

1 LIFE IN HELL

I could see the lights in the drop ceiling pass overhead as they rolled me down the hallways of the hospital. Since they'd moved the electroshock treatment lab to a different floor, I had learned the new route by counting the fluorescent lights overhead. Being strapped to a gurney at seven points (head, shoulders, torso, waist, wrists, knees, and ankles) didn't provide me with the opportunity to do much sightseeing, but I knew the drill. They'd give me the brown pill, and I'd fall asleep, and wake up later strapped down to the gurney, with a nurse monitoring my vitals. Once I was awake, the door to my private, padded room would open, and I'd start counting. Nine lights, then a left turn, and thirteen more lights before we got on the elevator. Three dings later, it was seven lights before a right turn was made, then three more and we were at the lab, where my nursing staff left me in Dr. Chapman's capable hands.

Once I heard the 'click' of the magnetic door lock, I let out a long, slow breath. I did this every time, once I realized that I had been holding my breath since we got off the elevator. The room smelled of ceramic tiles, rubbing alcohol, and ozone, and the temperature in there was at least twenty degrees cooler than it was in the rest of the building. Cutting my eyes left and right, I saw Dr. Chapman's shoulder just barely in my field of vision.

"Good morning, Doctor." I said calmly. Seemed like I was always calm, but I knew that didn't matter.

"Good morning Marty," Dr. Chapman said, loosening the strap across my forehead. "Feeling alright today?" he asked, as he loosened the strap around my shoulders.

"Yes, sir. Just fine, thank you." He continued down the gurney, loosening, but not releasing, the straps that had held me completely immobile. This was his usual routine, but today, I had planned to throw a wrench into it by doing something I'd never done before. I was going to ask him a question.

"Doctor Chapman?" I said inquisitively. "Why do they always strap me down?"

The doctor stopped his work, and just slightly re-tightened the bindings on my ankles. Walking slowly back up into my field of vision, he looked me right in the eyes and answered, "It's part of your protocol, Marty. It's for your protection."

Now that I could move my head a little, I looked to the left of the room, and saw the usual guard, standing where he always had stood, each and every day for a god's age.

"But, why have a guard, Sir?" I further prodded. "Have I ever hurt anyone?"

Doctor Chapman's emotions overtook his calm facade just for a moment, but he quickly refocused himself. "Only yourself, Martin. No one else that we know of."

"Then, respectfully, if I only hurt myself, why are you all so afraid of me?"

The white-haired, bespectacled man let out a slow sigh as he turned away, and went back to undoing my ankle straps. Turned away from me, he shakily answered, "We've seen what you've done to yourself, Martin; we can't take the chance you'd do that to anyone else."

As Doctor Chapman loosed the ankle straps again, he moved to the foot of the gurney, and placed his hand on a handle that was just below my feet. "Are you ready, Marty?" he asked. I nodded a little and grunted a quiet, 'um-hm', and he moved the handle parallel to the gurney frame, releasing the straps all at once. The faux leather of each one was sucked up into a spring-loaded roll on the right side of me, and the receiving ends on the left did the same. Sitting up slowly, I felt a little light headed, and Doctor Chapman stepped up to lend me a steady hand. I noticed the guard had level his rifle at me.

“He won’t shoot unless you make a move to harm either of us, Martin.” Dr. Chapman said, helping me to my feet. “And if he did shoot, it’s just a tranquilizer dart; no one here is trying to hurt you.”

Raising my hands up to my recently shaved head, I danced my fingers lightly across the scars where they had opened my skull, implanted electrodes, and roughly sewn my noggin back up. It felt like a little mountain range had grown on my scalp, with peaks and valleys left behind not by wind and rain, but by the sutures that had closed up the deep gashes that had been made in my skin. Between the sewn-up wounds, the once-smooth flesh had turned to sandpaper as my hair started growing back. Underneath, I could also feel a disconnect in my skull where they had sawed through to get to my obviously broken brain. Finally, my fingers found one of the thirteen electrodes they had implanted in my head, its receiving end jutting through my still-healing flesh.

I gave a sideways smile to the Doctor as I explored the alterations they’d made to my head. “You sure about that, Doc?”

As I stood next to Doctor Chapman, he easily reviewed the top of my head. I was only twelve at the time, and the old Physician had at least a foot and a half on me in height. I could numbly feel as he touched each electrode with a small probe. It didn’t hurt, but it was definitely a weird feeling.

“You look to be healing up quite well, Martin. Once your hair starts to grow back more, these scars won’t even show.” Putting down his probe, he asked, “Are you ready to begin, young man?”

“Yes, Sir” I responded. Doctor Chapman led me into a small, adjacent room with glass walls, and a large device that took up most of the far wall. There was a reclined seat attached to the device, and an indentation above the top of the seat where all the electrodes in my head would be hooked up. As I went to sit, I noticed this chair had straps, too.

Doctor Chapman noticed my gaze, and simply said, “For your safety, remember?”

I nodded, climbing up into the cushy seat, and allowed the doctor to strap me down. This time, at least my head was free, and a small padded arm came up from under the chair to support me at the base of my neck. Carefully, Doctor Chapman attached wires to each electrode, and I could feel an odd tingle behind my teeth. Once he was done attaching my head to the monitoring system, he simply patted me on the shoulder, and said “I’ll be in the next room, watching everything Marty. You needn’t worry about a thing.”

“Yes, Sir” I answered, adding, “Do you think it’s about time, Sir?”

Doctor Chapman looked at his watch and frowned. “Every day, right around ten am; we’ve got a little time. Just sit tight, Marty.” With that, he walked out of the room and into the control room where I could see him through the glass. As expected, large white lights came on, making the room almost painfully bright at first. Now that the room was lit up, I could see several cameras that had been placed around near the ceiling, all pointed towards me, recording everything in detail. I could also see a readout of my brain on a television screen that had been placed just within my eyesight. The scent of ozone grew stronger as the machine attached to my head reached full power, and Doctor Chapman opened the speaker system.

“OK, Marty. Let’s start with you sending signals to the scanner, shall we?” He nodded to himself, and the tingle behind my teeth suddenly stopped. “OK, all the sensors are waiting. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Martin Lannister Richards.”

“And where are you right now, Martin?”

As my ears processed the sounds, I could see the image of my brain lighting up not only where my hearing center was, but also in places where my brain processes language.

“Beacon Point Psychiatric Hospital for Children” I answered. Predicting his next question, I added, “I’ve been here for seven years.”

“Very good, Martin!”, Doctor Chapman responded as he too watched the image of my brain swimming in twinkling colours as various parts of it created my actions.

“When were you born, Martin?”

I had to stop to think. No one had ever celebrated my birthday at Beacon Point. “April 5th, 1958”.

“Do you know why you are here, Marty?”

Looking at the monitor, it was as though I could see my brain searching for information that simply wasn’t to be found, and the cascade of colour and light slowed after a moment as I found an answer.

“I know what I’ve been told, Sir; but I don’t remember.”

“Are you sure you don’t remember, Martin?” Doctor Chapman asked. I could see his hand moving across the control panel, as he switched from scanning my grey matter with all the electrodes, to using them, one at a time, to send small electric pulses deep into areas of my brain. The pattern on the monitor responded in kind, as each area of my brain was stimulated, one segment at a time. When the electricity hit my vision center, the room went all white at first, then slowly images started to come back into view, as though I was looking through a bad photo filter, or a very dirty window. Vision returned to normal as he moved to my hearing. Here, there were no sounds - not even my own heartbeat, which I could feel beating faster in my chest. I tried to yell out ‘stop it’, but no sound left my mouth. I could see my hands trembling, and feel my feet shaking in a struggle against the bindings that kept me in the chair.

And then it all stopped. The lights were back to normal, my body wasn’t shaking, and my heart slowed to its regular pace.

“Marty, do you remember why you are here?” Doctor Chapman asked again.

“No Sir.”

“That’s OK, Martin. We’ll continue with some other input exercises to get the scanner accustomed to your output.” Doctor Chapman replied. “In the meantime, I’m going to cycle through scanning on each of your electrodes, but don’t worry, this will all be low level. You shouldn’t feel a thing.”

I wanted to ask what had just happened, but they already had me convinced I was just a crazy kid. Not only crazy, but a kid that had done unspeakable things to himself. I could feel the tiny impulses cycling through my head as the machine started to ‘get used to me’, but all I could do was wonder what would happen next time. No one had ever seen me hurt myself, though many had been present when the stabbing pains hit my arms. As a small child, I’d cry out in agony, only to be beaten into silence by my father. When I complained about the pain, not even my mother had believed me, until the day that the attack was followed by deep black and blue bruises, and a small trickle of blood running down my left arm.

No, I knew exactly why I was here; they say I'd tried to kill myself. They told me that the untraceable pain had led me to attack my own body, and as a kid, I believed them. At least if I was my own worst enemy, there was some way to describe the regular, piercing torment, and occasional cuts and bruises that suddenly showed up on me. Crazy was a lot easier for a kid to deal with; a lot more real than the demons and devils my grandmother said lived inside me. I was, as they said, just broken. But they said they could fix me. They said they could fix me, and my mom and dad jumped at the chance to believe them. They let me be taken away, to be studied, prodded, and thrown in a padded room with my arms tied safely around my body. They gave me away to yell and scream futilely against an invisible attacker, to lay sobbing in the darkness, swimming in my own filth until daylight finally came.

That was when I was five. When I came to live at Beacon Point.