

"It started with them clowns," I say. "I've had a lot of time to think about it lately, clearly. And I really honestly do believe it started with them clowns."

The room looks almost like a therapist's office at first glance, subtle differences disrupting that illusion: chairs that are not quite comfortable, overly bright lights humming in the popcorn ceiling, the temperature and staleness to the air, the cobwebs... There are details, if you look close enough, details that would give one the impression this were some kind of TV set perhaps, designed by someone who'd never seen a therapist.

I shuffle my feet beneath me on the little rug that has been placed between myself and The Doctor. Her ankles are crossed before her, framing her pretty beige heels. She is at ease. She does this every day. Maybe multiple times a day? I wonder whether her patients are always men. Do the others treat her as well as I do? Are they polite and gentlemanly, or do they drool, and sweat, and squirm in their desire to have some of that prettiness just brush up against them.

"Clowns," she parrots. "Can you explain that in more depth for me, John?"

"Well, see, I had them in my nursery. All over the walls. I grew up in Texas, in a farmhouse, and I was born in the seventies. How old are you, Doctor? Your mother probably didn't decorate your nursery with clowns. You were probably a child of the nineties. Either way, it disturbed me deeply. There was always this one bust of a clown, framed, on the wall, just behind my crib, and it would watch me. *He's watchin' over you*, is what my mamma would say." I shift my feet again. At least this chair has a little padding. People don't ever think about their chairs being padded until they ain't. "I didn't feel watched over. Just felt watched."

The Doctor nods her small head, which is pleasantly shaped and might fit well in the palm of my hand, her blond hair soft against my skin. When's the last time I felt something soft?

I expected a man when they told me I'd be speaking with someone. I just imagined days and days of evaluations should then be evaluated by someone old, and wise, and withered, who didn't have nothing better to do than sit in this windowless room. But I suppose I shouldn't complain about having to look at a face as pink and soft as a doll's, and talk about my problems for a few hours. Isn't that what it would have been like to be married?

"You say you were disturbed. Yet you were in a crib? These seem like pretty early memories. But you would say they're affecting your decision making today?"

"Yes, I suppose they're early memories. But I've always had a sharp memory, see. I don't let many things slip past this old noggin." I tap my temple. "But they got a clown to come to my birthday party when I was three or four, and I'd say that's a decent time to start storing some memories. I cried the whole damn day."

"What exactly do you find so unsettling about clowns, John?"

"I don't like the way you can't see their faces. You don't even really know how big they are, 'cause of the costumes and all that padding. You don't know nothing about who's really in there besides that they're hiding for some reason."

"A dangerous reason? A bad reason?"

"Has to be. What else would cause a grown man to dress up like a fool and go to kiddies parties? Must be some twisted mind in there, likes watchin' little boys and girls running around, all sticky with icing."

We both pause, looking at each other as if we've never seen the other before. Then The Doctor continues.

"Okay, so you think all this began because of your fear of clowns. But can you explain to me how that connects with what happened? Can you directly connect your fear of clowns to the decision you made that brought us here today?"

I pause. Didn't I just do that? Maybe she is scared - not even paying attention she's so frightened of me.

"I mean, isn't it obvious? It's the faces? The hiding."

"So when you saw all those people wearing masks, you thought, surely they must have bad intentions?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean, I ain't delusional, Doctor. I understand why they were wearing masks."

"Do you?"

I don't like her tone. She thinks I'm thick. Which is it, Doc? Are you scared of me or am I dimwitted?

"Indeed I do. The Virus."

"But why do you think all those people chose to wear masks, John?"

"Government orders. State law was that we mask up."

"But you didn't want to follow those orders, did you?"

"Well, I didn't want no little kids being scared of me, in the way I was scared of clowns. You're a pretty young thing, Doctor. But I'm a man. A man's man, and an old one at that. And I'm big, too. I could snap a little thing like you into bits if I wanted to. If a man like me wears a mask I might rightly terrify some people."

"So you *don't* want people to be afraid of you, John?" She is skeptical.

The heat begins to rise to the back of my neck. "Of course I don't." So this is her role; to cut men like me down, and grind us to nothing. Must be a feminist or some bullshit. But I ain't about to play into her little tricks.

"Do you think people were afraid when you did what you did?"

I pause. I don't like the way she's turning my words around. This doesn't feel fair. It feels like a setup.

"I think I was scared when all those people came at me. All those security guards and cashiers and shoppers with their phones out... Tryin' to make me look like some belligerent freak. Tryin' to make me look bad."

"John," she takes a deep breath. "Can you tell me an alternative outcome for that day? Can you think of a different direction your life could have taken, had you made a different decision?"

"There are millions of decisions one makes every day, Doctor. It'd be too big for the human brain to imagine all those paths off every decision, snaking out like roots upon roots." I feel she's goading me - trying to get me to say something specific, but I won't. So what if she went to college? So what if she's doin well for herself? I ain't scum and I won't be treated like scum - not by a young female, especially. She needs to learn some respect.

"How tall are you, John?"

"Six foot, four inches."

"And how much do you weigh?"

"Three hundred and 47 pounds, last they checked. But that's goin' down by the day."

She nods. "An intimidating man. A man who might scare someone, as you said."

I'm torn. She's right, but I still feel like she's using flattery to coax me into a tight, dark trap I won't see before it's too late.

"Let me ask you this, John. What do you think might have happened if you'd put a mask on that day? If you'd just worn one, and gone to the grocery store like anyone else?"

"I already told you. People would have been afraid of me. I think they would have screamed, and little babies would have cried to see a man so large in a mask coming up on 'em."

"And the fact that everyone else was wearing a mask - the fact that it was the law at the time - that wouldn't have changed your mind?"

I scratch my beard, which is rough and longer than I like it. "I didn't know that everyone else was wearing masks. I hadn't gone to the store yet - hadn't gone out yet."

"Gone out as in left your house? Since when?"

I think. "I guess it had been around... four months."

"Four months since you went to a shop?"

"Four months since I stepped outside of my house. Four months since I checked the mail..."

"Four months since you checked the mail... So you weren't even driving? You weren't working?"

I shift in my seat, my neck hot at the back. "Don't think of me like some kind of invalid, Doctor. I was fine. Just wanting to keep everybody safe, is all."

"If you wanted to keep everyone safe, shouldn't you have worn a mask?"

"It's not that simple."

"So let's talk about why you had a gun that day."

I pause. She doesn't understand at all. I've connected the dots for her perfectly, all lined up like in a goddamned children's activity book.

"I've explained this," I sigh. "It had been four months since I'd even checked my mail... I wasn't sure what state the world was in. I didn't know if I'd be driving into riots or angry mobs - didn't know what to expect."

"Had you seen any news programs?"

"Course. That's why I thought maybe there'd be trouble."

She nods, but she doesn't understand.

I'm done. I want to go back to my cell now. I want to go lie down for awhile. This bitch is a waste of my time and energy. I'd rather just stare at those walls for awhile and rest, alone with my thoughts. I go to stand suddenly, the shackles on my feet jangling, my wrists jerking me backwards. I forget I am chained to the chair and floor.

The motion of my attempt causes The Doctor to jerk back, her pale eyes large and dilated. I pause for a moment, then smile, slowly.

"See?" I tell her. "When those people came at me... I had no choice but to do what I done. They were afraid of me, like you are now. They would have slaughtered me then and there."

Her brow lowers and sets. "Even the young mother, John? And her child in her shopping cart?" Her voice is steady as a surgeon's hand, and soft, dripping into my ears like thick oil.

I feel my jaw clench - my teeth fit together tightly. I ball my huge hands into fists. The heat on the back of my neck has migrated to the frontside now, and up into my cheeks. I meet The Doctor's eyes.

"Call the guard. We're done here."

She stands and walks gingerly to the door, her panty-line visible, riding up high in her beige slacks. She opens the door and tells the man outside she'll be gathering her things now. She returns for her briefcase, refusing to look at me. I must have scared her pretty bad.

"Maybe you'll see someone just like me one day," I tell her, my voice low and soft. "Someone big, and scary, and capable of doing bad things to you. Maybe he'll be wearing a mask. Maybe you'll see then... see why I had to do it. Maybe "