

The Brazen Head

By

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Excerpt from the novel *Bookends-Between Madness and Grace*, © 2005, all rights reserved.

Lead in paragraph- The dreadful experience of psychosis is terrifying to not only the mentally ill and the family but also a therapist. Yet despite the demons and darkness, there is hope-spiritual hope, for those who suffer the most.

“Why don’t you just leave me the hell alone! You’re just jealous ‘cause I can sing and you can’t! I’ve gotta move out so I don’t have to take your crap anymore!”

On a hot summer afternoon, twenty-year-old Aimee shouted at her mother, Maureen. The sun’s yellow rays cut through the tightly drawn curtains into a dark and smoky living room and onto the mother’s brunette hair. A cigarette dangled from Aimee’s mouth. She winced backward avoiding the curling smoke that settled in front of her face.

Aimee pointed her hand high into the air, while firmly planting her other on her slender left hip. “You’re always on my butt ‘bout something.” Aimee exclaimed. “Leave me the hell aaaaalone!” She dropped her hand to her side and glared at Maureen who stood a few feet away.

Despite Maureen’s unresponsiveness, Aimee sensed that like a deadly black panther, her mother was crouching for an evil attack against her. She glanced away from her mother’s piercing dark eyes towards the front door that sprang open. Aimee observed her father, Bill enter the small living room. He glanced at his wife and then towards Aimee.

“And jus’ what the hell are you looking at! You’re blockin’ my singing career, too,” she exclaimed as she turned away and stumbled upstairs towards her room.

Bill slowly closed the front door, preventing the hot afternoon air from penetrating the dingy room. He gasped not only on the murky cigarette smoke but also from his long draining hours at the garage. After stepping towards his wife, he paused and thought, *she sure looks ragged...Aimee’s put ten years on her face in only a few months*. He embraced her as she began sobbing and gently rolled her head onto his shoulder and chest. He stroked the back of her head while hearing his daughter’s heavy footsteps upstairs.

“What happened, lovey?” Bill guided his wife to the sofa, knowing that the explanation would be lengthy. He waited as she wiped away her tears and struggled to gain a fleeting moment of composure. “What happened *this* time?”

“It all started because of that.” She wearily pointed towards the light brown carpet that bore an inch long cigarette burn. Bill leaned over and rubbed his finger against the dark slit directly underneath the arm of the couch. He whiffed

the cigarette residue that was on his fingertip and glanced upstairs towards Aimee's screaming voice.

"Can't tell me what to do, damn it! Get off my ass." She stomped across her room and shouted, "I gotta get out of here!"

He turned towards Maureen. She sighed and shifted forward on the sofa while resting her elbow and arm on her knee. She plopped her chin in the palm of her hand as her other hand quivered at her side. She exhaled and uttered, "All hell broke loose about an hour ago. I caught her smoking again. Showed her rug burn and told her to go out to the patio. She refused; started yelling at me just like she's doing now."

Bill leaned forward and gently rubbed Maureen's trembling hand. The agony on her face drifted him back to the hundreds of times that Maureen and Aimee fought. "Ya know, you're not gonna be able to keep doing this. Constantly fighting with her is taking its toll on you. And ya know, when you're upset, I'm upset too. Everyone's becoming more and more miserable. Maybe she *should* find her own place and leave. She's twenty now. The older she gets, the more of a problem she's becoming, lovey."

Maureen withdrew her hand, grimaced and shook her head in disagreement. "But how is she going to make it? Lately, she's refused to do anything around the house. She'll just end up in the..."

"Damn her!" Aimee's voice rolled down the stairway.

Bill gazed up towards his daughter's room while saying, "Yeah, I know. But something's gotta be done because you won't be able to handle her much longer. I'm thinking only of you, lovey, only of you." Again he glanced upward for Aimee's voice bellowed.

"Damn devil; that's what she is. She's the devil that's gettin' inside my head." Aimee gazed at the carpet as she paced back and forth in front of her dresser. Her mind raced with wild thoughts. *It's the devil... tryin' to trick me! No- It's Mom! Mom- why are you talkin' like the devil? Why won't you let me leave? Oh, that noise--Oh, no! Not that noise again! The devil's tryin to hurt me again...Gotta protect myself...yes--protect myself from them. But, where's that other voice?*

Aimee abruptly halted, twisted her thin body towards the dresser and gazed into its circular mirror. She didn't care that her dark brown eyes did not match her frayed hair. Nor was she concerned that the dark mascara that was excessively applied did not match her pale white complexion. She examined the light red blush on the side of her face. Angrily, she rubbed it, for there was more on the other cheek. Frustrated, she bit her bottom lip. The red lip-gloss went above and below her thin lips, wider than her mouth or society would accept.

She peered at the tangled strands of her hair. After tugging and pulling her hair tightly together, she picked up a rubber band from the top of her dresser and snapped her hair tightly against the back of her head. Like a little whiskbroom, her short stubby hair exploded from the tight morning newspaper rubber band. Each day, Aimee placed a new rubber band from the newspaper in

her hair. It was her ceremonious way of keeping up with current events. She tilted her head and smiled while examining the results of her daily grooming.

Suddenly, Aimee darted from her bedroom and hurried to the middle of the stairway. Adrenalin pumped through her stomach as she gazed down at her parents.

“You...you are the devil! You’re tryin’ to keep me in prison. Yes, trick me so I won’t sing.” Saliva sprayed from her mouth with each desperate word. “But, I won’t let you! I won’t take any more of your shit!”

Her face was flushed with excitement as she haphazardly scanned the stairway walls. She reached to her side and abruptly ripped a picture of herself off the wall. The muscles in her neck tightened as she stared at a time long forgotten, a time when she was young.

Aimee raised the picture high over her head, like a Japanese samurai raising his sword high into the air for battle. She paused, for loud voices spoke deep inside of her. *Yes, I will fight her. I must protect myself from the devil-- from Mom.*

Aimee flung the picture down towards the bottom of the stairway. With a thud and the tinkling of exploding glass, it landed at Maureen’s feet.

Aimee felt a sense of power come over her as her mother looked helplessly up at her. She pointed her finger and said, “No more of your wicked crap. No more! I will fight you. You can’t keep me in prison forever, ya know!”

Aimee dashed back into her room and slammed the door shut. Her heart raced as she leaned against the door of her sordid smelling room. She didn’t care about its foul but familiar odor, for it was one of the few remaining safe places in an otherwise inquisitive and threatening world. Her parents rarely ventured in it and the hurt from others seemed to disappear within its walls.

Aimee turned on her small television and flopped down on her bed. On the TV screen was a burning church. Her pulse quickened as firemen armed with hoses dashed around the burning building. Her ears rang as flames exploded from adjacent trees, causing the reporter to cringe as he spoke. “The police are pursuing their investigation into who is responsible for setting fire to this small church. This is the third church in the last five months that has been burned. The police are treating this fire as a hate crime. One report from an anonymous phone caller indicated that the church was set a blaze to rid the community of the “terrible house of devil worshipers.”

“Yea, go for it!” Aimee blurted back at the TV. “Get rid of ‘em.”

The announcer’s words melted into the flames roaring inside her head. As she closed her eyes, time seemed to stop. Aimee listened to the sound of the water dripping from the faucet in her adjacent bathroom. Time seemed to pass by slowly with each drop. Suddenly she popped her eyes opened and looked at her portable CD player.

“Damn, wish I knew the lyrics.” Aimee muttered while starting to hum. OK... now how’s that song go?” In an almost angelic soprano voice she sang,

Fire of life
Burn within my heart...

She paused and silently gazed at the television. Despite the commercial advertisement, she relived the pictures of the burning church. A deep voice echoed in her ears as she thought, *Burn down the devil's house. Burn, burn it down. Gotta burn...*

Aimee pushed her hands over her ears while crying out, "Oh, those damn noises! Stop...stop them damn noises!" Her eyes flashed around the room. "Where's the other voice? Where's the good voice?"

Still tightly pressing her hands against her ears, she sang out a second time.

Fire of life
Make me holy unto You
Holy ...yes...purify

The lyrics of the song evaporated in the heat of her thoughts, *Gotta burn the devil...Gotta burn Mom.*

She sprang to her feet and hurried downstairs. She noticed but cared not that Maureen purposefully hid her tearful gaze. Nor did it matter that Bill also avoided looking at her by examining the shattered picture on the floor. None of that mattered; only escaping into the backyard patio was important. While scampering past them, she blurted out, "Yes, I promise. I will purify them. Gotta purify the house and save 'em from the devil!"

Aimee flung open the sliding glass door leading to the backyard. The heat from the summer afternoon warmed her skin. She perched on her favorite chair while lighting a cigarette with her trembling hands. The musky grass assaulted her nose and throat with its earthy smell. She jerked her head towards a thumping sound coming from behind her neighbor's wall and then returned her gaze towards her glowing cigarette. *Flames, burning evilness...Yes, purifying flames, Yes, burning down my prison ...Purifying Mom of her evilness.*

Her eyes widened and she jerked her head up towards the bright afternoon sky and muttered, "Yes, I understand. I will... I'll burn down this prison. Yes--I'll burn all the evilness. But...which voice are you?"

Cigarette smoke curled and hung in front of her eyes forcing her to blink several times. With a snap of her finger, she flicked the irritating red-orange flame into a nearby trash container. As the vapor of smoke floated above the waste can, Aimee's thoughts strayed with the ever-growing noises in her head. *Why are ya hasslin' me? Leave me alone! Ah-that noise...Jus' leave me alone! Ah- that sound... Where's the other voice?*

She pressed her hands against her ears. She bolted from the chair into the middle of the yard while shouting into the hot summer air, "Leave me alone! Stop that noise!"

Although Aimee's parents ignored her all too common words, the next-door neighbors took great interest in her activities. After hearing Aimee scream, Frank Bartiff and his teenage son Matt stopped playing catch and peered over their wooden fence.

With a quizzical smile and a shrug, the older Bartiff commented, "Damn kid's crazier than hell, today." Matt nodded as he stretched his neck over the short fence.

Following the sound of his voice, Aimee jerked her head towards the elder Bartiff. "What the hell you lookin' at? Leave me alone, assholes!" With a flick of her wrist, she whisked them away from her consciousness. She turned and walked towards the shaded patio. Noticing a the thin vapor of smoke hung over the waste paper basket, she yelled, "Burn...need to purify this place and break away from this devil's prison!"

The grassy green carpet swayed and moved with the ever-increasing speed of her thoughts. She cautiously stepped along the patio walkway towards the Bartiffs. She paused and glared eye-to-eye at Matt who peered from behind the fence. "You still here, asshole?"

Indifferent to his presence, she anxiously turned and retraced her steps towards her patio. Once completing her short promenade, she reversed her direction and walked back towards the Bartiffs. She paced back and forth, sporadically yelling at her mesmerized neighbors. Like a frenzied cat running into the path of an oncoming car, Aimee was unaware of the approaching danger.

"Dad! Look!" Matt exclaimed as he pointed his finger towards Aimee. Flames erupted from the five-gallon trashcan. Smoke blackened the wooden lattice that shaded the patio. Despite being only a few feet away, Aimee continued pacing and ignored the flames that exploded beneath the patio awning.

"Hey!" Mr. Bartiff exclaimed. "Look at the trash can- it's burning! You're going to burn the damn house down!" Hastily he turned to his son. "Matt, call 911 and tell them to send the police and fire department out here. If Bill doesn't do something quick, the roof's gonna catch on fire."

The young boy sprinted into his house and picked up the phone. Meanwhile, Mr. Bartiff frantically waved his arms and yelled. "Hey, Aimee, do something! You're house is going to catch on fire!"

Another voice however rang in her ears and distracted her from his warning. *Flames... burn the evil one...Burn the evilness out of Mom...Yes, flames, purifying flames.* As she paced, Mr. Bartiff's screaming finally shattered Aimee's fragmented world. Aimee winced and looked up at him. "What? Who are you?" Seized with anger she began shaking her closed right fist at him. "Get away from me; you're the devil too-stay away! "

From in the living room, Bill recognized his neighbor's voice and hurried to the sliding glass door. The tip of the flames danced within inches of the wooden patio awning. "Maureen." He cried out, "Quick! Get some water!"

Using his extended leg like a stick, Bill lightly kicked the can out from under the patio awning and onto the grass. The heat from the flames warmed his

blue pants leg. Falling out of the container was blazing plastic cups, candy wrappers, napkins and cigarette butts.

Bill frantically stamped on the patches of small fires with his feet as Maureen poured a small pitcher of water onto burning clusters of papers. She disappeared into the kitchen getting more water as he smothered more of the burning debris. Out of his peripheral vision, he noticed Aimee watching him. His heart sank as he recognized that frozen, mesmerized stare that left her impervious to the situation around her. Frustrated, he angrily kicked the trashcan as Maureen poured water on smoking embers.

As Bill stomped out the few remains of the burning papers, Mr. Bartiff ranted. "Damn crazy ass kid, you'd better lock her up. She's going to burn your house down and mine, too, if you're not careful!"

"That won't be necessary, everything's OK," Bill thought, *Wish that nosey damn neighbor would disappear.* His hope for an easy solution dissipated as two police officers appeared around the side of the house.

"Hey, over here!" Mr. Bartiff waved his arms and pointed towards Aimee. "Watch out... that woman, she's crazier than hell. Started a fire and doesn't even know it! She needs to be locked up. She's going to burn down their house and mine, too if she's not careful. The community needs protection from nuts like her!"

Intrigued by the commotion, his wife, the teenage daughter and his son Matt joined Mr. Bartiff and glared over the fence. With a proud smile, Matt looked up at his father who patted his son on the head. "You did good son, calling the police. She needs to be taken to a hospital."

"What's going on here?" One police officer inquired as he slowly approached Aimee. A second officer cautiously stayed back a few yards holding his walkie-talkie.

"I'm sorry officer," Bill apologetically began. "Ah.... everything's under control now. Guess, somehow my daughter accidentally started a fire back here. Probably threw her cigarette in the trashcan. Ah...just an accident."

Bill's heart fell as he watched Aimee flinch from the static on the policeman's noisy radio. Bill muttered under his breath, "Oh, crap." *Here we go again.*

He stared as Aimee pushed her hands against her ears. Her cold piercing eyes darted towards the Bartiffs, her mother and finally the police officer. He helplessly watched, for as if in slow motion, she stretched her forefinger out and pointed it like a gun at the police officer.

She screamed, "You must be stopped! You are the devil, too!"

Aimee thrust her arms high over her head like a referee signaling a touchdown at a football game. She paused and stared at the bright blue sky. At the top of her voice she shouted, "GOD! WHERE ARE YOU?"