

Gray Dawn. Chapter One

There are few things in this wide world that are capable of creating a sense of revulsion, dread and disgust as effectively as a Monday morning. The lull and relative tranquility of the weekend is suddenly and violently transformed into a day that is the very antithesis of these concepts. This particular Monday was no different.

The roar of the alarm clock awoke me from my resting place; confused and disoriented I attempted to make sense of my disordered room. Dirty clothes littered the floor, making the room even gloomier than usual.

“Dammit!” I exclaimed as I got up, accidentally stepping on one of the abandoned forks that decorated the floor. I really need to clean this place up, I thought as I half-walked, half-stumbled to the light switch. “Tomorrow, tomorrow...” I mumbled to myself as I walked into the bathroom for my morning shower.

Like many men before me, I have always felt that the greatest place for reflection and meditation is the bathroom. There must be some kind of magic in that white linoleum or maybe in the fresh smell of pine that seems to be present in bathrooms world-wide. Or maybe it is simply that sense of isolation and privacy that only the lavatory can provide; no tweet, e-mail or phone call would ever dare interrupt or disturb a person locked within. In was with this in mind that I took a shower every day, not that I did not care about my personal hygiene mind you, it's just that I have always strived for that one idea. That one concept that is so ahead of its time, so revolutionary and game-changing that it alters the course of history.

As I got out from my shower, unsuccessful yet again in coming up with by genius idea, I surveyed my small and shadowy apartment. The sun had not yet come up allowing the room to remain dimly lit by the eerie glow of my computer monitor. A dry husky smell filled the air, which seemingly gave the air a heavy and inert quality that pressed down on one's body. It may be dirty, grimy and somewhat depressing, but since the very first day I bought this place, it has never ceased to feel like home.

I rapidly went through the rest of my morning routine; checking e-mail, making breakfast and reading the news. When I finally sat down at my desk, ready to work, the sun already hung well overhead my apartment.

I had worked at a local publishing house here in the city; it allowed me to read and write at my leisure and provided me with ample spare time. Although most of the scripts and novels that were e-mailed to me were complete rubbish, some just downright laughable, every now and then a gem or two would find its way to me. It always filled me with immense pleasure whenever I came across one of these. Knowing that you are among the first people to read what should become a bestseller is always a cathartic experience.

That morning I plunged into my inbox with less enthusiasm than usual. Having been robbed of a good **nights** sleep, I felt that my sharp mind was a little dull and most definitely not in the mood to read some amateur's latest attempt at emulating one of the more popular authors. After powering my way through a couple of short stories and an atrocious attempt at a memoir, I gave

up on being productive and started to roam around the internet.

However, this also proved to be unsatisfying to me. I skimmed through news articles about the predicted collapse of the economy, a quick blurb about the latest romantic comedy and other articles that I would usually loathe, yet gobble up just the same, but these did not distract me from my noxious mood.

I could already tell that it was going to be one of those days.

I was trudging through a particularly boorish novel on whether dogs had nightmares regarding humans teaching them tricks for all eternity, when a small knock came from my door. This struck me as odd since, no one really liked me that much. Being disconnected from the world, or rather, being constantly connected to the world through a machine can affect a type of alienation with the rest of society. Tragically, I fear this was my case.

“Hello?” I tentatively asked without opening the door.

“Hello? Carl, is that you? It’s your neighbor, Monica” responded the voice from behind the door.

Monica was one of the few neighbors that I had actually had contact with. She was a young college student at the local university and lived in the apartment across the hall from me. I could never remember what actually she was specializing in, all I had was a vague idea that she in some kind of science, perhaps chemistry? No matter, she was a sweet and intelligent woman but most importantly, she was a good neighbor. She would occasionally stop by to check out the latest book that I was reading and every so often I would lend her a helping hand in one of her courses. Even though I saw her once or twice a month, she was the closest thing I had to a friend.

“Hello Carl, how are you holding up?” Monica asked once I opened the door.

“Same old, same old, Monica. Just surviving.” I responded as she walked into my home. I suddenly became very aware of how ugly and unkempt my apartment must seem to her. Too late to do anything about that, I thought.

“Hey so I was wondering if you could lend me your oven? I have some special baking to do and my oven is a piece of crap, do you mind?”

“Sure thing, go ahead. Is there a special occasion, or are the brownies just for giggles?”

“It’s a special brownie, Carl. Those are always “just for giggles”” she replied, shooting off a giggle of her own.

As Monica started to bake her pot laced cake in my oven, filling my apartment with the distinctive oily smell of marijuana, I made an attempt to make up for weeks of negligence and tidy up my apartment.

“So how is the publishing business going, Carl? Got a lot of future Pulitzer Prize winners lately?”

“I wish! You have no idea how bad I feel for these people that invest enormous amounts of time to punch out 50,000 word novels, only for someone like me to realize it’s crap in the first 100 words, but hey, what can I do, right?”

"I guess you're right, I guess you're right. Although I wish I had the patience to write a novel, no matter how terrible it is. At least I'd have the feeling of having accomplished something for myself, none of this pointless "going to college" stuff. I feel like by the time I'm a doctor, it'll be the end of the world."

"Don't worry, Monica, you'll get there" I reassured her. As much as I loathed to have contact with other people, preferring the anonymous and cold interactions of the internet, I really enjoyed my conversations with Monica. She was smarter than she gave herself credit for and was always interested in having a conversation with me. She had definitely lightened up my day.

"I don't know, Carl, I'm just feeling so flustered with college. I can't shake the feeling that all of this is pointless, you know? Waking up every day, going to school, sitting half-awake in class, all of it! I feel so aimless, you know? I don't know what I want, so I don't work towards anything, I'm just treading water here, Carl."

I always feel awkward when people talk about personal issues such as these, I can't help but think that no matter what I say, I will say the wrong thing. I made a very weak attempt at making her feel better anyway.

"Calm down, Monica. Just take it one day at a time, make every day feel like a victory, ok? That helped me get through college, that and huge amounts of alcohol."

Monica laughed at my response. Out of ridicule or not, I did not know.

"Anyway, all we have to do now is wait for the brownies to finish up in the oven. I'll be back in a couple, ok?" she said, and with that, she was off.

Loneliness made itself present with surprising speed, my bad mood not far behind.

I went back to my PC, my nexus to the outside world. Not much had happened in my absence, yet I still felt that need, that need to consume more and more information. I read article after article of drivel about issues I could not have cared less about, looking for something to fill me up, to satisfy me, all to no avail.

Sometimes I wondered why I still did it. I was addicted to my machine, always on the lookout for some sound bite or articles that would peak my interest and open me up to some new idea or point of view. Yet more often than not I just trudged through an endless amount of text that elicited no reaction. How hopelessly frustrating.

Just as my nerves were reaching their breaking point, Monica appeared once more in my doorway. She seemed much more upbeat, that strange smile of hers crossing her face made her appear so much livelier than before.

"You ready Carl? You up for some pot brownies?" she said with a grin.

"Hell yes, Monica. It's not like I have anything better to do" I replied as she opened the oven and started to cut the brownie in to smaller bite-sized pieces.

"I'm warning you, Carl. I put a lot of "stuff" in it, so be careful. I don't want you getting super high and then falling asleep, ok?"

“Oh **Monica**, just two times that happened! Two!” I shot back with a laugh. Monica apparently had a very high tolerance, which I did not, and every time that we had indulged our sweet tooth I had ended up making even more of an ass out of myself than usual before blacking out.

I reached for the still-warm brownie and took a bite.

Chapter Two

That next morning I awoke to a sound that would follow me for so many mornings to come; the sound of absolute silence. No alarm clock going off, no cell phone ringing, not even the low hum of the refrigerator. All was in complete silence. At the moment it didn't strike me as something that I should be particularly worried about. Electricity used to come and go every once in a while with the occasional storm, so it didn't seem as something completely out of the ordinary. Suddenly the silence was broken, but not by the crack of power being restored to the building, but by the gentle chirping of a single bird that had stopped by my window. A smile rapidly adorned my face; I could not have conceived a better way to start a day. I slowly started to remember what had happened the day before. Monica, the familiar feeling of desperation, the marijuana and finally, getting so stoned out of mind that I passed out on my bed.

As I walked to my living room I saw Monica curled up on my couch and still fast asleep. She looked so calm and peaceful; I didn't have the heart to wake her up and did my best not to do so as I covered her up with a spare blanket. Monica had never looked more attractive than now. Her black hair, frizzled and uncombed, covered her shuttered eyes as she clutched the blanket closer to her bosom. It wasn't her physical appearance that made me attracted to her right then, but how much she appeared to be a real person. She was definitely not one of those cookie cutter blonds that seemed to saturate the world, always looking like a freshly unpacked Barbie doll on a crisp Christmas morning. No, she was definitely not your stereotypical woman. Head-strong, smart and unabashedly outspoken, Monica had always defined herself as a “free woman”. She did what she wanted, when she wanted, social norms be damned.

I had a feeling that we had had a good time last night, talking and laughing into the wee hours of the night, yet I could not remember anything precisely, only bits and pieces of images and conversations. I mulled over the previous night with my standard morning beverage; a scorching hot cup of black coffee.

I remembered telling Monica about my youth, a time when my dream of becoming a successful writer had not yet been morphed by failure, which it eventually was. When I was a young freshman in college I had entered a writing competition alongside many of my peers. One fellow, whose name I can no longer recall, had won the competition for three years in a row and I was determined to unseat him as champion. At this point in my life I had become particularly fond of exorcising my own demons in print, and this contest proved to be no exception.

I wrote a couple thousand words describing one of my many failed romances, this time with a quite charming girl of Italian decent. I had fallen in love with this lady since the moment I met her and I quickly disregarded her reputation as one of those women who traveled with trails of broken-hearted men in her wake. When I inevitably joined this trail of broken-hearted men, I threw one of my famous temper-tantrums, outraged that she had played with my heart and that I had not seen it coming. The story ended with my protagonist egging this poor woman's car, with

deviled eggs no less!

The judges did not find my therapeutic novel to be of any literary value whatsoever and I failed even to make it to the next round. The judge's comments were kind of enough to write a comment on the novel's margin that read: "*While the writing is somewhat competent, the plot and especially your characters ring false. No man would react in the way your protagonist did and as such, your ending seems unbelievable and out-of-synch with the rest of your work*". Suffice to say the judge's comments on my novel, and my love-life, did not amuse me.

I was still deep in thought when I noticed that someone was knocking the door.

"Is Monica in there? I need help out here!" shouted the voice from the hallway in obvious distress. Not recognizing the voice, I ran to the door to greet my unexpected guest.

"Hello sir, I'm sorry to bother you this early but I was wondering if you had seen Monica. I don't know what is wrong with my wife and I know that she's a nurse or something, could you ask her check on my wife?" said the old man who I recognized as Mr. Coulter.

"Of course, let me get her. She'll be out in a minute."

Ten minutes later after the old man showed up at my door, Monica and I were rushing up the stairs to his apartment. He quickly ushered us in, visibly consumed with anguish.

"She kept complaining about how cold it was last night, but her skin felt hot to the touch! I had never heard of anything like it! I gave her some aspirin to try to make her feel better, but she kept complaining about the cold, I tell you! I was about to call the hospital, but she has always been afraid of doctors, so I gave her some sleeping pills and I hoped that she would sleep it off." Said Mr. Coulter as he opened the door to his wife's bedroom.

The room reeked. It smelled like an animal's cage must smell like, an odor which seemed to ooze into my body through every orifice. Lying in bed was Mrs. Coulter in what seemed to be a troubled slumber. Sweet trickled down her brow and the sound of her rapid breathing filled the air.

"I tried to wake her up in the morning, but she was fast asleep. I was worried that I may have overdone it with the sleeping pills, at our age those things can kill you real easy, right son? He said. "So I was wondering if this young lady here could check her out, ya see? Check her out and see if we should call an ambulance or if I'm just overreacting about this whole thing."

"Don't worry, Mr. Coulter. Let me just take a quick look at her and I'll see if I can help you two out." answered Monica, visibly trying to sooth old Mr. Coulter as she took his wife's temperature.

"Damn! You weren't exaggerating, Mr. Coulter, she's burning up!" Monica said as she took up the phone to call for an ambulance. "Your wife needs professional care, right now!"

One look at Mrs. Coulter and you could tell that Monica was just stating the obvious; Mrs. Coulter did not look well at all. Her face was void of color and her skin seemed to be steaming. Her frail frame would not stop shaking due to her fever and her clothes were visibly soiled as well, contributing to the nauseous smell of her room.

A soft moan escaped Mrs. Coulter's lips as she tossed and turned in her sleep. Mr. Coulter

rushed to her side and started caressing her hair grey hairs.

“Don’t worry, baby. Don’t worry, it’s all going to be all right.” He whispered into her ear.
“Everything is going to be all right. I’m going to make sure that you’re taken care of, just like always, okay?”

Suddenly Mrs. Coulter’s eyes shot open. Her startling red eyes stared deep into mine and let out a blood-curling scream.

Chapter Three

It had been a couple of days since the incident with Mrs. Coulter, since the day the fever had driven her mad and screaming through the halls of our apartment building. Our neighbors had poured out into the hallways to investigate the screams and had been greeted by Mrs. Coulter’s crazed bestial gaze. She had managed to knock down a couple of people before we were able to subdue her. By then the ambulance had arrived and she was promptly taken away to the hospital. We hadn’t seen her since, although Mr. Coulter had been routinely promised that she would get better soon.

The episode had left me somewhat shaken and anxious. I wasn’t particularly concerned about Mrs. Coulter’s well-being or her husband’s mental health it’s just that there was something unsettling about the whole affair. Mrs. Coulter’s crazed bloodshot eyes coupled with her subhuman scream had been haunting me in my dreams ever since. Every time I fell asleep, they would eventually creep themselves into my dreams and I’d wake up startled and drenched in cold sweat.

I wasn’t the only one that felt this way, Monica seemed just as unsettled as I was, but she felt an added burden of responsibility. As a nurse she felt that she was somehow responsible for Mrs. Coulter’s health and that she perhaps should have spotted her illness sooner. I had reassured her by reminding her that the doctor’s at the hospital were unsure of what ailment she was suffering from, so she should not feel burdened by not having spotted it sooner.

Our building’s energy had been flakier than usual and now our hallways were usually bathed in darkness, unable to see much other than the occasional light bulb that refused to give up. Tonight I had arrived home just before sunset and was greeted by an almost pitch-black darkness within the building. Boards creaked with every step I took as I cautiously walked up the stairs, hesitant to break the eerie silence that seemed to rule our building. Darkness weighed like a heavy cloud over my head as I crept through the building.

I heard a small whimper coming from one of the apartment doors. Muffled words drowned out by sobs. It was clearly the voice of a woman in great pain. “Should I knock?” I asked myself as I approached the door. A deep sense of discomfort invaded my mind.

I was halfway across the door when curiosity got the best of me and I decided to knock on the door. If someone had been beaten or raped, I definitely did not want to have that on my conscience. As I inched closer to the door, the sobs became stronger and more distraught. Obviously something had happened that had greatly disturbed this woman. I gently knocked on the door and was met with no reaction whatsoever.

I knocked again.

And again, the sobs continued uninterrupted.

I clenched the knob, now slippery with my own sweat and ever so slowly, opened the apartment door.

Lying on the floor was a blond woman in her early thirties, hunched over her arm and slightly convulsing with each sob. Her right arm was almost completely gone, bits and pieces littered the blood-stained ground around her. She gingerly stroked what was left of her arm while I resisted the urge to throw up. The blond slowly started crawling towards a particularly large piece of flesh, still oblivious to my presence. Still crying she gently picked up the still warm piece of meat and with an almost casual flick of her wrist, popped it into her mouth.

For a brief moment, the sobs stopped.

I was suddenly made aware that I had become frozen in my place, overwhelmed by the shocking image of the scene unfolding before my eyes. Feet frozen in place, arms as if within the clutches of rigor mortis, I watched as the woman continued to consume the remains of her arm with a feeling of almost barely restrained glee, like a man who had after wandering for so long in the unforgiving sun who had finally found water.

With her head covered in sweat and her own blood dripping from the scraps still in her mouth, she finally seemed to notice me. For a second, our eyes locked. A dull moan escaped from her lips and then, as if to announce her intention, she started chattering her jaw as she started her slow crawl.

This seemed to awake me from my statuesque state and I quickly slammed the door shut, hoping that the door would stop her, or at least slow her down.

What the hell had I just seen? What could have driven someone to do that to themselves?

By now she had already crawled to the door and had started scratching and gnawing at the door's edges. The moans grew louder and angrier as she started to pound on the door, the door bending from her added weight.

I ran up the stairs, tripping on the steps as I navigated the darkness. The ghosts of her shrieks and moans biting at my heels. I reached Monica's apartment and started pounding furiously on the door. I needed to know if she was all right, to know if she had seen anything like this before and what we should do.

I pounded, knocked and kicked at her door for what felt like hours. Ever more frustrated and consumed with hysteria, I decided I would wait for her by her door. For the following hours I sat there by her door, I went over what I had seen. I could still hear that woman's moans rising up through the stairwell. The noise haunted my frail psyche while I waited for Monica's return. There I waited and waited, unable and unwilling to enter my own apartment until I had spoken with Monica. After a while, my mind seemed to wander and I slowly drifted into a restless sleep.

It must have been close to midnight when my thoughts were interrupted by a bang. I quickly got on my feet, startled and wary. Had Monica finally come home? Had she bumped into whatever it was that I had seen? Unconsciously I moved towards the stairway, eager to see Monica's face

walking home, safe and sound.

The stairwell door slowly creaked open as I saw what remained of the blond woman. She wore a now toothless grin as she shambled towards me, remnants of her teeth lay drenched in blood across her shirt. She let out a small moan, stretched out her arms as she made her way towards me. In the the dim light I could barely make out the small details of her body. Her blood stained hair, the flesh of her arms mashed into an unrecognizable pulp and her noticeable limp while she walked towards me; unfazed by the enormity of her wounds.

An inaudible gasp escaped my lips.

Try as I might, I could not find the courage within me to run, to yell, to do anything but stare at this surreal abomination that was walking towards me. The smell of her corrupted body combined with the stale odour of her wounds overwhelmed my already shell-shocked mind. The stench filled my nose, my lungs and seemed to make its way under my skin. The smell seemed as inescapable as this creature's (I refused to still refer to it as a "person") slow approach. I found the creature suddenly thrusting its arms out, straining to grab hold of me.

Batting away it's murderous attempts at capturing me, I ran across the hall and quickly fumbled for the key to my apartment. Immediately after locking the door behind me, I started piling furniture against the wall. It wasn't long before I heard the now recognizable sound of her pounding against the door. By now I had already stacked enough pieces of furniture to feel safe. There was no way a single person was going to break through that barricade.

Finally feeling safe enough behind my door and three pieces of furniture, I felt myself overwhelmed with weariness. My head swimming, I staggered to my room and threw myself upon my bed.

I was asleep before I even hit the sheets.