

I often dream of being chased. Hunted, maybe. Interiors with no exit. Twisting, labyrinthine structures that go on forever. The feeling of close air and closer walls. Is it time I'm racing? Or something else? I fear I will awake in the night and stumble blindly to my bathroom, only to find my path extended forever before me. **NO EXIT**. None at all. Once, I only dreamt of being lost, the open world swallowing me whole. I needed to get away, get somewhere. I couldn't run properly, you never can in dreams. I think I was chased into these places. Whatever has sought me while I sleep has trapped me in these tunnels. The endless hallways, lined with books that cannot be read. The bare, echoing concrete tunnels lit by excruciatingly fluorescent bulbs. Always there is a promise of escape, and always it is denied me. What will happen to me when I am caught?

When I was a kid, I lived a few doors down from an older man; Frank, I think his name was. He was weathered, almost chewed up by the sun and the cigarettes he seemed to always be smoking. He would always smile, polite and caring, and he never had a bad word to say about our off-kilter little apartment complex. He was funny and worn, in a crooked, comfortable sense, like a nose that'd been broken and set too many times to be normal.

When I was eight, I would stay out late in the summers, exploring the undeveloped land just beyond the cheap pine fence that surrounded the Spires of Sherwood. The other kids, the wayward souls whose parents worked odd and late hours to afford the modicum of comfort the Spires provided, and I would jump the creek and run the fields and laugh and scream our youth until it was full dark and we couldn't stand the silence that seemed to fall all too suddenly around us. There were rumors, of course, of a witch who lived in the small parcel of land that sat behind the Spires, that if you followed the creek you'd find her creepy little shack and she'd kill you or eat you or do whatever horrible thing a ten year old from Block E could think of at the time.

I believed precisely none of it, but it shook me all the same. My mother and I lived on the ground floor, and my bedroom had a large window near my bunk-bed. I would have nightmares about someone standing just outside my window, watching me. There weren't any lights in the subsections of the Spires, probably so people wouldn't complain about being kept up at all hours, so I could never make out anything but the shape and size of them. Always still, just... watching. I slept in my mother's room more often than not when I was a kid. She had a large bed that blocked my view of her window, and her presence made the darkness and quiet a lot easier to bear. She was not there when it was almost 9:30 and the other kids'd gone home. I don't remember why I'd been out so late. Maybe visiting a friend? Regardless, I was walking home and it was dark.

The sky was that faint indigo, tantalizingly close to dusk but on the wrong side. Without lights above, I had to navigate by the lights in people's windows, not knowing where to go but where *not* to go. I was maybe an apartment block or two away from our unit, 49, but it was taking so long to get back. The lights from the windows didn't seem to reach far enough and all they ended up doing was keeping my eyes from adjusting and it seemed too quiet and where was *everyone*? There must've been over 150 people living here, and it's not like it was the middle of the night, so why was it so *quiet* and *empty* and *dark*?

And then I felt it. That sense of being watched. I began to panic. I started to run, petrified less of what would happen to me, and that I'd trip and fall on the rough stone walkways and skin my knee. How was I not home yet? I looked up and did not recognize the apartments around me. I was breathing heavily at this point, drenched in sweat from the humid night air and my own fear. I stopped to catch my breath in fleeting, desperate gulps, a little boy drowning in water shallow enough to walk in. My breathing slowed, bit by bit. I chanced another look around, and felt sure I could get home from here. But then I heard something else. Something still. You know how you can kind of "hear" when someone is nearby? How their presence disrupts the air in such a subtle but telling way? I'll admit, I screamed. Or at least I think I did. She, they, *it* was here, the thing, the watcher from my dreams. I knew it.

Closer now, with no window or bed or mom between us.

I ran again, full tilt, not even caring if I scraped my knee or chipped a tooth or whatever mundane horror I worried about when I could see the sun and light and people. I ran for what felt like hours, taking turns and corners and never once feeling that presence diminish. I was sure I was going to disappear that night, gone from the world to always run in dark alleys and rough cobbled sidewalks until time ended. Then, very suddenly, I saw Frank. He was standing just beyond his porch, with a large silver flashlight in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I barreled into him and he let me cling to his leg and bask in that familiar but not entirely unpleasant aroma of sweat and tobacco.

"You're alright," I remember him saying, "you're safe now."

He walked me home, then, and we were there, almost abruptly. He smiled at my mother and I, and walked back into the night with that blazing torch. I noticed he had a pistol tucked into the waistband of his jeans then. It's not like I never had nightmares after that, I was and am riddled with anxiety in its myriad forms. But I never saw that figure outside my window again, and I think a part of me knew it was because of Frank. I think he knew there was something in the darkness,

something wrong. A lot of other people would have just led me home and then gone home themselves. But Frank, and people like him, see something wrong and do something about it. They hear a bump in the night and they get a fucking weapon. That's what a Hunter is, someone who has seen the crooked, the malign, the fucked-up shit and instead of hiding behind their windows, their beds, their mothers, face it headlong. Whether it's duty or goodwill or just a lust for violence, they do things they feel need to be done. Because if they don't, who will?