Watcher

1.

May the 23rd, 2005: 3.32 am

It was just in the corner of his eye. The boy froze, his hands trembling. Gathering his courage, he clenched his fists, got his muscles ready to carry him as far away as possible… And turned around.

Nothing.

There was never anything. Only fear, coupled with that feeling, like there was… something… Someone, maybe? But the boy could never see it. He could always *feel* it. He could feel eyes on his back, he could feel a breath on his neck, he could feel fingers brushing his own skin yet every time he was brave enough to turn around, there was nothing.

The dark and empty corridor of his parents’ house, slightly distorted, slightly wrong, even if he didn’t know how, was still dark and empty. He couldn’t tell what was wrong. It was just a feeling, a horrible, scary feeling that told him something was way off, but what?

His mismatched eyes never saw anything, still he knew, he just *knew* that there was something.

For a reason he didn’t quite know, his feet carried him towards his bedroom, which was, if you asked him, the most terrifying room in the whole house. The more he walked, the more he felt like the corridor was getting longer, like the room was getting further away.

He felt the fingertips brushing his skin again. He felt the breath on his neck again. The cold sweat running down his spine kept reminding him how scared he was. He wanted to turn back. He wanted to scream, to run as far away from there as he could. But his feet kept walking. Slowly. He passed what he knew was his parents’ bedroom. Its wasn’t in the right spot. That being said, it wasn’t the only thing that should not have been there.

The noisy and creepy stairs, that should have been in the living room, except that they were now next to his father’s office, for some reason, were still noisy and creepy. Just like a lot of things in the corridor, the stairs should not have been there. The door to his brother’s room should have been on the other side, the trapdoor to the attic should not have been that close to his room, and the bathroom door should be right to his left, instead of next to the guest room.

All these clues should have told him that something was very, very wrong, however, his brain didn’t seem to recognize all those facts. It wasn’t quite *that* that felt like something was off, there was something more, something unclear. He didn’t wonder too much about it. After all, everything here was the same as before, only *slightly* wrong.

When he walked by his parents’ room, he heard noises coming from it. Strange noises, like someone was having trouble getting air into their lungs. Like their airways were almost completely obstructed. But he didn’t go check. He knew that whatever was in there, it was not his mum and dad. How he knew that was unclear, just like everything else, it was just a feeling, a voice in his head telling him that whatever was in there was bad news. He got worried for a moment that his parents might be in there too, with the *thing that had trouble breathing*, and he though for half a second about going in there to check on them, but his feet kept walking and, for a second, he felt grateful for it. Somehow, he knew that his parents weren’t there. They weren’t in the bedroom, or in the house. Neither was his brother. He was all alone.

He could hear noise coming from above his head too. From the attic. Like fingernails, or maybe claws, rasping the wood, trying to get through to him. It followed his ever step. Sometimes it was louder, like the fabric was giving out under the scratching. He begged whoever would listen to not let it get through. *Please, please, please…*

Every step further seemed to make the corridor darker. The boy had been walking for what felt like hours now. His step was so slow, like dragging his feet was taking up all of his energy. He couldn’t raise his legs properly, it felt like they weighed a ton each. He knew, however, that he had no control over them. They just kept going on agonizingly slowly, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He had passed a lot of doors that weren’t supposed to be there. Some of them he knew what they were, where they led. Some others, he’d rather not know. He’d really rather not know what was in those. He just knew it was watching him, smelling him. Maybe after he walked by, whatever was in there opened the door and started following him, just like the rest. He never turned back to check. He never dared.

Another breath down his neck, closer. Another brush on his skin, stronger. Another shake of his hands, another tear threatening to roll down his cheek.

The boy closed his eyes. He wanted to cry, he wanted to stop, curl up in a corner and hope that it will all go away. But his body disagreed. He walked and he walked and he walked.

In a few seconds, he would walk by the mirror. A huge mirror, that wasn’t supposed to be here, and yet, somehow always *was*. He had always been scared of mirrors, ever since his big brother told him that they were just a gateway to *somewhere else*, that there were *things* there, blind things, things he never wanted to meet. That when there was no light in the room, the things where not blinded anymore, that they could watch. That they could *see*.

And so, the boy walked. He got closer to the mirror. A few more steps and he would pass by. He closed his eyes again, harder, as hard as he could. He prayed. He prayed whatever God he could think of, whoever might be listening. He prayed that the things in there, because he *knew* they were there, he knew they were watching him, getting closer to him, would stay there. In the mirror.

He heard scratching on the glass. Like hundreds of hands were clawing at it, angrily, with nails like sharp claws, like the ones from the attic. It sounded horrible, hurt his ears and made him want to cry even more. His hands kept shaking. His shirt was drenched in sweat. Other than his eyes, all his senses were on high alert. He wished they wouldn’t be. He wished he couldn’t hear, feel, smell… Even the smell was wrong. His house should smell like it always did, like his mum’s perfume coupled with that scent each family member had that made it smell like *home,* that made him feel that it was alright, that everything was fine. But now it only felt like rotten egg and burning wood. It almost scared him more than the sounds, so he tried to forget it, to focus on the feeling on his skin, because whatever that was, it felt less terrifying than the smell… He wished he could just make himself believe that there was nothing, that it was just some kind of illusion, but his imagination didn’t seem to stretch that far.

Another breath, another brush, another scratch, another shake and another tear. It never stopped. Breathing was becoming harder too. Like too many people were using the air of a small room. The boy felt like his lungs refused to fill up. He felt dizzy. It was painful and terrifying. He wondered if that’s how he would end, from lack of oxygen? Yet, his feet kept walking. Further, and further, and further.

Suddenly, he stopped. He didn’t need to open his eyes to know where he was, but he did it anyway. In the corner of his eyes, he was quite sure he saw something again. He was also quite sure that the thing he saw just *stayed there*. A dark figure, unmoving, silent, watching him. He didn’t turn around. He knew the moment he moved, the thing would move with him. So, he looked at the door in front of him. The huge door, that seemed a thousand times too big, too dirty, too covered of claw marks. *Wrong.*

Without him touching it, the door opened slightly, not even enough to stick his head inside, not that he would want to anyway. But then his hand moved on its own, and pushed.

It opened with an excruciating creek, and the boy tried his best to run away this very instant. Except that is body still wouldn’t listen, and his feet carried him slowly inside.

It was dark. So, so dark. Way darker than it usually was. He could barely make out anything. The moon was supposed to shine through the window, giving the room a little natural light that always made the boy feel better, because he could *see*. Yet for some reason, the moon wasn’t there. The window wasn’t there. The walls were crooked, everything was in the wrong place, bent as well as twisted, so twisted that it shouldn’t even stand. But it did, and the boy walked further in. Slowly, the door closed behind him, shutting him away from any source of light that came from the corridor.

He could feel hands on him now. The brushes had gotten stronger and stronger the further into the dark he went, and now he could feel all of it. Fingers gripping his arms, hands touching his back, his torso, like they were fighting to know who would be the one to grab him and… He didn’t dare think about what would happen then. He couldn’t breathe anymore, couldn’t move, couldn’t see anymore. The breath on his neck felt so close now, so strong, like ten people were standing behind him, smelling him, all at once. For a second, he thought he would die, right here. He thought that the things would take him away in the dark, that he would never see the light again. He screwed his eyes shut, and prayed. Seconds passed. Minutes passed. And he didn’t die. Or at least he didn’t think he did.

So, he opened his eyes again. This time, they started to adjust to the dark a little better. The boy took in his surroundings, trying to figure out how his eyes could suddenly see anything. There was no light, nothing. He walked further and further in. He looked to his left. The moment his head turned, he wished he’d looked right.

It was his bed, right there. Slightly out of place, true, yet still there. His bed, his covers, his teddy bear. He’d seen a lot of things lately, that were not normal, that shouldn’t be there, but this beat everything easily. Because right there, sleeping in his bed, was a little boy. Not any little boy. Him.

No mistake here. The boy watched himself sleep. And, has his eyes were growing accustomed to the dark, he realized that watching himself sleep wasn’t the most disturbing. He realized that his eyes weren’t drawn to his small body, but rather to whatever it was that was sitting *on his chest*. A dark figure sat there, looking at him, whispering things in his ear.

The boy felt fear as well as panic take possession of his whole body. His eyes finally started crying, his knees started buckling, his hands trembled even harder. It was impossible to breathe now, impossible to scream, impossible to move. The boy’s lower lip tremble as hard as his hands, and he sobbed. He sobbed for what felt like hours, watching the thing whisper and stroke his face. He realized that the brushings and breaths down his neck were gone. That somehow made him even more scared. He couldn’t take his eyes away from the figure’s face that kept creeping even closer and closer to his sleeping form’s own.

The silence was the loudest one the boy had ever experienced. He could hear his own racing heart, almost exploding from the terror. But then, in that torpor, he heard something, something that finally made him scream. Something, right next to his ear, that he hadn’t noticed before, had gotten even closer. And then the thing whispered:

*Shhhhhhhhhhht.*

2.

May the 23rd, 2005: 3.35 am

The boy jolted awake, sitting straight in his bed. He struggled for a while to catch his breath and screwed his eyes shut. In and out. In and out. *In and out*.

For a small, small while, he kept his eyes tightly closed. He didn’t want to open them, too scared of what, or who he might see. He brought his knees to his chest and hugged them as hard as he could to try and stop the tremors shaking his hands. He felt cold, hot, then cold and then hot again, but he couldn’t force himself to push his covers away. They were, after all, his only protection against what could be there.

He hugged himself even tighter, and tried to reason with his terrified mind. Those nightmares were not new, not at all. He’d been having them for years now, they had just gotten a little more intense lately. He tried to tell himself to be brave, to just look, that there wasn’t going to be anything, or anyone in his bedroom. That he could just get up, if necessary, and turn on the light, just to prove himself right, to put his mind at ease.

But every time he found the strength to open his eyes, when he was just a second away from letting his eyelids part, a voice would *scream* in his head. Scream at him not to open, because once he saw whatever was in his room, somehow it was over. He would see, be seen, and it would be all over.

So, he kept his eyes closed a little longer, and then a little longer than that.

He considered calling for his mother, or his father, screaming for help, or crying out loud. But that wouldn’t do. He was too old for this now, his brother had told him. *You worry mum a lot with your nightmares*, his brother had said, *this needs to stop. Everyone has them, we just don’t scream for our parents’ help. You gotta grow up*.

The boy knew it was true. After all, his brother Ulysses was always right, he was the smartest person he knew. Ulysses certainly would not call for help. Ulysses would open his eyes, and turn on the light.

The boy gathered his courage. He trembled a little more, the smallest tear running down his cheek. Then, he took a deep, deep breath, before opening his eyes, one after the other.

He knew his room was just as it was supposed to be, as it had always been. His bed was stuck into a little alcove, between three walls, and faced the slightly open window. On his left, hidden by a huge cupboard, was his door, and right next to his door was his goal: the light switch.

But, even though he knew all that, he couldn’t *see* it. At this time of the night, the moon was shining on the other side of the house, on his parents’ bedroom (lucky them), and every light were out. Every light, except his little night light. The smallest nightlight there ever was, in his opinion, which was just perfect, because he needed to hide it until everyone was in bed, so nobody would think he’s a cry baby. But right now, the size of the nightlight annoyed him a great deal, because it was pretty much useless.

The boy blinked a few times, trying to force his eyes to accommodate to the darkness. Ulysses had a phone (lucky him too), so he could turn on the flashlight from his bed to see everything if he wanted, except that the boy had been deemed too young for it by his parents, who had told him he had to wait a little longer until he could get one (which was really unfair).

By now, the boy wished he had stayed deep in his sleep. After all, in the end of the day, nightmares were just nightmares, something you just wake up from, and then it’s gone (not quite totally gone, but still). This was somehow so much worse for him.

His eyes were finally starting to accommodate, ever so slowly. He begun actually seeing his bedroom. His dinosaurs were on the shelves right next to him, which was very nice, because his brother had hit him with it a few time “to play”, and it hurt really bad, so he could use it to defend himself. He could use the huge blue triceratops.

On the ground, his Good Omens book was open right where he had left it when the strength to stay awake had left him a few hours earlier. Then next to it was his little nightlight, small as ever but still very welcome in these moments.

The boy hesitated, not sure he wanted to go further, where it became darker and darker. He thought of what Ulysses would do. He knew Ulysses would act like a grown-up, and look. So, he did.

Next to his door was his “big boy” desk, as his dad called it, because it was made of glass, just like his dad’s. On it where all his books, as well as the big pieces of wood that spelled out his name, with the proud “N” taking the shape of a dragon’s body (it was a gift from his brother, so even though he was a little too old for these, he happily kept it. After all, he had always really liked dragons).

The boy forced his eyes to go even further, past the little guitar sitting on the ground, past all the toys that he had forgotten to put back in the chest. He went right past the window, before immediately stopping. He had gotten to the worst part. The darkest one.

It was the corner that everybody had, the one that everybody was a little scared of, even if they wouldn’t admit it. The one where we all saw odd shapes, and imagined the worst. The one that made even grown-ups turn on the light, just to be sure, because we’ve watched too many movies and *you never know*. The corner that everybody feared, even though they won’t admit it, because *they’re adults*.

Of all these people, the most scared was probably the boy. His eyes teared up quickly as he fought not to let the tear roll down his cheeks. He sobbed quietly, and bringing the covers to his chin, his hands starting trembling again. Because right there, in that darkest corner, was a shape. A shape which looked *very much* like the one he had seen in his nightmare.

For what felt like hours, nothing moved. Time seemed to stop as the sobs grew louder and louder. The boy started sweating again. He felt so, so cold. His hands were damp and a horrible smell seemed to filled the room, making him want to throw up. He could feel eyes on him as he kept staring at the dark figure, watching, *waiting*. For a second, he was sure he heard a voice again, close to his ear, but he pushed the thought away, all his senses focused on that one corner. And suddenly, the figure moved.

The boy gasped. It had moved. Or rather, he was quite sure it had. He knew he wasn’t dreaming right now, he knew there was something, and at this point, he knew that *that something* had just moved. He was *terrified*. Ulysses be damned, if the thing moved again, he would scream, he would call for help, because he knew how most of his nightmares ended up. It was never good. If this was the figure from his nightmares, if it was the one that he had seen perched on his sleeping body, there was no way in hell he wouldn’t call for help.

And the thing moved. A little more than the first time, but worst of all, a little closer to the boy. So, he screamed. He screamed higher than he had ever screamed, he thought, he screamed and screamed for what felt like hours. He screamed so hard his throat hurt. He could almost hear his voice break, so he screamed even harder, hoping someone would hear him before he couldn’t scream anymore, or before the thing had gotten to him.

His door busted open, and the second the light was turned on, the thing seemed to step back where it had been, disappearing to turn into what was apparently a coat. But, even as terrified as he was, the boy knew it had moved, and it had not been a coat. He knew he hadn’t hallucinated it. Because a hung-up coat would not move closer to him like he was sure the thing had. He now regretted calling for help, because he knew nobody would believe him the moment he heard his mother call him while looking frantically around the room. He knew tomorrow, Ulysses would taunt him, he knew his father would have to talk to him again, he knew his mother would try to reassure him right before he went back to bed. He knew that the second they would turn off the light, the thing would come back.

And he would be alone again.

3.

November the 5th, 2006: 4.56 am

The boy slowly walked down the corridor, his hands in front of him to stop himself from running into walls. He had turned the lights on, just in case, but he kept his eyes closed, hoping to stay sleepy enough to go right back to sleep as soon as he reached his bed again. When he had gone to sleep yesterday, he had forgotten to take a glass of water with him, and had thought that he probably wouldn’t wake up anyway, so no need to go back downstairs. Of course, he had been wrong, which meant he was now therefore making his way to the bathroom. The corridor felt longer than it should, but he attributed it to his sleepiness and eagerness to go back to bed. He had already walked past the first door, which meant that the second one, the bathroom’s, couldn’t be too far off, yet reaching it felt like an eternity to him. He kept his right hand sliding on the wall next to him, so he could feel the door when he finally got there. When he felt the doorknob under his fingertips, he turned to his right before stepping in the room, groping around to find the light switch. For some reason he couldn’t quite find it, all he could feel was the cold tiled wall. He figured that it didn’t matter anyway, his eyes were still closed, he would just quickly have a drink before going straight back to bed into the warmth of his covers.

He walked to the sink and bent down, cupping his hands under the water to appease his thirst but stopped straight in his tracks. He felt something in his back, shivers going down his spine. Nero hesitated for a second and cracked an eye open, sacrificing the remnants of his sleepiness. In an instant, he was fully awake. He was staring at the mirror in front of the sink, looking at his reflection. Except that his reflexion wasn’t right in front of him, as it should. It was way behind where it should be, standing with its back against the wall.

Nero rubbed his eyes, hoping that pushing away the last reminiscences of sleep would make the illusion go away, proving that everything was fine, but when he re-opened them, the reflexion hadn’t move. Worse than that, it was *smiling*. Not a normal smile, mind you. It was creepy, wrong, like something was pulling on its lips, turning a frown into a distorted, painful smile that didn’t reach the eyes. The reflexion’s eyes looked dead, empty of any light, any *life*. Neither of them moved for a long time, staring at each other in the dark.

For some reasons, the boy didn’t feel scared, per se. He felt uneasy, like watching a photo that had been tinkered with, a photo that had something wrong in it. It feels wrong, but you can’t quite tell why. In addition to the crocked smile, something was off with the reflexion’s face. Nero didn’t know what. He studied the face, looked at its nose, its ears, its hair… Everything seemed normal, physically speaking. It was even dressed like him, stood like him, and yet there was something, he just couldn’t place his finger on it…

Then he saw it. The reflexion’s dead eyes were blue. *Both of them*. Nero’s weren’t. The realization sent a shiver down the boy’s spine, making him step back towards the door. For years now, he had been teased because of his mismatched eyes at school, but, in the mirror, they were both the same colour. He had dreamed of his eyes being normal for his whole life, but somehow, now that he was seeing it, it felt wrong, like his soul wasn’t just quite there anymore. Like the reflexion’s body was empty. That was what was wrong. It looked empty, like a puppet. Its body was slumped down, barely standing, as if there was no tension in its body, in its muscles, its head slightly tilted to the right.

Nero’s breathing quickened. However, he still didn’t feel real fear. He didn’t move, keeping his eyes firmly on the reflexion. It wasn’t breathing either. No slight rise and fall of its shoulders could be seen. It was like someone had taken his lifeless body and had attached it to invisible strings, gluing its unnatural eyes open and pulling its mouth in a creepy smile.

Not sure of what to do, the boy rubbed his eyes again, a little harder this time, hoping that it might make it all go away, somehow, but the moment he re-opened his eyes, he saw something that made his skin crawl. The other him was closer to the mirror. Like it had taken a quick step towards Nero while his eyes were closed. Its traits were clearer now, clear enough for the young boy to see just how pale its skin was. It was as white as a vampire’s, like he saw in the movies. *Pale like death*. Its dead, empty eyes were staring at him, staring into his soul, as if it was jealous that he had one, and was trying to steal it away.

Every passing second Nero felt more and more uneasy, uncomfortable… C*old*. The bathroom had gotten very cold very suddenly. It reminded him of the time he forgot to close his window in December, and the night had been absolutely freezing. He had woken up shivering and, sure enough, had gotten a bad cold later. Nero wanted to hug himself, to rub his arms to try to warm up, but all his attention was focused on the other him. He felt as if his brain was so focused on it that it couldn’t send anything to his arms to initiate the action. Not an inch of his body moved.

In the blink of an eye, the reflexion had taken another step. The boy never saw it move, but it was getting closer alright. He could now see its body a little more precisely. Its clothes were torn in some places, like someone, or something, had pulled on it too hard and had ripped it under the force of the pull. What Nero also noticed just now, which made him wonder how he hadn’t noticed it earlier easier, was that the other him’s hair were perfectly combed. That never happened. His hair was untameable, as he had concluded with his mother long ago. The reflexion’s hair should be sticking out in every direction, but it was so neat it made him feel awkward. It was almost as if someone had put glue on it to keep it tamed.

Only now, the boy started to feel fear creep into his body. He wanted to go away, run, scream for help, but his body was frozen in contemplation, he couldn’t even take his eyes away from the other him. All he could do was blink.

The reflexion got a little closer again. It was now at arm’s reach, and would only need to raise its hand to touch Nero. However, somehow, the boy wasn’t scared of *that*. He didn’t quite know how he knew, but he had a feeling that it couldn’t touch him even if it tried. Like it wasn’t in the room, it was rather on the other side of the mirror. Stuck, waiting. Somehow, that was worse. The reflexion wasn’t getting close to him, it was getting closer to the mirror. And God knows what would happen when he reached it. Another blink, another step, and the other him was now standing next to the scared boy, its eyes still staring into his soul. It never stopped looking at him.

Slowly, the reflexion raised its arm towards the mirror with the same movement a puppet would have. Its articulations moved first and the bones followed. There seemed to be no muscle action at all. Its arm got closer and closer to the mirror before stopping. The other him slowly opened its hand, raising his index and tapped the glass. Just once. The quick noise made Nero jump. The other him’s head seemed to be pulled by an invisible string, raised itself straight and then dropped on the other side. It looked a little like what dogs would do with their heads when something was puzzling to then, Nero thought, only creepier, apparently forced by something, or someone.

The reflexion tapped the glass again, a little harder, before waiting with its fingertip resting on the surface. Nero didn’t dare move. He wasn’t sure what it wanted, and especially didn’t know if he should give it to it, whatever it was. Everything was so silent in the house; all the boy could hear were the taps resonating in his head. The other him hit the glass again, and again. It might be getting impatient, but there was no way of telling. Its eyes still looked dead, there was no expression on its face, no movement in its body other than the slight rise and fall of its finger against the mirror. It started tapping at regular intervals now. Ten seconds would go by, before another tap would resonate. Nero still didn’t move.

It was trying to tell him something, he was sure, but what? The reflexion was getting more insistent now, tapping without stopping. *Tap, tap, tap, tap*. Nero wondered if maybe it was trying to point out something behind him, yet he still couldn’t make his body move, let alone turn around. The noise was getting so loud it hurt his head, he felt as if it was drilling in his skull. He just wanted it to stop.

Then the other him changed tactics. It started hitting the glass with the flat of its hand. He hit it so strongly that the whole mirror shook, making the boy wonder how it hadn’t broken yet under the force of the shocks. He wanted to cover his ears, close his eyes to make it all go away, but his hands had stopped listening. With crippling fear shaking his body, Nero finally felt his body move. Only he really didn’t want it to, not like that. His left hand started raising itself slowly toward the other him, who hadn’t stopped hitting the glass.

He felt like the movement was taking hours. He tried so hard to keep his body from moving now, yet he couldn’t seem to stop it. The reflexion had stopped hitting the mirror now, and was completely motionless, its hand resting flat out against the glass, waiting, its eyes never leaving Nero’s. The boy felt something cold under his hand and was finally able to detach his eyes from the other him’s. He looked down to see that his own hand was now resting on the mirror right over the reflexion’s waiting palm.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Time seemed to stop as the two Nero’s contemplated each other. Suddenly, something changed in the reflexion’s face. Something snapped, its horrific smile got even wider, its eyes seeming to light up with life. Nero felt its fingers close around his hand, its grip unforgiving. It hurt so bad he almost could hear his bones crack. He tried to pull his hand back towards him, but there was nothing he could do. In a second, the reflexion stepped back, yanking the boy towards him. Nero’s arm went right through the mirror, on the other side. He closed his eyes before screaming from the top of his lungs. He felt the other him’s second arm grab his own, pulling harder, his head hit the mirror, and everything went black.

4.

November the 5th, 2006: 5.06 am

The boy jumped as he woke up. It took him a second to remember where he was. The room felt foreign for some reason, his sheets felt rough and his pillow felt like it was filled with rocks. He slowly came to, his eyes adjusting to the dark. He now recognized his room, the softness of his sheets, the comfort of his pillow. He figured he had probably still been enwrapped in his dream just a second ago. He sat up with some difficulty, his arms still half-asleep struggling to raise his body’s weight, before turning on his bedside lamp and swiping the sweat on his brow with the back of his hand.

Usually, he had recurring nightmares that would come back every now and then, some more often than others. While it didn’t stop them from being horrifying, at least he had gotten used to them. As far as he could remember, and he almost never forgot any nightmare, this one was new. He had been scared of mirrors for years now, thanks to his brother’s stories, but he had actually never dreamt of anything weird happening with them. Granted, whenever they happened to be in a nightmare, they were creepy, and sometimes, there were things happening to them, however, a nightmare solely focused on the mirrors had never happened before. It had felt too real too, almost like a memory. It reminded him of the day he went to an amusement park with Ulysses and two of his friends. He’d had so much fun on that day that he had dreamt they were still there. Or when he had watched that really long, boring movie that he used to love as a younger kid which, now that he was older, had just seemed like it would never end, and he had dreamt that the movie was still going on and on and on. His dad called it sleepy memories. Tonight, it had felt just like that. He felt as if, even now that he was awake, his brain was still scrambling for forgotten information that was just out of reach somehow, like it does when you’re in the middle of a test at school, and you remember reading about the question, you can visualize the page, the colours, even the exact spot where the answer it, and yet you just can’t quite remember what it said.

But it didn’t make sense, did it? He would remember it if he had been pulled through a mirror by a lifeless puppet looking like him, that’s not the kind of things you forget. Most of all, he was quite sure he would remember how he had gotten out of that situation. Yet, he had bribes of memories, flashes coming back, most of them that weren’t even part of the dream, flashes of what happened *after* he had gone through the mirror. Somehow, he remembered lying on the cold tilted and dirty floor, the other him’s hands on his face, its nose touching his own, the weight of its body sitting on his chest, pinning him on the ground, making it impossible to move. He can still feel the other’s hand on his mouth, silencing him, stopping him from screaming. He remembered the smell of putrefaction, like the other’s hand were rotten, seeing its dead skin peeling off. All those images flashed before his eyes every time he closed them. He grabbed his pillow from behind him, hugged it hard against his chest, as hard as he could, before burying his face in it, trying to find some comfort in what was left of its warmth, relishing the familiar smell of the lavender extract his mum put on it so he would “sleep better”. It had seemed like a good plan, back in the day, plus he really liked the smell, so it was really a win-win situation.

Nero wondered if he should talk to his parents about this nightmare. He used to always tell them about the horrors he saw during his sleep, ever since he was a child, but he had recently realized how it worried and hurt his mother. He’d heard her talk to his dad once, tell him that it wasn’t normal, that there had to be something they could do. It had hurt him a little to think that maybe *he* wasn’t normal, that there was something wrong with his mind. He had always felt different than his brother or his parents, if he had to be honest. He knew he didn’t think like them, feel things like them. If anything, he felt *less* than them, in general. He had talked about it to Ulysses a while ago, and he had said something about a thing called “empathy”. Nero didn’t know if it was actually relevant, or if his brother had just read something about it and thought it would be cool to mention it and look smart. It sounded like something he would do. Nero didn’t like to talk about it, he never really told any them how he felt, how, for years, he used to think he was adopted. Of course, he now knew he wasn’t, he looked way too much like his dad, just thanks to their mismatched eyes.

So, when his mum started to get worried, he talked less and less about his nightmares. He was old enough to deal with them anyway now, there was no point to make a whole situation out of it every time. With time, he eventually stopped talking about it all together. He would just say he slept well enough, avoiding any further questions. Everyone thought the nightmares were gone by now. Everyone but Ulysses. He always told him about them. The older boy always made fun of it a little, that’s just what big brothers do. Nero knew that even though he was being mocked, it was just his brother’s way to normalize things, to reassure him, making him laugh by annoying him. It always worked, Ulysses never failed to bring a smile on the boy’s face. It was his special superpower, as he called it.

What was good about the jesting was that he also could tell when *not* to jest, when it was just too much, and making fun just wouldn’t cut it. He always knew to right words, the right gestures that would calm the scared little boy right away. Today, Nero felt it was a day of much needed comfort. He took his teddy bear with him (he was a big boy now, but not that big, not in those circumstances), hugging it tight, before getting out of bed and walking out of the room.

Weirdly enough, he wasn’t really *scared*, just really distraught. He didn’t even think about the usual feeling of being watched, didn’t think about the shadows and the dark, didn’t look back or sideways. All his mind could focus on were the sleepy memories, nothing else. There wasn’t room for the rest in his brain right now. He walked to Ulysses bedroom and cracked the door open slowly. His brother was sleeping peacefully, lying on his side, his mouth slightly opened. Not wanting to wake him, Nero tip-toed into the room before closing the door. He figured he could just discreetly slip into the bed and fall asleep there, without making any fuss. Ulysses was quite used to waking up next to his deeply-asleep little brother. He would get up without waking him and never mention it, which Nero really appreciated. Thankfully, the moon was shining through the window, which meant the boy could pretty much see where he was going. At least he could see the shapes of the furniture, and not walk straight into the cupboard. It would be an easy task to get there and spent the last few hours of the night being lulled to sleep by the teenager’s calming breathing.

He was so focused on not running into anything that he didn’t consider he might walk *on* something. He stepped on a little figurine that had been discarded early next to the bed. To be fair, there was no way he could have seen it, and even now he had fully stepped on it, he still couldn’t see the small object. He yelped in pain and rubbed his foot, swearing. He had recently learnt a new word at school, one that his mother really didn’t like him saying, so that’s the one he mostly used. When he finally put his foot down (next to the figurine this time, he tip-toed around, just to make sure that it didn’t happen again) and looked up, Ulysses was staring at him sleepily. Nero though that he might get in trouble for swearing like that, but for a long moment, neither of them said anything, neither of them moved. Without a word, Ulysses sighed, and scooped back into his bed, his back against the wall, before grabbing his duvet, opening it, inviting his brother in.

Nero didn’t need to be asked twice. He quickly got in, lying down next him, curling himself into a ball and hugging his teddy as tight as he could. He rolled around a few times, trying to find the most comfortable sleeping position, before settling down. Ulysses said nothing during the whole ordeal. He looked at him worriedly, probably wondering if he should tell their mother about this situation tomorrow. He won’t, however. Of all the times he had found himself waking up to a scared little boy in his bed, he never said a word once. He was the keeper of his brother’s secrets, and if Nero didn’t want to talk about it, he sure as hell wouldn’t either. It wasn’t his story to tell anyway. But it worried him anyway. It worried him a lot.

In the safety of his brother’s bedroom, unaware of his worried sibling’s careful looks, the boy allowed his mind to roam. He wasn’t scared of the shadows right now, he barely even noticed it. That never happened when he was alone anywhere. When he looked at them, he saw nothing wrong, nothing worrying, no reason to be scared. He didn’t feel eyes on him, he didn’t feel the cold touch of something that shouldn’t be there. He didn’t imagine weird shapes that seemed to be creeping towards him, didn’t hear scaring sounds or scraping. He felt *safe*. Maybe the thing was scared of his brother? Maybe, when Nero grew older, it would start to get scared of him too, and leave? Maybe it only followed children, and that was why adults never mentioned it and told him it was just nightmares. If that was it, he couldn’t wait to grow up. Being an adult seemed way better than being a child for many reasons, plus, if one of them was the absence of the shadows, then he would take it. He was almost a grown up now anyway and soon, all that horror would be scared of *him* and go away.

He really hoped so.

5.

January the 2nd, 2009: 00.12 am

The dog jumped in surprise as a spaceship exploded on the television. Nero was watching Star Wars, as he usually did when he was home alone. Either that, Harry Potter or Jurassic Park. But tonight was special. It was the very first time his parents left him alone so late in the evening. His brother had gone to a party to a friend’s house, where he would be spending the night, and mum and dad were at a fancy restaurant a few towns over celebrating their wedding anniversary. Twenty years to this day, that was quite an accomplishment nowadays. Earlier in the evening, he had heated up and eaten the pasta dish his mum had brought for him, which hadn’t been very good, to be honest, but that wasn’t very surprising coming from microwavable food. He had wondered all trough diner which movie he would watch. After dinner, he had spent a good twenty minutes sitting in front of all his DVDs, shuffling through them again and again, before deciding on Star Wars. He had considered a horror movie, since it was after all his favourite genre, which he always thought was weird. Why would a boy, who was always scared of everything, and whose nights were systematically plagued with nightmares, love horror movies so much? He didn’t have a clue, he just loved the feeling of fright, loved the adrenaline rush. At lease it was what he told his parents. But a movie of that kind might have been a little too unreasonable, as he wanted to be able to sleep tonight. He figured that, since it was so dark, Star Wars would probably look really good on the screen. He had been right.

Lightsabers collided, red against blue, the flashes of colour illuminating the whole living room. They had gotten a brand-new television just a few weeks ago. This one was huge compared to the previous one. It almost felt like a cinema at home. Nero decided that he had definitely chosen the right movie and turned to the clock to check the time. His parents had made him promise that he would go to bed just before midnight, which was latter than usual since tomorrow wasn’t a week-day, but still not so late that he would wake up at noon the next morning. He had figured that they weren’t there to check, since they wouldn’t be back for at least two more hours, maybe even longer than that. He would tell them that he had obeyed on the next day, everyone would be happy, satisfied of their respective enjoyable nights. Good.

His huge German Shepard was asleep on his lap, snoring. He was getting heavy, to be honest, but the boy loved to hold his dog against him, and every sort of contact initiated by the dog himself felt like a blessing, like he had been chosen. Granted, the dog didn’t have any other laps to lie on. Still, it was a nice compliment. The other one was sleeping on the floor. Apparently, the spaceship explosion had shaken her, but not too much, certainly not enough to make her let it interrupt her sleep any longer. She was dreaming already, her paws moving slightly. She was probably dreaming of running, Nero thought. Or at least that what his brother usually said when dogs did that.

Nero scratched the dog’s head distractedly. He was getting a bit sleepy, he had to admit. He kept yawning and yawning, his eyes starting to sting a little, but he was just getting to the good part of the movie so falling asleep or going to bed was just not an option, he decided. He straightened his back, rubbing his eyes, hoping to push the sleepiness away. It seemed to work for a little while.

Suddenly, both the dogs started growling. Nero didn’t think much of it, they reacted to pretty much everything. He figured they probably heard one of the neighbours’ dog bark and they responded. However, even with the passing seconds, they kept growling. It was an aggressive growl, the boy realized, not one they used often. Then, one of them let out a loud bark, the other following soon enough. They were still lying down, though. Nero put the movie on pause. Everything was suddenly quiet. Nothing moved. All the boy could hear were their combined breathing.

In the blink of an eye, his dog jumped out of his lap, scratching Nero’s legs with its nails in the process, and both the animals started barking aggressively towards the hallway. The boy had never heard them bark like that. Nero hesitated, barely daring to walk up to them, first because he wasn’t sure he wanted to see what they were barking at, as well as not quite knowing how they would react. He figured that, since they were obviously scared, they might startle, snap at him or bite him to try and defend themselves. But he was getting a little freaked out too, so he didn’t want to stay too far away from them. He took a step towards his dog, then another one, trying to see what they were barking at. The hallway was empty. Dark, granted, as well as creepy too, since he had turned off the lights to watch the movie, but he was sure as hell it was empty. He should turn the light on, he thought, yet a voice in his head was telling him not to. For some reason, he obeyed. He stayed in the dark, listening for any other sounds than the dogs. Nothing.

It had been going on for a little while now, and there was nothing in sight that could justify their reaction. He was about to start telling them off when he heard it. Or at least he believed he did. There was a tap on the window. A low, steady tap coming from the kitchen. Nero froze, quickly taking the time to thank God, or whoever deserved to ben thanked, that he had closed all the curtains of the house. He tried to rationalize, telling himself that it was just probably a plant that was moving due to the wind, or an animal maybe, or even an insect stuck between the glass and… Something. It had to be one of those. But the tapping was so steady, in perfect rhythm, that all his senses were on high alert, on lookout for danger.

And then, suddenly, one last tap, and they stopped altogether. The dogs’ barks slowly died down. Everything went dead silent. Nero thought it was finally over, that he had been right because, *of course* it was nothing wrong and whatever it was had gone away. But he couldn’t shake that feeling of dread, couldn’t stop the little voice in his head. Just as he was about to dismiss it all, go back to the couch to put the movie back on, the main door starting shaking, the door knob going crazy. Now he was sure that someone was trying to open it. He prayed that it was his parents, that they were just having some difficulties with the door and their old key, that they would walk in and say “we got back early”, before telling him off for still being up, but he knew that wasn’t it. The dogs were going mad again, yet it didn’t discourage whoever was behind the door. The boy was frozen on the spot.

The would-be intruder started banging on the door with what Nero assumed to be his fist, from the force of it. He was so scared now he felt his knees shake. The banging went on for what felt like an eternity before stopping again. Maybe they would give up now, the boy thought. They would just try another house. Plus, who on their right mind would hear dogs bark like that and still try to come in? There were steps outside now, circling the living room, where Nero was standing. Then the banging started again, on the windows this time. Nero tried to look for a shadow on the curtains so he could see if it was a man, or maybe kids playing a cruel trick on him, but the lack of lamp posts outside made it hard for him to see much. He banged on every window as he walked around, like he knew exactly which room the boy was in. He didn’t miss a single one, banging steadily on it with his palm.

Nero wanted to scream but somehow, he couldn’t. The dogs never stopped barking and growling, which, weirdly enough, didn’t unsettle the outsider. He kept going around the room, slowly, before, just like the tapping, everything stopped and went silent. The boy could barely breathe. His whole body was shaking, he wanted to cry more badly than he ever had. He tried to calm his body, thinking as hard as possible to come up with a solution. Phone! He could use the phone to call for help, of course. His body finally listening to him, he ran to the phone sitting on the table, picking it up to hold it to his ear. He couldn’t hear a thing. The usual steady beep was absent. He tried to compose a number anyway, but nothing happened. The phone was dead. He then thought of his own phone, his brother’s old one (how had he not thought about it earlier?). He fished it from his pocket and held it to his face. It wouldn’t turn on. He pressed the “on” button a few times. Still, nothing happened. It was like the battery was dead, which didn’t make any sense since he had just been charging it during diner. At had been charged at a hundred percent when he started the movie and he had barely used it. His whole body shaking, Nero slowly stepped back from the windows, leaning his back against the wall right next to the corridor. Weirdly, the moment he did, the banging stopped. The whole house was plunged into silence again.

Now, he started crying. He couldn’t help it, he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. He couldn’t call anyone, and he certainly couldn’t get out of the house to get help, not with that guy outside. He could make a run for it, maybe the man wouldn’t even see him leave, but he couldn’t risk it. Why had he even suddenly stopped? Should he be worried or relieved? Before he could feel any sense of safety, he started sobbing, falling to the ground. There was a new sound now. And it was *in* the house.

It sounded nothing like what had been going on outside. It was a scratching that seemed to be coming from *inside* the walls. Even as scared as he was, he knew that the guy from outside couldn’t possibly be the reason of the new sound, for the simple and good reason that there was no way he had gotten in the house, let alone in the *walls*. Nobody could be in the walls… Right? It had to be an animal now, some kind of rodent. But the fact that the tapping and banging had gone and that the dogs had stopped focusing on whatever was going on outside was puzzling. It didn’t make much sense. Had the guy given up, and now, by some sick coincidence, a rat or a ferret had decided that it was the perfect time to roam around in the walls?

The dogs were fully silent again, however, they hadn’t calmed down in any way. They kept pacing, sniffing around the living room, never stepping too far away from Nero, which he was thankful for. The scratching seemed to move now, following the path of the walls and, for a second, Nero felt like it was calling him. It almost sounded attractive, like it was begging him to come closer, and he was very tempted indeed. He felt a force pull his legs towards the noise. For some reason he couldn’t quite explain, he didn’t try to resist it. One step after another, he slowly walked up to where the sound was coming from. He vaguely heard his dogs whimper, as if they were trying to stop him from going any further, but he ignored it and, after hesitating for a few seconds, put his hand on the wall. The second he touched it, the scratching stopped, and something tapped on the other side of the wall, just like the tapping on the window, right on the boy’s hand. He jumped out of surprise, and only of surprise, because for some reason, he didn’t feel so scared anymore. He felt drown to it. The tapping went a little further along the wall. Nero followed it without taking his hand away. The dogs didn’t follow, he noticed. They kept pacing in the living room, not barking or growling anymore. They just looked at him leave.

The boy felt hypnotised by the noise, by the feeling on his palm. He followed it around the house like an animal following a trail. He kept his eye on the wall as well, as is something was about to appear and he couldn’t risk missing it. He slowly followed the sound into the darkness, his feet moving of their own accord. His heart was beating so hard but he still didn’t feel proper fear, just a sensation of unease obliterated by the need to follow the sound. Eventually, he came to a stop when he reached a door. The basement’s door. The boy hesitated. He had always hated the basement, just like anyone else, he supposed. Nobody liked to go in there, especially in the middle of the night, but the tapping was getting insistent on the other side of the door and, for some reason he wasn’t quite sure of, he reached out and opened it. In front of him were the cliché basement stairs, just like in the horror movies he liked to watch with Ulysses, the ones that went along the wall before diving straight into the darkness. He turned on the light, taking his first step down. It was just a light bulb attached to a wire, swaying slightly, barely illuminating anything, let alone the dark corners of the room.

The boy reached the end of the creaking stairs, finally letting go of the wall. The tapping had stopped now. Somehow, he felt as if it had been trying to tell him something, to get him to go somewhere and now, he had arrived right where it wanted him to be, where there was something he *had* to see. It kind of made sense now, all those sounds. They had started in the window, which was the closest room near the basement. When he had been too scared to come, the banging outside had almost *pushed him* towards the corridor, where the tapping in the wall had started. It was as if something had tried really hard to get him in there.

He looked around. He hadn’t been down there for ages. This was where they kept their canned food, laundry detergent and the likes, but since it was so creepy, Nero always managed to have someone else go down here. He suspected that Ulysses knew he was scared and volunteered to go just to take it off his little brother’s back. Everything was covered in cob webs and dust. They didn’t come here very often, and he was quite sure nobody came down here to clean the room.

The lightbulb kept swaying at the end of its wire, for some reason, even though there wasn’t any wind getting inside the room. With every movement of the light, Nero swore he could see something move, all the way into the opposite corner. He walked to the centre of the room, his eyes not leaving the spot before steadying the light with his hand, careful not to burn himself. He squinted, trying to focus on discerning a shape from the shadows, stepping a little closer, carefully. He stepped back immediately.

Right next to the shelf, crouched on the ground, his back turned towards him, he could clearly see the shape of a man, curled into a ball. Or of something humanoid curled into a ball, at least. Nero couldn’t see all of him, but the top of his body was naked and he could see every single bone of his back. Every vertebra was sticking out, it almost looked like the skin was barely hanging on his body as there was clearly no flesh left, like the man had been starving for months. Nero couldn’t see his face as it was hidden between the man’s knees. The position looked painful and, for a reason that was a little unclear, the boy took a few careful steps closer to the man and called out to him.

He immediately regretted it. The man turned around so fast Nero wondered how he hadn’t snapped his neck. Except that it wasn’t quite a man. It looked like one, but its face was all wrong, like the skin had melted of the bone. It had only a few strands of long, dirty back hair barely hanging onto its skull, as well as one of its eyes was missing. Its mouth hung open, as if it didn’t have any muscle left to keep it closed, and the head was hanging to the side. In a low growl, the thing dropped itself on the ground, propping its body on the palms of its hands. Nero fell on the floor in surprise.

With a harsh breathing, the thing crawled slowly towards the boy. It sounded as if every breath was forcing open a pair of lungs that had been inactive for weeks, months, even. Now that it was crawling into the light, Nero could see the details more clearly. Some spots of skin were rotten, the stench coming from the moving body almost making him throw up. It looked dead. It looked as if it had just been rotting away in the basement, waiting for the boy to come down.

Nero crawled backwards, trying to stay out of reach, sobs shaking his body periodically. The thing wasn’t very fast and still, somehow, it looked as if it was still going faster than him. He cried out. His back had just hit the wall. He was stuck. He closed his eyes, praying for something to happen, for someone to open the door and help him, but all his mind could focus on was the thing’s horrible breathing, coupled with the sound of its body dragging itself on the floor, slowly.

It seemed to go on for hours, the horrible sound of the dragged body making Nero cover his ears. Then, suddenly, it stopped. He could feel and smell a horrendous stench on his face. The boy cracked an eye open before letting out a whimper. The thing’s face was right in front of him, just a few inches from his own. It creeped closer, their noses almost touching. Nero could feel its hair touch his cheeks and closed his eyes, readying himself for whatever was going to happen.

He heard the thing take a deep breath in, and a loud, screeching scream resonated from its rotten throat and filled the room.

6.

January the 2nd, 2009: 00.19 am

The dog licked his face, waking the boy up. He sat up on the couch, rubbing his neck. His sleeping position hadn’t been optimal and he felt sore. He massaged the muscle to push the stiffness away and rolled his shoulders. The dog seemed nervous, pacing in front of the boy, yapping every now and then. Nero figured he must have had quite an agitated sleep. He was thankful he had been woken up at that precise moment and hadn’t been forced to live the nightmare any longer, who knows what was going to happen next. It was quite unusual for him to dream of something resembling the situation he was in when he fell asleep. After all, he was alone at home, watching Star Wars in the dark, and his parents still wouldn’t be back for a few more hours. He hadn’t been asleep for very long, as the credits were still rolling. He turned off the television, listening to the silence. The house was plunged into darkness without the screen lighting up the room. The only sound he could hear were the snores coming from his second dog, who obviously hadn’t been disturbed by Nero’s nightmare at all.

Nero sighed and stretched his legs and arms, hearing his left knee’s articulation’s pop. He rubbed his eyes before slowly getting up and walked towards the light switch. The warm light engulfed the room, effectively waking up the dog, who jumped in surprised, got up, and trotted to the boy. He smiled, wishing he, too, could be up and kicking so fast right after waking up. He scratched her behind the ears, before turning his head towards the hallway. From far way, into the dark, he could discern the basement’s door, hidden in the shadow. Somehow, he could still smell the thing’s breath, feel its hair on his cheeks. He shivered, shaking his head, hoping it make shake the memory away. The air felt heavy, too warm for a January night, yet he didn’t want to open the window, still too afraid of what he might hear coming from outside the house.

From behind the curtains, he could see the light from the lamppost flickering. Right next to his house was a small forest where they usually walked the dogs on Sundays, with Ulysses. Before you get to the woods, there is a long, dark alley you have to cross, one that went right alongside his garden, before diving straight into the darkness of the forest. When they were kids, they used to go in that alley to sit right in the middle of it in the evening. They would meet with their neighbour, who was, coincidently, Ulysses’ best friend. She would bring a small flashlight, and they would spend hours telling each other scary stories, up until their parents called them back in. In time, other kids from their street ended up joining them. But then, some thugs started hanging there to drink and smoke. They were just teenagers who probably didn’t mean to do anything bad, yet it had been enough to scare the suburban parents. A few weeks later, that lamp had been installed, and the kids had deemed the place “not funny enough anymore”. However, not that long later, the lamp started flickering. The lightbulb was replaced, but it didn’t change anything. According the whoever it was that took care of it (his father had told him who it was but he hadn’t cared much about it), they couldn’t tell what was wrong. So, the alley earned back its title of “scary spot”. They actually loved it even more, as it remined them of that similar scene at the beginning of the third Harry Potter movie, when Harry sees the Grimm for the first time. One of the oldest kids even swore that she had seen a huge dog staring at her from the forest, and a cloud taking the shape of a wolf right when the light flickered. At that point, that had just been stealing the plot from the movie, but it had scared the younger kids, so it was good enough.

They had spent months meeting every other night to share those scary stories. It had seemed like a good plan, back in the day, not to mention that it was probably what had sparked Nero’s love for horror movies. However, right now, scared, alone in his living room, he kind of regretted doing it. They hadn’t done it for years now, which made him wonder how he could have been cool with it when he was so young. He was quite certain he wouldn’t be able to stand it, now that he was older, he would be too scared, for sure, which was a little humiliating.

Sitting on the couch, he considered his next move. Going to bed wasn’t even an option, there was no way in hell he would be able to sleep. Plus, going upstairs didn’t feel like a very good idea right now, he would never dare cross the corridor. He could sleep on the couch, but again, that would mean closing his eyes and be oblivious to whatever might come near him, so that was a no as well. He figured that, the first thing to do, would be to try and find out how long he would be alone for. Twenty minutes, he could just wait it out, three hours, he would need to find something to do to appease his mind. So, accepting that he might be told off for not being in bed yet, he settled for sending a text to his mum, as his dad probably didn’t even have his phone with him. Apparently, he hadn’t grasped the concept of a *mobile* phone yet. A simple “Are you guys on your way back yet?” would do. Hopefully they wouldn’t be too far.

As he waited for an answer, slumped on his couch, Nero took in his surroundings. He wished he were brave enough to go into the other rooms of the house to turn the lights not, as he glared at the darkness that seemed to be creeping closer to him. He turned his head towards the television, trying not to think about all the scary things that could hide in the shadows. He knew he shouldn’t be afraid of the dark anymore and yet, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was watching him, the exact same feeling he’d had since he was a child.

Before long, he also figured out that staring at the television wasn’t such a good idea either. Just a few weeks ago, Nero and his brother had decided it would be fun to watch the Ring together. After it had ended, Ulysses had said that the movie wasn’t scary enough, and had disappeared into his room to come back with the DVD of the Japanese version of the horror film that a friend had given him. The younger sibling hadn’t been very comfortable with the idea. To him, the first one they had watched had been scary enough, so he wasn’t sure he could handle worst. Still, he kept his mouth shut and pretended he agreed. He had slept in his brother’s room, that night.

5.

July the 12th, 2013: 1.47 am

Nero’s eyes shot open. It was dark and silent as ever and he had been half-asleep, face-down in his pillow, but he was sure he had heard a noise. The house, which was located in a very silent neighbourhood, wasn’t a creepy, creaky one, so noises never failed to wake him up. He waited for a few seconds, wondering if it was just in his head, or if the noise would come back. He didn’t move, and barely breathed, as if the sound of his breathing would scare the sound away. He tilted his head slightly to the left, trying to hear better, before closing his eyes, hoping it might make his hearing a little stronger. Then it came again. A loud bang, louder than the one that had shaken him, but it wasn’t just a banging, there was a scratching noise to, like something was scraping wood. Like nails scraping wood. He raised his head from his pillow and opened his eyes again, looking down on his bed. The bang rang again, once more a little stronger. And again, and again. Every time a little louder.

He screwed his eyes shut, trying to think of logical reasons this could be happening at this time of the night, however he really couldn’t come up with anything. He hugged his pillow as tight has he could, trying to stop the growing shaking in his hands. He kept repeating himself that it was nothing, it was probably in his mind, or he was still half-dreaming, that the sound was completely natural. Yet something in his head, a little voice told him that he was just fooling himself.

For a second, he thought about just staying there, in his bed, and wait for whatever it was to pass by. But he was a man now, an adult. He was seventeen, after all. Maybe his brother had a problem, and was banging the door to get help? Or maybe someone had gotten in the house and was hurting his parents? He took a deep breath before turning on the little lamp beside his bed. The light blinded him for a second, making him he shield his eyes with his left hand. With the right one, he reached for the small wooden knife he had made himself a few months back, when the nightmares had become so horrible that he couldn’t sleep. His mother had said it was weird and dangerous, but he couldn’t sleep without having it next to him, and, right now, he was really glad it was there. The noise hadn’t stop. It kept going on, each time a little stronger.

He opened his eyes when he found the knife, gripping it tight, as if it were going to slip out of his fingers. His hand was shaking quite badly already, and sweat had started dripping down his back. The boy slowly got up, walking towards his door. The noise never stopped. With his free hand, he reached for his door before opening it. He silently prayed for the noise to stop, for everything to go back to normal, and stepped into the corridor. Even after all those years, this place still scared him to the core. It was as dark as ever, even darker, if he was being honest.

Nero suddenly felt cold, like a huge, silent wind had gone right through the house. He froze in his steps, holding his little knife with both hands in front of his chest. He was gripping it so hard he started wondering if it might break from the force of it. He felt like crying again. He was about to start walking when something moved. Or rather, he thought something had moved. The corridor was by far the darkest spot in the house, with no natural light coming in. The only light that was turned on was his small bedside lamp, which wasn’t much help. He cursed himself for not turning on his main light, at least, and tried to go back. A sob escaped his lips. He was frozen to the spot. He felt all the blood drain from his face to go straight to his heart that was beating so hard he could hardly hear the noise anymore. But it was there, and so was that shadow that he had seen moving by, he was sure of it.

He felt eyes on his back, like something was watching him from afar, taunting him, waiting for him to come closer. Nero’s whole body was shaking so hard he wasn’t quite sure how long his legs would carry him. He was about to let himself drop to the floor when the noise became more insistent. It started shaking the whole house, the scratching becoming more intense, like the nails had started to go through the wooden door. In that very moment, he knew. It was coming from his brother’s room.

His hands shook even harder, which he didn’t think was possible. They shook so hard he almost dropped the knife. The sound came from the left part of the corridor, and the only room that was still in front of him was his brother’s. He tried to scream call for Ulysses, or their parents, yet, no sound would escape his mouth, like his voice had been taken away by the fear that gripped his whole body. Nobody would come to help him. He closed his eyes again, trying to calm himself, settle his breathing. Everything was so very wrong, terrifying, but he had to go to the room to do whatever he could to protect his brother. He had to run through the rest of the corridor and reach the door. Damned be the dark, the banging, the scratching, or even that shadow, if it was really there.

Nero wanted to move so bad, however, his whole body was frozen. A tear rolled down his cheek as he noticed his shirt drenched in sweat. He felt so, so cold. He re-opened his eyes, immediately wishing he hadn’t. Because now, at the end of the corridor, he could clearly see the shadow. It was standing right besides Ulysses’ room, as if waiting for him to come close enough to grab him. Its body was tall, crooked, so dark it looked like it sucked in any light around it. It waited, unmoving, silent.

The noise had gotten even stronger now, whatever was behind it banging and scratching the door so hard, like someone, or something was coming up behind them, and that door was the only way out. Gathering all his courage, Nero gripped his knife as tight as he could, taking in a deep breath. He *ran* towards the shadows. He screwed his eyes shut, stabbing blindly in the dark as he ran, hoping that whatever was there would either die or go away but, to his great surprise, he reached Ulysses’ room without touching anything. He stopped right in front of the door. The noise was so strong he wanted to cover his ears. It now felt like it was coming from everywhere, surrounding him, strangling his throat and crushing his head. But he couldn’t lose any more time now.

The second Nero opened the door, the noise stopped. There was nothing. Everything was now so silent, he wondered if he didn’t like it better before. It was one of those silences that you know aren’t quite natural, that feel like something is definitely wrong. The sudden lack of noise chilled his bones. He could only hear his heart beat faster than ever, like it was trying to break out of his ribcage. Nero peered inside. The room was empty. Ulysses’ bed was unmade, empty has well. It was still dark, but the blinds weren’t closed (which was weird too), allowing the moonlight to shine through the window. The boy walked in slowly, raising his knife in front of him. There was something wrong with the room, a feeling he didn’t like. The air felt heavy, suffocating. It was so cold that Nero shivered, hugging himself in an attempt to warm up.

All the furniture was still there, yet nothing was where it should be. The bed wasn’t against the wall, the desk was on the wrong side of the room, the wardrobe was next to the window… Everything was just *wrong*. For a minute, he considered thieves, but all the drawers were still closed, plus, the room clearly hadn’t been searched for any valuable objects. Ulysses’ wallet was even there, he could still see some money sticking out of it. He walked in a bit further, stepped closer to the bed, and froze.

It was in the corner of his eye. Just as it had been all those years ago, when he was still just a child. He didn’t look directly at it, but he knew it was there. The same shadow than the one he had seen in the corridor now felt even more dangerous, threatening. Somehow, he knew that, if he looked at it, it would be over. He felt it watch him, observe his every movement, his every step, waiting for him to step out of line, to come close enough for it to reach him. Nero cried in silence, stepping back slowly. He reached the corridor in what felt like hours, and closed the door, not once looking back in the room.

He wanted to sit in a corner and cry, to wait for the sun to come back outside, but he had a feeling that the night would never end, a feeling that there was something wrong with his brother. They weren’t twins, Ulysses being four years older than Nero (even if Nero was the responsible one, ask anybody, really) but they had always felt like they shared that bond, the twin thing, like they say in the movie. Sometimes, one of them would feel something in their guts, in their bones and sure enough, there was something wrong with the other. It felt like that today.

So, he took a deep breath before turning to his parents’ room. Somehow, he knew it would be empty too. However, he walked up to the door and opened it anyway. Knife raised, he kept his eyes to the ground until he had reached the bed, not once glancing at the direction of the darkest corner of the bedroom, next to the small television, and looked up at the bed. He wasn’t surprised, but he sobbed anyway. The bed was unmade, empty. Nero touched the sheets, realizing they were still warm. Something was so wrong, everything felt out of place, and he didn’t know what to do, so Nero cried. He curled up in the bed, hugging his mother’s pillow, inhaling what was left of her scent. It felt like she had been gone for hours, but the sheets weren’t cold yet, which he didn’t understand. Nothing made sense and he knew, without looking, that he wasn’t alone in the room. He knew the shadow was there, waiting for him.

Slowly, he got back on his feet, shaking, crying like a child. Just as he had done before, he kept his eyes down, left the room, and walked away, not even bothering to close the door anymore. Then he noticed something, something that he hadn’t noticed before. He didn’t know how he had managed to miss it, and wondered if it had been like this since the beginning. There was light coming from downstairs. Not only light, but *music*. The radio was turned on. He got closer to the stairs, glimpsing down to the living room. It was empty, as the light and music were coming from the kitchen.

Nero slowly walked down the creaking stairs, stopping when he reached the last step, trying to see if anything was out of place, but it all seemed fine. The furniture was where it was supposed to be, everything was clean and… *Normal.* The cold stone ground against his bare feet shook him out of his trance, and he walked slowly to the kitchen. He sighed in relief. Right there, sat at the table, facing the opposite wall, were his parents and brother. He smiled, feeling better than he had in ages, all the tension leaving his shoulders.

“There you guys are, I was so worried!”, he said, coming closer to the room, putting his knife in his pyjama pocket.

But nobody answered.

“Guys?”

Nero creeped closer to them. Everything was silent except for the radio, neither his parents nor Ulysses was talking, which was the weirdest thing in there because Ulysses talked *all the time*. He then noticed that it wasn’t a usual radio that was playing, it was a very old one, like the ones you would see in a 1960’s movie. The show that was on was clearly one from that period in time as well. Suddenly, realizing that, everything felt off again. The feeling of dread was right back under his skin in a second. The boy’s whole body tensed, and he felt eyes on his back again. He slowly walked into the room, trying to make someone answer, speak, move… None of them did anything. They just sat there, stuck in a stupor he couldn’t describe. Nero grabbed the knife again before walking around the table to face them.

From the corner of his eye, he swore he could see the shadow smile. He opened his mouth to talk to his mother, but nothing came out. His heart stopped, his hand dropping the small weapon. Nero couldn’t move, couldn’t speak, his whole body was frozen by the choc. A few seconds passed, and he screamed harder than he had ever screamed before.

They were all dead.

6.

July the 12th, 2013: 1.53 am

Nero woke up whimpering. His whole body was shaking, and all he could feel was his drenched shirt sticking to his sweaty body. He didn’t dare open his eyes, still too shaken by the nightmare. If he had to be honest, too scared of what he would see if he did, too. He kept his eyes screwed shut and tried to calm his breathing down. He felt like his lungs were on fire, as if air was having trouble making its way in and out. Breathing hurt. His heart was beating so fast, so hard against his ribcage he thought for a second that it might just jump out of his chest at any second.

Sticking his shaking right hand from under the covers, he reached for his bedside lamp, groping around his little table until he found the on-button, and pressed it. He quickly brought his hand back into the safety of his bed, gathering the courage to open his eyes. He was a little blinded by the light for a second, so it took him a little while to adjust. By now, his breathing had gotten a little better, but the reminiscences of his nightmare kept coming back every time he blinked, the faces of his whole family, *dead*, of his brother’s lifeless eyes, his mother’s limp body slumped on the chair, cursing his memory. He looked at the time and sighed. It would be another sleepless night then. Thankfully, during summer, the sun would be out quite early, probably around 5:30, he estimated, which wasn’t so far off, so he might grab a few hours of sleep before everyone was awake and going about the house… Maybe.

Nero buried his head back into his pillow, trying not to look at the dark spots of his room that the light couldn’t quite catch. His bed was in a small alcove in a corner of the room, where had been since he was a child. It made him feel safe to be surrounded like that, especially not to see the door, which used to be very scary to him as a kid, probably because his brother’s idea of fun was that he would come to his bedroom in the middle of the night, slowly open the door to stand in the doorway, so the corridor’s light would cast a terrifying shadow in the room, scaring Nero to death. He obviously hadn’t done that in years now, but they never moved the bed, finding that the young boy slept better like that anyway. However, it also meant that the light wouldn’t go far and, apart from the surface of his bed, not much else in the room would be illuminated.

He tried not to think of the shadows near the window, to forget that feeling of dread and unease, tried not to listen to the voice in his head telling him that someone, something, was watching him from that same spot as it had so many years ago. He kept his eyes firmly fixated on his small wooden knife next to the bedside lamp. Nero brought his knees to his chest, hugging himself like a child would. He felt ashamed that he still had to do that, and certainly wasn’t going to tell anyone, especially not Ulysses. He would make fun of him, of course he would, and he would be right to.

Minutes passed, agonizingly slowly, and he realized that he couldn’t quite calm down. He considered picking up a book to try to read a little, hopeful that it would help him forget the nightmare, the horror of what his mind had made up tonight but, as he was slowly reaching for it, he closed his fist, putting his arm back around his knees. He wouldn’t never be able to focus on anything, not right now, not in this state and, as ridicule as it sounded, he didn’t like the idea of being distracted. He didn’t feel safe, and wanted to be able to notice anything out of the ordinary.

The feeling of having someone watching him just wouldn’t go away. The voice telling him that he wasn’t alone in his bedroom would not go away. Not to mention that he still hadn’t dared to look towards the shadows. In addition of feeling terrified, he felt angry, angry with himself that he was still so stupidly scared, just like he had been as a child, only he wasn’t a child anymore. Next year he would go to university, and then what? Wake his roommate every night because he had a *nightmare*? Make sure he would be tagged as “the boy that cries during the night” for his whole academic life? No thanks. He was already quite unsure of that whole “uni idea”, but that would just make it all worse.

Nero felt a tear of frustration roll down his cheek, and he brushed it off angrily. He still hadn’t quite calmed down. The images of the dream kept coming back and back, he started wondering if it would leave him alone at some point. The thought of his family hurt, *dead*, obliterated the one of the shadows hiding something. Nothing was more terrifying to him. So, he grabbed his phone to turn on the flashlight. For a second, he considered turning it towards the rest of the room, but the old feeling that there was indeed something there was stronger, so he decided that he would rather not know. He slowly got out of bed, taking his wet shirt off, and walked to the door, illuminating it, careful not to look at anything except the exit. He swore he could feel eyes follow his every movement. Still, he pushed the idea to the side and kept going.

The door creaked open as he stepped into the corridor. The small halo of light coming from his phone couldn’t do much to light up the whole place. However, Nero decided that it would be good enough for him to walk to the light switch. He kept his eyes firmly on the floor, trying hard not to think… About anything really. As he walked, he was sure he could hear a rasping behind him, almost sounding like steps, like someone was following him, trying to be as silent as possible. He dismissed it, having more important things to do. The boy turned the light on and sighed in relief, eventually daring to turn around and look back. The corridor was empty, of course. He reasoned with himself that, obviously it was empty, it had always been empty, but somehow, he didn’t quite believe it.

He reached Ulysses’ door and slowly opened it. In a second, he felt all the tension leave his body. His brother was there, sleeping, his face illuminated by the light he had turned on just a second ago. He thanked his good luck that Ulysses was a very heavy sleeper, otherwise he would have to explain why he showed up in someone else’s bedroom in the middle of the night just to stare at them like some creep. He kept his eyes on his brother for a long while, watching his chest rise and fall as he breathed in and out. Of course, he knew it had all been just a dream, yet he couldn’t help but feel like his family was still in danger, the feeling of something being wrong with them never quite leaving him. Seeing him there, safe, was the best feeling Nero had felt in ages. The vision of his Ulysses’ dead body slowly disappeared, replaced with the vision of a peaceful sleep. Safe, thank God.

It wasn’t the first time he had gotten up during the night to check if his family was fine, needing to shut up the voice in his head, that voice screaming that the nightmares weren’t just nightmares. He never told them of those nightly visits. He didn’t think he ever would. He also didn’t think he would ever stop checking on them, somehow.

He wasn’t quite sure how long he stood in the doorway when he finally stepped back and closed the door. He turned to his parents’ room next. The door was wide open, as it usually was, since their family pets slept in there too. Nero stepped in the room, trying to make as little noise as possible. His father’s sleep was as heavy as his brother’s, but his mother’s was much lighter, so she would jump at the slightest sound. Thankfully the corridor’s light never seemed to wake her. His hands in his pockets, he looked at them smiling.

Of course, they, too, were fine. His father was snoring, as usual. It was apparently the only sound his mother could sleep through, by some miracle. Her face was almost entirely hidden under the covers, which made him wonder how she could sleep like that without feeling like she was suffocating. Between them, peacefully sleeping, and lightly snoring too, was their German Shepperd, or rather *his* German Shepperd, if you asked him. He was quite a big dog, but he always managed to fit himself in that tiny place in between his parents. Their second dog, just a tad smaller, was half-awake at the end of the bed, silently looking at him. The cat, on the other hand, was fully awake, and not too happy that the light was shining right into his face.

Even though he felt better and calmer, Nero still didn’t dare to look in *that* corner, the one near the television. He sighed, stepping back outside the room. He walked back to his own room, taking the time to turn on his own light before shutting down the one in the corridor. He closed the door behind him and rested his back on it. He knew he wouldn’t get any sleep tonight, at least not until the sun was up. He rubbed his eyes tiredly and walked back to his bed, leaving the light on. He slowly got under the cover and grabbed his book, sure, however, that he wouldn’t be able to read one single page. He just held it in front of his eyes, trying to settle his eyes on a word in the middle of the page, and focused all of his attention on it.

As he had guessed, he didn’t get any more sleep that night. Not even when the sun rose.