ago, even before the tragic deaths of his family. But like many medical practitioners, Stewart's doctor could not really know what the true cause of his illness was. It was often described as a chemical imbalance in the brain, a result of genetic factors. However, Stewart had always thought of it as a disease of the soul, for he could not live peacefully, no matter how many drugs he was prescribed, no matter how many therapy sessions he was forced to endure. Stewart rarely saw the beauty in life, even though he himself was a remarkable specimen of physical human perfection. He was thirty years old, and at six feet in height, he was also one of those fortunate people who managed to keep a lean, sculpted physique without having to really work out. His wavy, dark brown hair was left to grow long, hanging in an unkempt mass and curling loosely over his shirt collar and touching his shoulders. His deep-set dark eyes, straight narrow nose and prominent cheekbones gave him an almost unearthly beauty.*

*But Stewart didn't acknowledge real beauty, either in himself or in others. For him, the delicate petals of a rose or a baby's smile were fleeting pictures that would*

*rapidly be replaced with the inevitable: the rose would wither away and die, and the baby was sweet and innocent until it grew into the planet's ultimate predator—a human adult.*

*As he nurtured his death wish, Stewart became even more forlorn as he realized that if, in the event he actually did attempt to end his life (as opposed to just thinking about it), he would probably fail there, too. Just like he failed to save his wife and son from the flames. He would somehow manage to blow off his beautiful face with one gunshot to the head, and still manage to survive. Or he would become permanently brain-damaged as a result of a lethal combination of drugs and alcohol. Of course, slitting his wrists was another option, and he'd heard that it was actually supposed to be a relatively painless way to die, if you did it right. But Stewart knew he couldn't do it. He was deathly afraid of needles, and the thought of slicing his flesh open was too morbid to contemplate.*

*As he brooded, Stewart saw himself in a cluttered, one-bedroom apartment. He was staggering recklessly around the room, drinking heartily from a bottle of Bacardi Dark Rum. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, but somehow it wasn't enough. He just couldn't get the high he was used to. He staggered into the bathroom and took a good long look at himself in the mirror. His long-sleeved, black shirt was unbuttoned, and hanging out of his jeans. He hadn't shaved in almost a week and his dark hair stuck out in all directions. His dark eyes were bloodshot and his prominent cheekbones were starting to take on the emaciated look of the "heroin chic." He looked horrific, but at least he was in fashion.*

*He emptied all of the pill bottles he found in his medicine cabinet. His shrink had prescribed him Trileptal and Trazadone to combat his bi-polar problem, but they didn't seem to be working. The drugs made him feel sick with nausea, and his head felt like it was caught in a*

*deathly vice-grip. Maybe if he swallowed enough of them, he would eventually end his torment.*

*The scene switched in his mind to a young woman leaning over him, but Stewart couldn't really see her clearly. Her face was out of focus, and she was dressed in what appeared to be a white lab coat.*

His mind snapped back to the present. "There must be some mistake," Stewart said. "I have always been prone to depression, even deep depression, but I would never have the guts to kill myself outright, especially slashing my own wrists."

"There is no mistake, Mister Barclay. You are a danger to yourself. We will keep you in this facility until we see fit that you are stable enough to function in the outside world."

"How...how long have I been here?" Stewart asked.

"Five days. Your body is healing quite nicely. But we are still concerned about your mental condition."

"My mental condition is just fine, Doctor..."

"Lincoln. Randolph Lincoln. We cannot be sure of that, Mister Barclay until you have completed the final stage of treatment."

"Final stage? What do you mean? And why can't I close my eyes? How is this supposed to help me?"

"The metal apparatus that is keeping your eyes open is part of the treatment we are giving you, Mister Barclay. Even though you have been unconscious for the past several days, this method allows your subconscious mind to heal itself while your eyes continuously take in positive external stimuli to help you overcome your mental disorder. You may think of it as a form of autosuggestion."

"External stimuli? What do you mean?"

Doctor Lincoln folded his hands. He looked at Stewart directly as he spoke. Stewart thought he resembled a giant insect ready to devour its prey.

"Films, Mister Barclay. Most of the films we have been showing you are just pleasant scenes from

nature...mountains, streams, forests, etc. They are designed to put you in a sort of meditative state, or trance.”

“You mean you’re hypnotizing me. Scrambling with my brain?”

“No, Mister Barclay. We are trying to *unscramble* your brain. We have also been conducting electro convulsive therapy to try to combat your depression. The fact that you attempted suicide is a very serious matter.”

“But I swear to you, Doctor, that I have no memory of that whatsoever. I really think there’s some mistake. I couldn’t slash my wrists. I can’t even look at a needle in my arm without getting sick.”

“Believe me when I tell you this, Mister Barclay. This is for your own good. You will stay in this facility for two more days. After this, you will be transferred to Wycliff Manor, a mansion located in Annapolis. While there, you will complete the final stages of your rehabilitation. You will not be completely free of this house until we determine at such time that you are able to handle stress without resorting to self-annihilation.”

“Wycliff Manor? Are you kidding?” Stewart asked incredulously. “Evidently, Doctor, you don’t know who my family was. Wycliff Manor happens to be my inheritance. How did you come to know of its existence?” He paused. “Oh, I get it. You’re holding me hostage here, and you want to use me to get the mansion for yourself. That’s really clever Doctor, but you can’t do anything with Wycliff Manor without my consent!”

Lincoln sighed. “Mister Barclay, let’s not waste time, shall we? I know quite well who your mother was and about the entire Wycliff family. However, according to the law, if a person is rendered unable to look after himself or his estate as a result of a mental illness, then it is the duty of the State to turn over the estate to either a next of kin or a trustee to look after his affairs. You, Mister Barclay, are mentally unsound. However, to ease your conscious, I am not interested in acquiring Wycliff Manor for myself.

Without being too boastful, I've made a lot of money over the years as a doctor. I've already got three houses: one in this area, one overseas in London, and a beach house in sunny California. Wycliff Manor is of no interest to me in that respect. But I have found it to be the perfect place to conduct our treatment plan for you. We are only interested in making you well again, Mister Barclay. You *must* be able to function again in the outside world."

The doctor did not raise his voice, but he *was* emphatic with this last statement. Stewart was confused. Why was Lincoln so concerned about him? It was true that he was a doctor, and as such, he should maintain a healthy concern for his patients. But Stewart felt that the doctor seemed to have a personal interest in him that went way beyond the average doctor-patient relationship.

"What are you saying, Doctor? That you're going to turn Wycliff Manor into some sort of halfway house without my consent? Is that it? I'm to live there with a bunch of other fruit loops?"

"Mister Barclay, negativity is counterproductive to your recovery. You will be able to come and go within certain time frames. A servant will prepare your meals, and we will check in on you from time to time, without invading your privacy too much, of course. We'll need to see how well you're managing. You will have access to all of the normal luxuries: television, radio, etc."

Stewart was beside himself with questions. "I still don't understand. How is Wycliff Manor supposed to cure me?" "There will be certain 'tests' that you will have to pass while you are living at Wycliff Manor, Mister Barclay. I'm afraid I cannot tell you the details. It would ruin what we are trying to accomplish."

"And what *are* you trying to accomplish? Why am I strapped down like this? Apparently I'm not a danger to anyone else but myself, so what gives?"

Doctor Lincoln looked at Stewart gravely. "I'm afraid the straps are necessary, Mister Barclay. In two more days

you will be allowed to eat solid food, and then we will transfer you to Wycliff Manor. Now, I'm going to show you one more film before I leave. Try to relax and let your mind become one with the pictures in the film."

Before Stewart could protest, Doctor Lincoln had turned off the lights. A giant, flat-screen television showed pictures of glorious mountains, forests, and wild animals. New Age metaphysical music accompanied the film. Lincoln started to take his leave.

"Good night, Mister Barclay. Try to sleep. I will check on you in the morning." The doctor opened the door and let it slam shut behind him. Stewart heard the click of several deadbolts on the door.

As Stewart drifted off to sleep, the nightmare began again. What good were films about nature if the demons of his dreams wanted to devour him?

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On Monday morning, Doctor Lincoln informed Stewart that he had a visitor. It was Stewart's final stay at Saint Elizabeth's before he would be transferred to Wycliff Manor. Stewart was intrigued. Who would come to visit him? The ankle and wrist straps that had secured him were finally loosened, and the strange metal contraption that had kept his eyes open was also disengaged. Stewart was grateful to finally feel like a man again instead of a caged animal.

But he was still profoundly confused. Why couldn't he remember his attempted suicide? There had to be some mistake. Some insidious practical joke. He sat up in bed and looked at his wrists. They were heavily bandaged. Out of some inner, morbid curiosity, Stewart began to unwind the bandages of his left wrist. There were several layers, and when he finally reached the last one, he tore it off impatiently. He stared, dumbfounded, at his wrist. There was not a scratch on it! No scar, no mark, no stitches. Not

even a blemish. Hastily, Stewart began unwinding the bandages on his right wrist. He found that it was identical to the left—flawless. For someone who attempted suicide by slashing his wrists, his were smoother than a newborn baby's butt. What the hell was going on here?

As he looked around the room, Stewart saw that it was filled with strange computers, monitors, and other high-tech machines. In fact, the room looked more like a laboratory than a rubber room for a psycho. A large observation window was located on the wall to his right. So, they had been watching him, had they? Stewart suddenly felt ashamed. He had been observed closely without his knowledge, his body put on display, for almost a week. It felt almost like being raped.

The door of the cell opened, and Doctor Lincoln escorted a young woman inside. She looked vaguely familiar; Stewart couldn't quite place her. He stared at her unflinchingly, drinking in her exotic beauty. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, and had a slender, but athletic build on her five-foot, seven-inch frame. Stewart couldn't quite guess her ethnicity. Her facial features appeared to be both African-American and Caucasian. Perhaps she was something else altogether? Her curly brown hair was about collar-length, and was streaked with blond highlights. Her eyes were a light gray, which were striking contrasts to her smooth, caramel-colored skin. She was dressed in black jeans, a white T-shirt, and a short, black, leather jacket. Stewart suddenly felt naked and unattractive in his white hospital gown. The nurses hadn't shaved him all week, and his face was covered with dark whisker stubble. His hair was a mess, too, and he desperately wanted a shower. Why couldn't the nurses have kept him looking at least a little presentable?

Lincoln spoke first. "Mister Barclay, this is Mahalia Devereaux. She's the young woman who found you in your apartment. She saved your life."

"How are you, Mister Barclay? I came to see how you

are feeling.” Mahalia’s lazy Southern drawl and her French surname revealed her ethnic background: she was a descendant of the Les Gens De Couleur Libres. (The Free People of Color) in New Orleans, Louisiana.

“Pleased to meet you,” Stewart said. “So, you’re the person responsible for my being locked up here in the nuthouse.”

“No, I...” Mahalia began, but Lincoln interrupted her.

“On the contrary, Mister Barclay. Miss Devereaux found you in your apartment, like I explained to you earlier. She is actually responsible for your admittance to DC General. It is the best hospital in town for treating trauma patients. Once your condition stabilized, it was decided that you be transferred here. After all, suicide attempts require extensive psychiatric care.”

Stewart jabbed a finger in the doctor’s face. “Cut the crap,” he snapped. “I’m onto whatever little charade you’ve got going on here. So I tried to kill myself, huh? Well, what about this?”

He held both of his arms in front of his face with palms facing outward. Doctor Lincoln looked confused.

“I’m not quite sure what you are referring to, Mister Barclay.”

“*This*, damn it!” Stewart shouted. “Look at my goddamned wrists! What do you see?”

The doctor shrugged. “Well, nothing, of course.”

“Of course!” Stewart sneered. “So how the fuck did I slash my wrists and there’s no scar? Explain that one to me, Doctor.”

A touch of impatience colored the doctor’s response. “Mister Barclay, these days medical science can do wonders. What was not possible before is now easily accomplished in this day and age. We have advanced knowledge, and state-of-the-art equipment that allow us to treat injuries such as burns and deep wounds without leaving a scar. The surgeons simply used an advanced type of skin graft when they treated you. Your wrists were

naturally bandaged after surgery, but the intent was for them to heal without leaving scars. Also, on the psychiatric end, we feel that scars are a hideous reminder as to how unbalanced a patient was before we treated his mental condition. Scars stand in the way of mental healing for the patient.”

Stewart sighed and ran a hand through his rumpled dark hair. He gazed wildly at Lincoln for a long moment. “OK, I see I can’t win with you people,” he finally said. He looked directly at Mahalia. “I apologize for thinking that you were responsible for my feeling like a side-show freak. But tell me something: how did you get into my apartment? Have we met? I mean you *do* look a little familiar, but...”

“A couple of weeks ago, Mister Barclay, we met at the Blackstone Gallery. You were giving a lecture about contemporary art, and it was the evening of your gallery opening.” As Mahalia spoke, Stewart let her sweet, Southern drawl smooth over his raw emotions. It was like music to his ears.

“I told you that I am a big admirer of your work,” she continued. “I told you that I am a sculptor. I specialize in wax figures. Anyway, we talked about our goals as artists, to make our work appear as realistic as possible. You, with your beautiful landscapes, and me with my wax statues. As we talked, we discovered that we actually lived in the same apartment complex on Eighteenth Street, and so we arranged a dinner date for the following evening. I was really looking forward to it. When you didn’t knock on my door at 7:00 p.m. as planned, I began to worry. And so I went to your door, and knocked, but there was no answer. Naturally, the door was locked. I don’t know, you didn’t seem like the type of guy who would stand me up, and I guess my intuition told me that something was terribly wrong. I had the building apartment manager open your door with his master key. And that’s when I found you...” Mahalia’s eyes filled with tears. “I had no idea that you

were so troubled and in that much pain.” She lowered her head and sobbed. Stewart placed a hand on her arm. He was astonished that this beautiful young woman, whom he barely knew, was so concerned about him.

“Hey, don’t cry, Miss Devereaux.”

“Please,” she sniffed, “call me Mahalia.”

“Mahalia...that’s a beautiful name. Call me Stewart. I *am* very grateful to you for saving my life. I just wish I could believe that *I* was actually responsible for trying to end it.”

Mahalia looked at him with amazement. “You mean, you don’t remember?”

“Not a damned thing. I still think there’s some sort of mistake. But I assure you and Doctor Lincoln here that I *will* get to the bottom of this thing.”

Lincoln spoke again, a little impatiently. “Well, Mister Barclay, I’m sure you will want to clean up and dress yourself before we escort you to Wycliff Manor.”

“My clothes...” Stewart began.

“I took the liberty of bringing some fresh clothes from your closet with me,” Mahalia interrupted. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Stewart smiled. “No, not at all.”

Doctor Lincoln and Mahalia left Stewart to shower and shave. It felt good to finally be in clean clothes again. After a breakfast of toast, eggs, and coffee, his first solid meal in nearly a week, Stewart was ready to make the long trip to Wycliff Manor.