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Prologue

As he was running through the dark unlit alleys of Hub City, Barry felt a chill rising up his spine. He was certain he was running for his life, his worst fear right on his tail. When Barry came upon a clearing in the city, shocked by the mere sight, he gasped for air. His lungs filled with the nauseous fumes of the decaying bodies strewn about, ripped apart as if a pack of wild animals had just passed through. Still Barry kept going, for he had to find his friends and make sure they were okay. Advancing through the streets he noticed that he had not come across a single living soul in an otherwise lively city. When he arrived at his dorm, where his friends and girlfriend all lived during the year, Barry entered and shouted “Anyone in here?” to which he received no response.

It was Wednesday afternoon so he thought to himself “They must still be in the rehearsal room at school, practicing our next song.” Before going out, he grabbed his backpack and put his flashlight, short baseball bat and snacks in it. He didn’t completely understand why he needed these but he just felt he would have to use them at some point. Reassuring himself his friends were still okay, he ventured out again in the barren city. Between setting off from the dorm and arriving at school, he still hadn’t

come across a single living soul. The only sight he had been greeted with the entire time were dead bodies ripped apart, their guts and blood splattered around. The only way he could keep going was because he convinced himself it wasn't real, just like the infernal wolf he used to see in the dark as a child.

Finally he arrived at school and entered the premises. Upon reaching the courtyard, he saw It. His heart instantly skipped a beat by what he encountered. His friends hung up in the air like dolls on a string. Except they didn't hang from a rope or pole but seemingly seemed to float mid-air. When he slowly closed in on his friends he could kind of make out small black shadows swirling around them. These shadows seemed to keep his friends in the air, holding them in a T-pose. Barry still couldn't fathom what he was witnessing, it was like a scene from a paranormal horror movie. He tried to pull his friends down, but he could not move them even an inch. They were stuck, hung up like martyrs nailed on a cross. It was only then Barry noticed his girlfriend wasn't hanging there. He jolted away, searching frantically for his loved one, hoping she hadn't met the same fate. Tears began to swell up in Barry's eyes at the mere thought of his girlfriend dead like the rest. "This can't be happening, not to me, not in real life!", Barry said to himself.

He ran to the end of the building where the rehearsal space was. He busted through the door and froze. Shocked by what he saw. A being that could only be described as an otherworldly entity, floated in the middle of the room. Seemingly made up entirely from the same swirling shadows keeping his friends in place, the entity had a humanoid appearance. Its six arms seemed to be cradling something, Barry couldn't quite make out exactly what it was until he circled around the being. It wasn't cradling something, It was holding his girlfriend whilst extracting her blood! Barry instinctively reached for his baseball bat and took a swing at the being. His bat went straight through the entity as though there was nothing there. Alice opened her eyes, saw Barry swinging like a madman with tears rolling off his cheeks and muttered "Run, my love. Run away while you still can, I'm done for."

Barry fell and looked up at her, thinking that this was the last he would ever see of her. At that moment the being stopped draining her of her blood and turned its head towards Barry. He could feel its gaze go straight through him. It looked at him with bright purple eyes while the shadows' halo seemingly began to spin faster above its head. "Go, run! Now!" Alice screamed with all the strength she had left before passing out. Barry sprung up on his feet and ran towards the door. He heard a high buzzing sound behind him, coming closer at high speed. He looked back and saw

that the being had turned towards him, letting go of Alice and launched the halo as a projectile. The halo sliced through Barry's left arm that reached for the door handle. Blood spurted out, coating the door in a thick deep crimson color. Barry screamed out of pain but kept running, fearing for his life.

Right from the start he had a feeling it would've turned out this way, but ignored the signs because he was said to do so. The being pursued him, slowly drifting behind him while spinning up its halo again. Barry ran for what seemed like eternity and felt he wasn't moving anymore, but stuck in the same place. He looked down and saw that he was floating a few inches above the ground and suddenly couldn't move at all. It felt like a crushing force of gravity all around him keeping him in place. He was turned around to face the entity, which had stretched all its six arms out wide now. Barry started screaming out of pure terror, screaming for his life, not wanting to die. He heard the halo approaching him, thinking that would be the end of him.

"Barry... Barry... Barry, wake up, bro! You're gonna miss our stop."
Monty said. Barry opened his eyes and was back on the bus, returning from his museum trip with Monty.

Chapter 1: Dreams

“Coming!” Barry shouted as he gathered his backpack and spurted towards the door. “God, did I sleep the entire way back?” “Yeah you did. We were barely past the second stop when you started snoring.” Monty said laughingly. “Why didn’t you wake me up any sooner or even keep me from falling asleep at all for that matter?”

“Because I figured you needed the rest. It was a busy day after all. Besides, it was a pretty funny sight seeing you completely KO so I took some pictures. Wanna see them?” Monty joked at Barry, he knew what the type of reaction from Barry would be.

“Oh no, you didn’t. How many times do I have to tell you not to take pictures of me without my consent? You have to delete those right away, man.” Monty smiled at Barry. He got the reaction he hoped for, both of them love it to get the other worked up over nothing. “Oh you bastard, you’re just toying with me, aren’t ya?”

They walked to the dorm, continuing to tell jokes to each other and talk about their plans for the evening. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow at band practice. Later Monty.”

At the dorm Barry went to his room to unload his backpack and headed to the showers. There was no one in the bathroom, which was to be expected this late in the evening. It was a simple, blue-tiled bathroom that was shared for the entire wing of the dorm. There were two sinks, a shower and bath separated by a pane of matt glass. Barry locked the door, undressed and went into the shower. All of a sudden, Barry heard a ticking noise coming from the window. He looked out the shower and saw nothing. He shrugged it off, thinking it was his imagination. Then again came the ticking noise, three ticks against the window. Barry looked again, saw nothing and said “Monty, is that you? This ticking gets annoying really fast you know.” At which Barry got no reply. He finished up in the shower, dried himself off and went back to his room. Barry was exhausted from walking around all day, going from one war museum to the other. So he decided to go directly to bed. Unlike other days, it didn’t take him long to fall asleep that night. He drifted away into his sleep, and had vivid dreams that night.

Barry found himself going to a concert together with Alice. A couple of local metal bands were performing just outside of town in a pub which neither of them had ever been to. The pub itself wasn’t all that large and was decorated in a modern industrial setting. The brick walls were bare and the metal support beams visible. The stage was nicely decorated for

the event. Mic stands fitted with skulls, a shared drum kit for the bands to use and a LED backdrop to show their album cover on. Barry and Alice had a great time at the concert going with the flow of the music. The bands weren't that great on their own, but they cared for their audience and kept the mood going. After the last set of the evening and everyone started leaving, Barry and Alice did the same. They finished their drinks and headed towards the exit.

Because Alice is bound to her wheelchair, entering and leaving a venue can be quite cumbersome at times. This occasion was no exception. The exit door was one step up and swung open inwards and closed automatically. This made it really hard for Barry to keep the door open and push Alice through to go outside. While he struggled with the door and Alice's wheelchair, Barry noticed two jocks laughing among each other whilst one of them held his phone up. It seemed as he was filming Barry struggling with the door.

"If you guys have the time to film me struggling and laughing about it, you could also find the time to help me out here and at least do one good deed in your miserable lives." Barry grunted. One of the jocks answered "Nah, we'd much rather see you struggle so we can share the video amongst our friends. Something you probably don't have, seeing what

you've been hauling around all evening.” This was a sensitive matter for Barry. He detests anyone who makes fun of Alice because of her condition. His reply mirrored his feelings “I guess I should have known better than to ask for help from a bunch of blithering idiots with sawdust for brains.”

“You know what little man, if you ever get outside with that lump of meat in a stroller then you'll feel what these 'idiots' can do to you.” The jocks couldn't cope with a verbal assault and resorted to violent threats. Barry shrugged it off and let them go through the exit before him. After some time, and help from the pub's staff, he managed to exit the venue and was off towards the car so they could head home.

The jocks went through with their threats and were waiting for Barry just outside the pub. Barry set Alice aside and whispered to her “Don't be afraid. I'll probably take some hits, but I'm sure I will beat them.” Barry confronted the jocks and said in his most confident voice “So, what have the two monkeys planned for entertainment? Juggling act? Oh I know, how about you two go fuck each other in the back alley and just let me pass. Then we'll forget about this day and leave it at that.”

“Did you hear that George? The little man acts tough but is actually afraid. Let's make him taste some fear.” “And just how are you numbnuts

planning to -” Barry’s words were cut short as the biggest of the two grabbed him by his neck and lifted him up off the ground. “Like this!” the shorter one yelled as he punched Barry twice in the face and gave him a hard stomp to the ribs. Barry looked at both of them and calmly went “If that’s it, I’d like to point out a major fault in your idea of letting someone taste fear. My legs are still free.” after which Barry kicked the one who held him right in the nuts as hard as he could. The man let Barry go and grabbed his groin as he fell to the ground. In a matter of seconds, he had mustered the strength and agility to topple the second man down to the ground and found himself on top of him. His legs held the man’s arms in place and sat on his chest. Barry smiled as he looked at how defenseless his enemy had become, completely at his mercy. He caressed the man’s cheek, lay his hand on his temple and said “I’ve always wondered how this would feel in my hands.” as he put his thumb over the man’s eye and pushed as hard as he could until it popped. Blood and other fluids spurted out while the man screamed his lungs out. All Barry could feel was the eerie smile on his face whilst the deed was done. His emotions weren’t present anymore at that point. The moment he looked up, he saw the other man pointing a gun at him. Barry heard a bang and found himself awake on the ground beside his bed drenched in sweat.

“Fuck... Not another dream turning into a nightmare.” sighed Barry. It was only 2 o’clock at night. Too early to stay awake and start his day, but he needed to clean himself up. So he went to the bathroom to freshen himself up and get ready to return to bed. While he was cleaning himself, Barry heard a noise down the hall of the dorm. The last thing he’d expect was anyone else to be awake at this hour. Footsteps came closer towards the bathroom followed by two knocks on the door. “Who is it?” Barry quietly asked. No answer, so Barry asked again. A little bit louder this time. Still no response. He opened the door to see who was knocking, but there was no one to be seen. Barry shrugged it off thinking it was one of the other dorm residents who thought it was funny to play a prank. He finished up and headed back to his room so he could get some more sleep.

Barry lay wide awake in his bed and found it troublesome to fall asleep again. He worried about his dream and what it could possibly mean. Will his anger break free again in the future or was it just a representation of his worries about himself? He picked up his phone and began to scroll through memes in hope of letting go of his worries for now.

Eventually, Barry managed to fall asleep again. This time without one of those awful dreams that haunt him from time to time.

When morning came and he woke from his sleep, he stood up and began his day. It was a pleasant and calm Sunday during spring break. The sun was shining, making it a nice and warm day. He went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and get dressed. Along the hallway he bumped into Eva who had just finished her bathroom routine. She was, along with Alice, one of the rare types of women who didn't take ages getting ready in the bathroom. "Mornin' Barry. I'm just on my way to Alice to help her get dressed." She said in her quirky way. "Hi Eva, thanks for helping Alice out so much. I appreciate it a lot. Are you taking her somewhere today?" Barry asked, still half asleep. "You haven't forgotten the four of us are going to the fair this evening have you? We even agreed to go eat some pasta before going there."

"No, how could I forget something important like that...". Barry actually had forgotten they were going to the fair this evening. Monty didn't mention it either the day before so it was safe to assume he had also forgotten. "We have a reservation at six right? And afterwards we'll go to the fair." "Exactly. You make sure both Monty and you are ready by then. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd forgotten as well." she answered, a bit irritated by our forgetfulness. "I'll get him here on time so we can all go out together. No worries."

Barry headed to the bathroom to get himself ready for the day, like he originally planned to. The morning went as usual. He ate his breakfast, watched an episode of his favorite tv show and practiced his guitar playing. Just before noon, Monty already arrived at the dorm. He was carrying his on-the-go barbecue and two pieces of spareribs. Barry instantly knew what he was up to. An afternoon barbecue together with the girls to make up for the fact they both had forgotten what they had planned for the day. “Hi Barry, do you guess this could make up for our stupidity?” Barry shrugged his shoulders because you never knew with those two. They could either be forgiving about it or hold it against them. “Let’s just go to them and see how it goes.”

Monty and Barry first got a scolding from their girlfriends for forgetting what they’d planned for the day, but forgave them for trying to make it up. They did try to make it up so they got points for trying. They lit up the barbecue outside and cooked the ribs while they all had a drink. Except for Barry of course, because he reacts very badly to any amount of alcohol. The loss of self control makes Barry angry and easily triggered. But they had fun anyway, just like they always had when the four of them were together. They ate ribs, played some tabletop games and cleaned the barbecue. They had to pass the time until the evening after all. But dawn

came quickly and before they knew it, it was already time to go eat out at the Italian restaurant.

It was a true authentic Italian restaurant. Small and cozy with a lot of warm, wooden accents. The tables were dressed with the typical red and white tablecloths and there stood cheese graters on every table. They sat down at their reserved table and ordered their food. They all had a different pasta dish. Monty had a carbonara, Eva wanted a napolitana, Alice ate a regular pasta puttanesca and Barry had an arrabiata. They only had a small dish because they were still a bit stuffed from the ribs that afternoon. “Monty, it was really nice to bring those ribs, but man did I eat too much already today.”, said Barry while scooping up the last of his pasta. “And don’t forget what awaits us at the fair. We’re not going to let traditions fade because we’re a bit full are we?” Monty replied. “Oh God right. There are oliebollen with our name on them waiting for us. We will have them, just give me enough time to let this pasta settle a little.”. They finished up their food, paid the bill and went out to the fair.

Chapter 2: The Night Out

It was a pretty generic fair, so it seemed. The entrance was adorned in the house style of the park with lots of greenery used in the logo. The park itself wasn't all that big, but they used every square centimeter to its utmost limit so it seemed bigger than it actually was. There were a lot of people at the fair since it was their opening weekend. Which caused long waiting queues at almost every attraction. Barry didn't like the amount of people present. It made him uneasy, his anxiety for the unknown playing a big part in it. But because he was together with his friends, Barry managed to keep a level head and focus as much as he could on the four of them. It was comforting to him to have something close to home with him.

“Ooh! The digital fortune teller is already working. Let's go try it out, it seems there's not a lot of people over there.” Eva gleefully said to everyone. “Come on, Eve. You know that fortune teller thing is just a load of bullshit, right?” Monty had never believed in a set fortune or destiny for that matter. “Bullshit or not, the answers coming from fortune tellers are really funny most of the time.” Eva said while pulling Monty along. Barry had no choice but to follow, so he pushed Alice's wheelchair forward following his friends. “I'm curious what that fortune teller is

going to say about me.” Alice said. “I reckon it’s going to say you’ll be with me forever and ever. That or something really vague like, you will feel a sense of distress in the near future.” Barry replied. They arrived at the fortune teller machine and Eva went first. She inserted a coin into the machine and laid her hands on the panel. The display showcased a plethora of abstract images resembling a loading screen of a game. Then the message showed. ‘Good luck awaits you in the near future. Coins will fall at your feet in plenty.’ “Seems like we’ve got ourselves a future millionaire at our hands, lads!” Monty joked. “It didn’t say what type of coins she’ll get. It could be those edible chocolate coins for all that matters.” Barry said. “You always want to see the negative in everything, don’t you Barry.” “I’m sorry, Alice. It’s just what came to mind, and you know I blurt those things out too quickly. But anyways, Monty you’re next.”

Monty stepped up to the machine and inserted the coin. His message read ‘One gun will miss, but the other will shoot straight and hit its target without fail.’ “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” said Monty in an annoyed voice. “I guess today’s not a good day to go to the shooting gallery for you. But perhaps tomorrow it’ll go better in your computer games?” Eva said to Monty, hoping he wouldn’t complain all evening about the fortune teller. Next up was Alice. Barry set her close to the

machine so she could reach the panel. He inserted the coin for her while she laid her hands on the panel. The machine took a little longer than for the others. Eventually, the message appeared on the display. ‘A strong mind is necessary for the time to come. Good luck awaits you at the end.’ “It couldn’t be more vague, can it, Barry?” “Well, the message is within expectations I guess. Don’t think too much of it, these things just blurt out random things that could make sense. Let’s see what nonsense it will give me.” And so Barry too, put in a coin, placed his hands on the panel and waited for the messages. The machine took nearly as long as it did for Alice and even froze a few times before spitting out the message. ‘Forked is your path. The choices you make will define many futures. Live with the consequences or let it all go when the time is right.’ The message had an eerie truth to it, although he didn’t know why. “See, I told you it would be nonsense.” Barry tried to laugh the eerie feeling away and wanted to forget it as fast as he could. “Let’s just go to the coin pusher and to the shooting gallery afterwards. Maybe after that we’ll get hungry again and can go for some oliebollen.” They all agreed and went to Luna Park to play some coin pushers.

While they were playing, the message kept repeating in Barry’s mind. Especially the ‘live with the consequences’ part. Ever since he was a child he had an irrational fear of a dormant evil side inside him that would fuck

him over. Back then he had an outburst of rage he couldn't control. Years of being bullied pushed him enough to get him over the edge. He'd managed to get hold of his bully and smack his head repeatedly against a metal staircase. That bully probably wouldn't be alive today if it wasn't for the teachers' intervention. Because the bully spent three weeks in a coma because of what happened back then, Barry was sent to an asylum for three months. Barry shook his head and tried to focus again on the coin pusher. He didn't want to remember those times, certainly not now when he's out with his friends.

"Don't space out so much Barry, I'm really starting to think you haven't got much brain left in that head of yours." Barry jumped up when Monty was suddenly behind him. "And a bad conscience as well, so it would seem. Do we have to believe your fortune message?" he said.

"What? No, of course not. That shit is all fake and you should know it most of all. I just didn't expect you to be right next to me, that's all."

"Fine, fine. I'm just messing with you bro. Let's finish up here so we can go to the shooting gallery. There are some chalk sticks with my name on them." Barry looked at his amount of coins he still had left. Almost half his basket was still full. He looked over to Alice and Eva and saw they were about three quarters of the way in. Barry decided to give the rest of his coins to the girls, so he and Monty could go to the shooting gallery.

They would only be watching as they didn't like holding those guns. It gave them a dirty feeling as they were both opposed to violence. "You know what, let me give the rest of these coins to Alice and Eva. We can go ahead to the shooting gallery and they can finish up here. They don't like shooting anyways." Before Monty could even answer, Barry turned to Alice and said "Hey love, can I give my coins to you and Eva so Monty and I can go ahead to the shooting gallery?" "Sure sweetie, you know we don't mind. Go ahead and have fun. That's why we're here anyway." Barry gave his coins to Alice so she could divide it between Eva and herself. He gave her a kiss, caressed her cheek and set off with Monty to the gallery.

On the way there, Barry kept feeling like someone was deliberately following them through the streets of the park. Monty noticed he kept looking around and behind him and tried to calm him down. "Chill bro, everyone here's just minding their own business and is trying to have fun. So should you. Besides, you have a big and strong friend with you. Nothing bad's going to happen." Monty said to try and soothe Barry's anxiety. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I should take my mind off of it. We're going to have fun and shoot some sticks off the wall!"

After a short walk beside the blacksmithed fences blocking off the inner garden, they arrived at the shooting range. As per usual they went for the largest amount of bullets available and divided it between them. They always did it this way because they would receive more bullets per coin if they went for the maximum amount. Both of them paid half of the amount due and received their bullets. They each took the gun laying before them and loaded it up. Agreeing on which stick they'd start and what direction they'd follow the sticks, they aimed for their respective targets. Barry found his focus again and rarely missed his targets. Monty on the other hand couldn't for the life of him manage to hit his targets. Three out of four shots missed the sticks and hit the wall behind it. By the time they were almost finished, Alice and Eva returned, each with a teddy bear in hand that they won with the coin pushers.

"I've had it with this for today. These guns aren't tuned right. I've already tried three different ones and can't seem to aim at all today." Monty grunted. "You'll get better luck next time, honey. Today just isn't your day." Eva said to him. Barry finished his last bullets and laid down his gun. He chose a larger bear for Alice to add to the collection. During the years it had become a tradition to always pick bears as a prize on fairs and collect them. Barry returned to the group with a life size teddy bear of a French bulldog and gave it to Alice. She was thrilled with this one. She

didn't have a teddy bear or a dog yet. She kissed Barry out of sheer happiness and smiled at him. Figuring it was still a bit too early for food, they went for the rollercoaster. And then, tight as he was about to take the handles of Alice's wheelchair, he was sure he saw something. Bright purple eyes on a shadowy black face peering at him from a distance. It seemed that it stood behind a pair of shrubs, covering most of it. It had been years since he saw something similar. He felt a chill go through him, right down to his bones. He looked again in the same direction, but the eyes looking at him were gone. Did he really see them or was it just a figment of his mind like previous times? "Did you see something bro?" "Thought I saw someone I know, but it wasn't them. Let's just carry on to the coaster." Barry didn't want to tell them what he saw, or thought he saw. They wouldn't believe him anyway, who would believe someone claiming to have seen purple eyes on a shadow face staring right at them. He turned his back to where he saw the eyes, grabbed hold of Alice's wheelchair and went towards the rollercoaster.

The line was long, but it didn't matter. They all wanted to ride the new coaster so they figured it was worth the wait. The entire coaster was themed in Chinese folklore including the annoying music playing in the background. The carts themselves even resembled a Chinese Azure dragon. They moved along the line until an employee saw them and

called for them. “Hey, miss in the wheelchair. Come over, you have a right to access the coaster right away!” They were surprised the man called for them to come, but didn’t hesitate for one second and went to the employee entrance. The man let all four of them in and set them on the side of the coaster entrance. “When the ride comes back, I need you four to sit in the last two carts, okay? It’s for safety reasons.” The employee looked at all of them to make sure they understood. “Understood, sir. We’ll take a seat in the last two carts.” Barry answered.

After a couple of minutes, the carts came rolling down the track and stopped at the station. When the people had exited the carts, the four of them took their place in the last ones. Eva and Monty took the dragon’s fiery tail while Barry and Alice took the one in front of them. The safety bar of the cart came down and locked them into place, ready to take off. The other people took their seats and locked their bar into place. The employees did a routine check to make sure the bars were firmly in place and gave the green light to start the ride.

The chains began rustling against the gears and pulled the coaster up the track. They couldn’t see where the track started to go down because they were at the back, but also because it was already dark and the coaster was barely lit. This gave the ride a scary sensation. Barry loved to take in the

view on high places and when the coaster came at its highest point just before dropping off, he looked around to take in the full view of the fair. It was a gorgeous sight. The lights of the fair against the dark sky twinkled like little stars. He could even make out people walking in the park in the distance. But before he had the chance to take it all in, the coaster sped up and started its descent. There he saw the strange figure again, its bright purple eyes following his cart very carefully from behind the blacksmithed fences. Barry immediately froze and locked eyes with the shadowy figure. It looked like it wasn't from this world. As soon as he locked eyes, the ride had passed on to the next bit of track, letting the figure disappear out of view. No one else seemed to notice the figure on the side, watching them. Monty and Eva were too busy screaming and Alice had her eyes closed. Barry sat motionless in the cart, a blank expression on his face. He didn't know what to think of it, but the image was stuck on his retina. He had a feeling it wasn't something in his head. He saw it too clear for that. The ride went on along its track and ended back in the station. They exited the cart and helped Alice step back into her wheelchair.

“I know you don't scream on a coaster, Barry. But you were extremely quiet. Almost as if a doll was sitting in your seat. Didn't you enjoy the ride?” Monty asked. “Of course I enjoyed the ride. I had a great view just