

*Week 4 exercise, older narrator looking back on a moment in their life right before something cataclysmic happens, casual and slightly confused/frustrated tone with the narrator losing trust in his perceived reality.*

Some days I forget how our lives used to be. It's those small little things you forget to remember. Strangely enough it seems like I don't dare to explore those thoughts, as if my mind tries to tell me it has always been this way. Most days I don't think about it. I get forced to remind though when I see his face lurking from the corner, his pale helpless eyes glimmering through the dark. I'm not even sure if that was how his face looked like. Funny how the mind starts playing games with you. I know he isn't real. My little brother. I mean, I know he isn't there when I see him.

Him - or whoever is standing there.

It's of no use going back to those thoughts, those memories. Those useless videotapes. Fucking Mark with his deadbeat old mother. Couldn't he check those damn tapes himself?

He had recently installed a new surveillance system to make his mom feel safer. Valid reason I guess. What had happened is that the system notified some movement was caught the previous night, but according to Mark, he needed help replaying those tapes. What was I thinking? And how am I now blaming him? I should have known better. I think a part of me wanted to believe they weren't real. Of course his house was already infested. It probably wasn't even *he* who called me that night.

Just a few days prior the county's head deputy sheriff had broadcasted a video message to stay inside after 22:00. To hide and alert local authorities whenever they got inside your home. We didn't think much of it. I think the first case of missing children came from Walworth County. They didn't even bother a state-wide Wisconsin alert. Only after I lost little Tony. Fucking "authorities". Never on time when it matters.

They aren't supposed to help you.

I drove home after rebooting Mark's surveillance system, I think it was around 23:30 by that time already. My mom was asleep. Tony, my little brother, was also asleep. His bedroom window let open.

I couldn't sleep that night, something felt off – it had followed me home.

Why did I have to fix that system now? Where was Mark's mother when I came over?

Couldn't this wait until next morning? While these questions were circling my mind, I suddenly heard my brother whisper. My room was one story above his and since we lived in an older house, I could always hear him from his room. What followed is a sound I'll never forget, a slow long moist crush. The sound of a child's skull giving in. And at the time, I didn't even realise that *that's* what I had heard.

I remained motionless in bed. I just listened. I listened as I heard steps from the stairs below creak closer. The steps getting louder before they suddenly stopped. It stood right behind my door. I saw its shadow shine through below my door. The shadow of two limbs standing motionless.

"Jhaake, can yuu ophrenn the dhooorr?" I heard my brothers voice gurgling.

I remained silent.

It knocked on my door.

"Jhaake... Jhaake we wan't' t shreee yuuu."

I wasn't there.

I don't remember how long it stood there. Or even how I got out. I guess a part of me remained in that room.

Since Tony's missing, anomalies in our state only increased. Already forty thousand children went missing in Wisconsin. It seems nobody knows where they came from, nor where they take our children. The local police station won't even send their officers in case of a breach. Phone calls go straight to an automated message.

We are all alone.

There he is again. I see its bleak stare cut through the darkness. Sickly smiling in the corner of my room. I feel nothing. I think I've held out long enough.

I surrender.

I let go.

It's better this way.

Tony won't be alone anymore.