

The room was still spinning as I awakened into darkness. The pressure around my head and face suggest I'm blindfolded... or bandaged. One of the two. Either way, I can't see anything but I can tell that the room is brightly lit. I tried to take the bandage off but my hands are cuffed to this...bed? I'm sitting down but...no, I'm laying...

...I'm in a hospital! I tried to get my feet on the ground but they were shackled too. I continued attempting to free my limbs but failed.

"Sir, calm down, please,"

Someone was talking to me. No clue who it is. I don't know that voice or recognize the smell of their perfume. The voice was feminine in tone. Higher than mine, but forceful. Maybe they're in charge here.

"Sir, you need to relax. You have a head injury. You're safe. Please calm down."

Seeing no other real options, I stopped thrashing.

"Thank you, Sir," the voice said.

I turned in the direction I thought the voice was coming from and asked, "What's happening? Where am I? Where did you come from? Where did everyone go?"

The voice chuckled. "You're either really confused or you go by the name Cotton-eyed Joe."

I thought about it momentarily and realized those were song lyrics. "It's Greg, actually."

"Well, okay Greg, If you can hold still for a moment, I'm going to remove this bandage from your face. Is that okay with you?" the voice asked.

I nodded my head and noticed that my neck was sore and I was starting to feel a pain rush from my neck all the way through my skull. Whatever the reason my head is hurting is probably the reason this damn bandage is on my head in the first place. "What happened to me?" I asked as the voice started to unwrap my head like a cat let loose on the toilet paper roll.

"Well, Sir... Greg... I was hoping you could tell us what happened to you."

Us?

The light from the overhead lamp was overwhelming, forcing my face to wince, the sudden jerk of my head aggravating my already sore neck. The voice, seeing my reaction, turned the lamp away from my face. “Oh gosh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think that all the way through, did I? Are you okay? Is this better?” the voice asked.

I opened my eyes bit by bit until they had adjusted enough to the brightness of the room for me to see a face that went along with the voice. She was a slender woman with bright red hair that flowed over her shoulders. She wore light blue scrubs that matched her bright baby-blue eyes, and a field of freckles dotted across her moderately rosy cheeks.

“Yeah,” I eventually worked my mouth to say, “I think so.” I went to move my arms again only to remember that they were cuffed to the railing along the side of the bed. “Is this really necessary?” I asked as I tugged on the cuffs.

The red-headed nurse looked back to a dark corner where I could barely make out the silhouette of a tall man standing against the wall. His body looked box-like, but I think that might be a long coat or jacket. I glanced back up at the nurse who appeared nervous like she was in trouble just because I asked to be let loose. She was even breathing a bit faster.

Only a few seconds passed but noticing how scared the nurse was, it felt like a lifetime. The man in the corner took just a couple of steps forward - enough to get a better idea of his presence, but not enough to really see him. He was taller than I thought, about six-foot-five. I could see black slacks, black dress shoes, and the edge of a white coat. I’d assume he was the doctor. “I think it’s best that we leave the restraints in place,” the doctor said calmly, “We wouldn’t want another,” he paused, seemingly to find just the right word, “incident. You know, like before.” The doctor shifted his square-ish body toward the nurse, which now I can tell are likely muscles. Big stronger-than-me muscles, and continued, “Wouldn’t you agree, Nurse?”

She stared into the darkened corner momentarily before nodding to the doctor and then to me in agreement.

I looked up at the nurse and asked, “What incident? What happened?”

The nurse again turned around to the doctor in the dark corner for an answer, again seemingly nervous as she awaited his answer. “Not just yet,” the doctor declared. I didn’t notice this before but his voice is cold and empty. It borders on sinister, but maybe I’ve watched too many movies. Of course, I did just wake up in a random hospital cuffed and shackled to the bed because of an ‘incident’ I don’t remember.

Maybe ‘sinister’ is the correct word.

“If you’d remember, Sir, you were quite...,” the doctor paused again, looking for a word. The nurse, still anxiously at my bedside, looks like she wants to help him find it, but it appears like she knows not to.

“I don’t remember, Doctor,” I interrupted, “If I did, I wouldn’t be asking you about it and I probably wouldn’t be so bothered by it.” I raised my hands as high as the cuffs would allow in protest.

“That’s for our safety just as much as your own, Sir,” the doctor stated.

I lifted my feet about six inches which is how far the shackles would go. “And this?” I asked.

The nurse chimed in, looking into the shadowy corner to make sure it was okay and back at me, “You kick really hard!” The nurse tugged on the drawstring of her scrub pants and pulled on the waistband to loosen it. “If I may...” she said before lowering the scrub pants around her hip showing off a painful-looking bruise.

“Did I do that?!” I asked. The nurse nodded as she adjusted and re-tied her scrub pants.

“I assume you understand what I mean by ‘our safety’ more clearly, am I right?” the doctor said smugly and even more sinister than before.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I looked over to the nurse’s hip and then back to make eye contact. “I’m sorry, Miss.” The nurse smiled and lightly patted my shoulder. I took this as she accepted the apology.

“Sir, what DO you remember? Do you have any idea where you are or how you got here?” the doctor asked, pausing before asking his last question, I assume for a bit of dramatic flare, “Did anyone see you?”

I dwelled on that last question for much longer than I might have any other day. My memory was foggy. Like London pea soup levels of foggy. Is that a thing? I guess I was thinking very hard and the smoke was coming out of my ears because the nurse looked at me intensely, minus a glance or two to the corner where the doctor was still hiding. I was trying to remember the day before I ended up here and I just could not form a clear image in my head.

“Sir,” the now impatient doctor interjected, “maybe we can help you with your memory, hmm? Do you remember waking up? Do you remember what you did in the morning?”

I’m not sure why but that helped. “The governor,” I said quickly, “the governor on TV.”

“And what was the governor doing on TV?”

“Messing up traffic!”

“Excuse me?”

I paused. A bunch of images and memories were rushing in my head tsunami-style. “Let me try this again.”

The nurse continued to rub my shoulder, this time I assume to relax and for comfort. “Take your time, but I think you’ll want to think quickly,” the nurse looked to the corner again and squeezed my shoulder a bit harder, “you know, before your memory fades.”

That was a message and it was clear as crystal. I’m on the clock and the shadowy sinister-sounding doctor of the dark is keeping time. I took a deep breath and tried to recall the events of my morning. A few more moments passed and the pictures in my head began to clear up. “Okay, I think I got it.”

“Whenever you’re ready, Greg,” said the nurse.

“Yes, Greg,” the doctor added, his voice becoming even more evil-sounding, “please share.”

Yeah, I don’t like him.

“I believe I woke up, took a shower, and made some coffee. I turned the TV on and the news said the governor was coming to town to talk about some bill or something. I don’t really care about all that but I knew that with the road closures around downtown, traffic was going to be ridiculous.”

“That’s a pretty good start, Greg!” the nurse congratulated. “Is there more? What did you do next?”

“I put on my work clothes and work boots and went down to load up my truck.” I turned to face the nurse. “I like to hose down the truck before I leave to make the logo clear and easy to see while I’m out driving. My neighbor told me that it’d be a good business practice. I tend to agree with him. I remember a time...”

“I’m glad to see your memory returning to you in abundance, Sir,” the doctor interrupted, clearly getting angrier, “but it’s imperative that you get on with what happened to you.”

Yeah, I was right. I knew something else was going on with the doctor. My memory is returning and I do remember waking up, taking a shower, making coffee, and seeing the governor on the news, but I made all the truck washing and whatever else up to see how they'd react. The nurse is paying attention and just listening. The doctor in the corner is getting mad. I don't think I can get away with this again.

"Umm... yes, of course."

"You're doing just fine, Greg." the nurse added, her voice as gentle as her grip on my shoulder wasn't. She looked down at me from the bedside and could swear there was literally fire in her eyes. "We just want to," she paused, "better understand your injuries. Please continue. What happened when you left the house?"

"I remember being on the highway leading into downtown. I was scheduled to help some other company with a project and I was angry that the governor's press conference or whatever messed up traffic so damn bad. I was trying to take an earlier exit, hoping that I could drive back roads to the location when this strange white van crashed into me, running me off the road. I just remember seeing a bunch of trees in front of me." The pain in my head returned.

"I woke up and saw..." As the memory returned became overrun with confusion and fear. "When I woke up, I was in the truck, but everyone was gone. The cars, the white van, the people on the side of the road. Everyone.

"I tried to start the truck. The engine was a goner, but the battery still kicked on but no one was on the radio. Not one station I turned to had a person or a song playing. There had been a road crew working and they were gone. Trucks, cones, signs, and all. Everyone was gone."

I looked back at the nurse. She'd removed her hand from my shoulder and covered her mouth. She was looking in the corner. The doctor said nothing, now having stepped back deeper into the corner. I heard what sounded like a chair shifting along the floor. He's sitting now.

"I got out of the truck. I found my cell phone, but there was no service, which I thought was odd. There was always cell service out this way going into downtown. I tried to call my boss, but again, the phone wouldn't connect. Like, it didn't even try.

"I got out and walked for a bit. I must have wandered for a few miles in all. Everything was so empty; so silent. I crossed many roads with no cars. No people. No one crossed the streets, No one walked on the sidewalks. Nothing. I'm not even sure the traffic lights were changing anymore. It was the eeriest thing.

“After a while, I came across a house that sat back away from the street. As I looked for any sign that someone was home, I looked up and I thought I saw someone standing in a window. I couldn’t describe them, but they went back inside and I saw the curtains move.”

The nurse, at this point, is leaning against a counter, panicked or scared or nervous - I’m not sure.

“I ran to the front door,” I continued, “and the door was opened so I went inside. Living room, kitchen, dining room, front yard, backyard - no one there. I saw the stairs and I shouted out for whoever was there, but no one answered.”

“Are you certain you saw someone there?” the doctor asked from the dark.

“Yeah, absolutely. And when I got upstairs, I had something fall or move or something. There was one locked room and that’s where I heard the noise.”

“So someone was upstairs after all? Why didn’t they answer you?” the nurse asked, talking to me but looking towards the doctor’s corner.

“Not sure,” I told the nurse, trying hard not to look toward the doctor, “but I needed answers and I felt like whoever this was had my answers.”

The doctor’s dark and brooding voice crept out of the darkness but didn’t quite make it to my ear. I asked him to repeat himself, cautiously of course, and I could hear him push his chair back and his footsteps as they echoed in the tiny and quiet room. “I said, how do you know it was a person at all? Could have been a raccoon or a dog. You claimed that there were no more people yet there was one all of a sudden. Not to mention you and I are talking now so there must still be people, right?”

My voice and mind fell quiet. I knew there was a person in that window, but the doctor did make a point. Here I am, in this room, talking to two people as I talked about all of humanity just suddenly going away. Had I been dreaming? I felt my mind slip away from what I thought was reality. Are these my memories?

What is happening?

The doctor stepped forward about as far as last time, to the edge of the lit part of the room. “Why don’t you go ahead and finish your story, Mr. Greg.”

I paused, debating if I should finish the story, as ridiculous as the doctor made me seem. Of course, I've also learned that the doctor is accustomed to getting his way, and being that I'm still cuffed and shackled, I wasn't in a position to fight.

I continued, "So, like I said, there was a door. I knocked and knocked and knocked but no one opened. I turned the knob and it was locked. I looked around for a key or something - nothing. I tried to bust the door down like they do on TV—"

"On TV?" the nurse asked.

I unintentionally gave the nurse a blank stare. "You don't watch a lot of movies, you do?"

"I guess not," she answered bashfully.

"Well, it doesn't matter because it didn't work anyway. After that, I walked downstairs and thought that since I didn't see a garage on the house when I came up, maybe there was a basement. Sure enough, I found the basement and went down looking for some sort of tool to break that door—"

I stopped before I could finish the sentence. I remembered what I found in that basement. As I looked around the room, the nurse was back at the bedside breathing heavily; almost in double-time, her eyes locked on me, and her hand was back on my shoulder.

"What did you find in the basement, Mr. Greg?" the doctor asked. He knows what I found. He has been waiting for me to admit this whole time.

I sat up the best I could and looked toward the doctor. "You should let me go now."

The nurse closed her eyes tightly and I could see a tear roll down her face as she turned away from me. She squeezed my shoulder one more time before giving it an apologetic pat. She walked over to the door, opened it, and from the sounds of it, opened a second door before she closed and locked them both, the clicking of the locks echoed louder and louder in my mind as I realized that I was now alone in this room with him.

"Let me go! Now!"

"We both know that won't happen now, don't we?" The doctor finally stepped forward into the light of the room. The black slacks were all covered in dirt and that white coat was spattered with blood. A step or two more and I could see a scarred and mingled face behind a plastic face shield that was red-tinted, clearly not by design.

“Listen, Sir, I don’t really know what I saw down there. I just—”

“You know exactly what you saw down there. The fact that you couldn’t just admit you saw the bodies shows me that you won’t have what it takes to survive the New Way of Life.”

“A new way, what?”

“You missed the boat. You didn’t make it to the bus stop on time and now you’re stuck here.”

I wanted to call this wack-job out for what he was but the clicking sound of the locks filled the room again and the nurse returned, clearly having just cried and regained her composure. She stood by me again. “You missed the Rapture, Greg.” The nurse wiped away a few more tears. “We all missed the Rapture. I’d estimate you were unconscious from your accident for maybe a day, tops. You found my grandmother’s house. She was sick and dying and so my dad and my uncles had this room converted to be more like a hospital room. Justin was also driving when it happened.

“I’m Nikki and that was me you saw in the window. Justin found you in the basement with the others.”

“You killed all those people?” I asked.

“Not all of them and not all on purpose.” Nikki looked over at Justin. “Some of the leftover people were hurt, like Justin,” she paused, “like you. I tried to help them. Justin hit you in the head really hard. He didn’t want you to wake up and freak out so Justin suggested we tie you down.”

“And you just happened to have handcuffs and shackles just lying around?”

The nurse tried to hide her smirk. “No kink-shaming.”

I said nothing.

Justin broke the silence. “This has been fun and all but he needs to die now.” Justin pulled a pistol from his waistband and a silencer from his pocket and began to twist the silencer on the gun.

“Justin!” Nikki yelled, “You’ve killed enough people today!”



“It doesn’t even matter anymore! Nothing does. God is apparently real and we’ve been left behind. What difference does it make?”

“I’m tired of cleaning up the mess!” Nikki replied.

Justin compromised, “Fine, but he dies tomorrow. We have so much work to do.”

Justin left the room leaving me and Nikki alone. “You really wanna kill me?” I asked. “What was the point of all this?”

“I don’t want to kill you, I really don’t. Justin does have a point, though. You weren’t exactly honest and nothing truly matters anymore.” Nikki reached down and pulled out a notebook and a pen and placed it on a table that rolled and came over my lap. “I do still have some compassion so I bought you this notebook and I thought you might wanna write down your last thoughts before tomorrow.” She placed her hand on my shoulder one last time. “I was really hopeful this time.”

Nikki bent down and kissed my forehead. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small key. “Left-handed or right-handed?” I raised my right hand and Nikki unlocked that handcuff. “This should make it easier to write.”

Nikki gathered her things and walked to the door. “I really am sorry about all this. I hope you make your story a good one. I’m looking forward to it.” She opened the door, cut off all but one light, left the room, and locked both doors behind her, leaving me alone.

I looked down at the notebook with the words “Dream Journal” in puffy white letters on the front cover as the reality of my situation fell over me like a steel blanket. With nothing else to do, I started to write this.

The End