

- There's a story that occasionally floats around. - A large man, wizened by his age, spoke, moving his arm sustained by the elbow on the table. He had a thick and well cared for grey moustache to go along with his considerable amount of grizzled hair. - It always speaks of someone who, after a brief period of very clear paranoia, dies in their sleep after five complete minutes of uninterrupted screaming. Nobody really understands the cause, but there's one very interesting, albeit macabre, bit in all of it.
- And what's that? - Asked the young and curious brunette. She was in no way tall, standing at about chin-height against the other speaker. She wore small round glasses, even if they spent most of their time near her or hanging somewhere in her clothing (currently on the table), and complimented her long dark brown haircut with a well defined bang at the front.
- The brains of the people who succumb to whatever this is are completely rotten.
- What? - She asked in disbelief as her eyes widened and one of her eyebrows slid up. The speaker continued his explanation with a grim tone.
- The outside looks as normal as any other, but the moment you start cutting it open, a putrid smell of rotten flesh, stronger than even a week's old corpse, just comes out and everything from the inside is simply falling apart.
- But... how does that even happen? How come the outside doesn't look affected? That would imply the rot started from the inside? - It made no sense to her how a piece of living tissue actively being used simply rotted. Even more so the fact that it confined itself to just the inside of the brain.
- That, - The speaker started, shaking his head. - I'm afraid I do not know. It does not make sense to me either. Or to anyone for that matter. Almost every scientist just considers it complete bollocks.
- Almost?
- Well, the few who don't are the ones who actually autopsied the bodies of the victims.
- Wouldn't they just show it to anyone who didn't believe in it? Didn't they take pictures? - It seemed like an obvious step to take when dealing with something so bizarre.
- Pictures aren't very good at showing such things yet. We would need them to... present colour, at least.
- I guess... - She reluctantly conceded
- At any rate, - The speaker rose from his chair with a grunt of effort - I take it this is a good enough matter to study for your thesis, Miss Goodwood?
- Oh, absolutely, Mister Winslow! - She claimed with a smile - But is there even any way I can investigate such a thing if so few people get to see it and even fewer believe it to have any scientific worth?

Mister Winslow grinned.

- Please follow me to my library. - He asked, stepping away. Miss Goodwood soon followed - I can't claim that it will be enough for such an investigation, but it should get you started. - He explained while on the way. - It's a book that details an account of someone succumbing to the disease.

- Wow, really? - She asked in surprise, skipping just next to him to see his face better. - How did you get a hold of that?
- I wrote it! - He claimed just as he opened the double dark wood doors that gave forth to a fairly big personal library.

It was just a single floor, but there were several bookshelves starting from the left wall and circling until halfway across the room, giving the centre of it a space for a couple of dark green single sofas and candles for reading in a small, circular table between them. However, the almost wall-wide window on the right provided enough lighting in the room to read at any time while the sun was out, and a pleasant view of a well-tended garden. Closer to the window, there was also a writing desk with a few papers and writing implements strewn about, but Mr. Winslow simply took a left and started scanning his bookshelves, letting his hand drag as he mumbled the names of what he saw.

Ms. Goodwood, on the other hand, stood next to the couch for a few seconds before asking if she could help, which a sudden shout of celebration interrupted. It seems the book had been found.

- Here you go, Miss. - He handed it over with a satisfied smile. It was a slim dark-green book. The bind was poorly made and held together with extra strands of thread; the cover itself looked worn and there were a few bits of different types of paper sticking out. The title seemed to have been scrawled into it by hand. "Brain Rot". - This book - He explained - contains my rendition, in story form, of the experiences of my father before he died of that disease. I based it on the notes he kept while it was going on, which are also in that book, and what I saw myself of his developments.
- Your... father? - She asked, afraid she had overstepped herself into a topic she should have known about beforehand. He was quick to dismiss it as not-important. - Alright but... - She started, in doubt - this looks like the original version. Can I really have this for my research?
- I wrote it a couple of decades ago when I found my father had kept notes about what happened to him. The nature of it was merely for me to get closure and an understanding of what was going on while he was dying, as there was a lot I didn't get at the time. I closed the matter when I finished the book, and I had no intention of ever touching it again. It was probably just going to gather dust on that shelf. At least this way it might be useful to someone else. And who knows, you might get people to finally accept this disease exists. By all means, take it.

She took a moment to look at it before replying, slightly bowing

- Thank you very much, Mr. Winslow, I will take good care of it.
- You seemed like you will, from the conversation we were having earlier. I wish you best of luck in your thesis. Feel free to come back at any time if you have further questions. I'd be happy to answer them over a cup of tea. - He still graciously offered.
- I'll show you to the door.

It was a quiet ride home as Ms. Goodwood kept sneaking peeks at the book and the notes within it; careful to not let them fall off of the pages they belonged to. The rate at which

the writing became more and more frantic had her curious. So much so that, by the time she arrived, she merely dropped her jacket and handbag and sped her way to her study to work under the candle light.

- Father! Father! - A child excitedly called as he ran into the living room. He was no older than seven. Brown hair, nearly black eyes and pale skin. He brought a brown album in his hands that was almost too big for him to carry. - I found this in the attic and mother told me to show it to you.
- Oh? - The father chirped in curiosity as he finished folding his newspaper. - Ah! Yes. - He then proclaimed in pleased nostalgia as he took it from the child's hands. - This is the photo album me and your mother have been keeping ever since we got married. - He scooted to the side slightly and tapped on the sofa. - Sit here next to me. We can look through it together.

With a bit of effort, both father and son squeezed themselves into the seat, and the album soon rested on top of their legs. Like he had said, it started with a marriage. Multiple pictures showcasing the guests, the bride, the groom, both of them, and everyone together. All smiling and laughing. And the father explained who they all were and what they were doing at that time. He even pointed out the people his son would know, like the uncle who brought him a toy the last time he was in Norway, or the aunt who keeps pinching his cheeks every time she sees him, but there was one person that kept appearing in every other picture whom he could not recognise.

- Who's that? - The child pointed at one of the guests. A man in a suit with a round face and very short hair. He had one arm around the father's neck. They both shared a very large smile on their faces.
- Ah! That's William. A friend of mine. We went to college together. - The father answered somewhat dismissively as he kept looking elsewhere in the picture. - But I don't remember who this one was. - He said, his finger touching a section of the picture further behind in the scene.
- There's... no one there, father - The child claimed. - I only see a bush.
- What do you mean? - He tapped the spot once more - He's right there!
- That... kind of looks like a person, but it's a bush. Do you need glasses, father?
- Hush, son. That's rude to ask. Though perhaps I might...

To him, it appeared that he was looking at a tall white man with receding hairlines in his very black hair, accompanied by thick eyebrows. He bore an angered expression, but he did not seem to be gazing at the photographer nor at the duo posing for it, but rather at the father seeing the picture. Like he knew he was in view.

A glance at both the previous and the following pictures revealed that, indeed, he kept appearing.

Always alongside someone else, he was never alone, looking perpetually into the direction of the father, who kept racking his brain for anything that could remind him of someone like that, without success.

- What about here? - He asked, pointing to a different picture. - Do you see him, James?
- No. - The son claimed after a few seconds. - That just looks like a tree. Father? Can we stop?

He hummed to himself and pointed to a couple of pictures more to confirm it. Just like before, the son saw something else instead.

Worried, but keeping that detail from the child, he closed the album.

- Go put this back. - He asked, returning it. - We can look at it some more later. And go ask mother to check with the cook about dinner.

A minute later, he was left to his own thoughts.

The silence of the dining hall was only broken up by the light clinking of cutlery on the plates and the occasional gentle corrections the parents made to James' table manners.

But what happened earlier still dwelled on the father's mind.

- Sarah? - He asked, in between bites.
- Yes, Christopher? - Came the response, her tone curious, as if she knew he was acting strange. Sarah was a mildly tall woman, not too shorter than her husband. Her figure was notable, her face dignified, with brown eyes and black hair. She dressed elegantly at all times.
- Remember that photo we took at our wedding where William had his arm around my neck and we could barely keep up straight?
- You two had the stupidest smiles on your faces and I was about to slap you for drinking so much at our wedding. Yes, I remember. - She spoke with a clear disdain at the memory. - Why do you ask?
- Do you remember there being a third person behind us?

Sarah seemed confused at the question.

- No... Not that I remember. What did he look like?
- Thick, dark eyebrows. - He gestured. - Very dark hair, and he seemed to be looking very angry in all the pictures I saw him in.
- The only angry face I ever saw at the wedding was mother's whenever she looked in your direction.
- Father kept confusing that person with trees and bushes. - Interjected the child.
- Honey, should we see about getting you some glasses? - The mother asked in worry.
- I assure you, my vision's quite fine. I do not have any problems seeing anything. - Christopher seemed almost insulted by the suggestion. - I do not understand why James does not see him. It's as clear as day that he's there. I can show you the pictures, too.
- We'll have a look after dinner, but if whomever you're talking about is not there, please don't be stubborn and schedule an appointment, alright?

With a sigh, he agreed to do so.

Ms. Goodwood took a moment to pause. There was a note accompanying the page.

“That was the first time I saw him. He was definitely there. Unmistakably human. There is no way around it. It cannot be confused with something else, so why? Why am I the one who sees him and no one else? And why is it that he started appearing in old photos?”

“A constant figure blending into old pictures. So it causes hallucinations?” She pondered “But this seems oddly specific for just a hallucination...”

She put the note back, flipped the page, and kept reading.

Christopher seemed fairly annoyed by all of it, even if he never was impolite to those around him.

In the early afternoon of the following day, he found himself going through the motions of the visual tests asked of him with a lack of enthusiasm that left no doubts as to how little choice he was left with on the matter.

- I'm afraid your husband might be right, Ms. Winslow. - The doctor concluded, ticking off a box on the paper on his desk. - His eyesight seems almost impeccable. There is no reason for him to wear glasses right now.
- But what about the figure he keeps seeing, then? - Sarah asked
- I'm afraid that I might not be the right kind of doctor to help you with that. - He advised. - A psychologist would probably be of better use. - He still suggested. - In fact... - He looked around a couple of times before speeding to his desk to go and grab a steel nib pen and a small piece of paper, in which he hurriedly scribbled a couple of lines before delivering it to Ms. Winslow. - A friend of my wife's a psychologist. Here's her address and message telling her who's sending you. She'll give you a reasonable price for her sessions.

With a cordial nod and a smile, she thanked him and the family of three gave their farewells, going about their way until Christopher glanced at one of the posters hanging on the wall.

It was not that detailed, its purpose was merely to inform people of a few facts regarding eyesight, but there was a space there with a drawing of a doctor pointing to the text with a small slogan underneath it. What caught his attention, however, was what was next to the drawn doctor.

He was there.

He bore a similar work coat as the other but again, he was looking in his direction, his expression mirrored like before.

Angry, but composed.

Christopher stopped and asked, pointing at it. Dead serious:

- How many people are in this poster?

The doctor blinked a couple of times, stopping himself from sitting back at his desk, and answered after a noticeable “Uhm”, clearly confused:

- One... why?

Not before an audible sigh, he thanked him again and moved on, anticipating his wife's question as they closed the door.

It swung shut with the heated sounds of the couple arguing as they arrived home.

- Forget it! - Christopher loudly demanded. - There is no way I am letting anyone suck out any of my blood or spin me in a chair just because I'm seeing a figure that no one else does! I... - He took a moment to prepare himself for what he wanted to say, straightening his posture after bringing his hands to his temples for a second. - I can live with it...

Sarah did not seem, in any way, convinced, placing herself in front of him and staring her husband in the eyes:

- It might just be a figure today, but if you leave it unchecked, it will get worse, - She frowned at him with worry. - and I might have to send you to an asylum... Please don't make me do that to my very own loving husband...

The notion forced Christopher to pause for a couple of seconds before he frowned as well, feeling guilty for making her feel that way.

And she noticed.

- Let's at least try and get a second opinion, ok?
- ...Alright. - He agreed after a couple of seconds more, grabbing her and kissing the forehead. - I'm sorry I'm causing you worry - He added.

Another note was left on this page.

“The second doctor said the same. He was a male one, too. It just doesn't seem right. Not even they seem all that sure of what they suggest to be my ailment. But if it is not an eyesight problem, and it doesn't seem to be like any other known mental problem, then just what in the blazes is this?

He kept appearing, too. Saw him in a poster outside that day, and in someone's window reflection. Sarah keeps worrying about me, and James is still too young to fully get it. I hope I can figure this out, or at least control it before he's old enough. Still, if that was all he did, I could have gotten used to it. Sarah was right though; it did get worse...”

“So the hallucination only appears in some kind of image that he sees. Be it a picture, a poster or a reflection. It is never possible to misunderstand it as a person in the actual world and it adapts to the environment it ‘inhabits’, so to speak.” Ms. Goodwood mused to herself, rubbing her chin and looking to the distance. “No, this is definitely not just a simple hallucination... Mr. Winslow was right. This *is* rather bizarre.”

She'd keep herself like this, thinking of the possibilities for what the late Christopher Winslow might have been going through, but the clock inside her house snapped her out of it when it rang only a single time.

- Oh, shoot! - She audibly claimed to no one but herself. - I didn't notice the time!

Quickly arranging herself, she put the candle out and went to bed.

The class didn't pass easy for Ms. Goodwood, who kept dozing off in spite of her best efforts.

- I hope my class wasn't too boring. - A man jokingly half-shouted to the third row of seats of the amphitheater-like classroom. He wasn't a tall fellow, looking to be in the later part of his sixties. He wore glasses and had a few marks showing his age on his balding head.

It startled Goodwood, who sprang herself up and immediately looked around to find herself alone.

The class had already ended, and everyone had left. She felt an incredible amount of shame.

- I'm so sorry, Professor!!! - She nearly screamed, bowing slightly in apology, her cheeks thoroughly flushed. - Your class was not boring. I... just didn't get much sleep last night. - She explained. - I was up reading a book Mr. Winslow gave me yesterday.

The professor seemed to brighten up at the mention of that name.

- Ah! So you did go and see him. Wonderful! Tell me: How is James doing?
- He seems to be doing well. - She happily said. - He asked about you too, once I told him you had suggested I meet him. We had a very nice conversation about my thesis, medicine and about how you two know each other, as well as a few stories you two lived through. - She giggled, to which he accompanied.
- I hope he didn't tell you about the one with the French tourist.
- The what? - She blinked.
- Good! - He straightened his blazer. - At any rate, we should leave. There will be another class here soon.

Ms. Goodwood startled herself once more.

- Oh! I need to get to my next class! - Grabbing her things, she darted towards the door. - Goodbye Professor Brailsford!
- Goodbye, you two! - He waved with a smile.

Christopher sat in the living room, reading the newspaper. Sarah was in a different seat reading a book, and James was in the next room being tutored. The only sounds in the room were those of the crackling of the fireplace.

The father did his best to ignore the figure as it kept appearing but, as if he knew, he started to take more and more prominent places in the pictures, sometimes even covering other people. He wanted proper notice. So much so that, at the turn of a page, his face covered the entirety of the landscape picture in the double-page article, causing Christopher to visibly widen his eyes and re-adjust himself in his seat at the surprise.

- You're seeing him. - Sarah remarked without taking her eyes off the book.
- I was trying to ignore it, but it seems to not be working. - He replied, his eyes not leaving his paper either. - He doesn't like it. 'Just took over the entire picture of this article. - He turned the paper around. - Nothing? - He asked, to which Sarah looked and shook her head after a moment:
- We need to decide what to try next. - She stated, marking her page and closing her book.
- We do... - He sighed, looking at the paper again. He was still there. - We need to at least confirm whether anyone actually knows what this is, first.
- We can continue to do that, but the two we already went to seemed to point to the same thing. - She counter-argued.
- They also said that they had never seen something so specific as mine. They were not sure of what it was. - He turned the page. This one didn't have images, at least. - It was an educated guess, at best. They are probably not entirely wrong, but it is not something to base important decisions upon.

She had to at least concede that he had a point there.

- Fine, but what if the next one says the same?
- If the next one is also unsure about it, - He started, while folding his paper. - We'll get one of them to monitor my condition and try to figure out what it actually is and how to cure it.
- Very well. - She agreed. - We can try that.
- In the meantime, I'll try to keep away from anything that could make me see him. - Although folded, there was a picture visible. He was there. Christopher looked at it, pondering out loud. - Just what are you, though?

Slowly, the angry expression softened. Then a bit more; and more; and more, until it became a simple smile. But it kept going; and going; and going, until it became unsettling, sadistic, evil.

Christopher's eyes widened once more and he mumbled, a bit shaky in his voice:

- You... you can hear us?

Its smile grew just a little more, but it was enough to understand that the answer was "Yes".

In reflexive behaviour, he crumpled the paper while jumping out of the chair and threw it into the fireplace.

- Christopher! - Sarah called, surprised at the action, but stopped at the look he gave her.
- He... no, it... it can move... - He revealed, starting to shake - It can hear us...
- It what? - She challenged, as the paper caught fire.
- Just now... - Christopher explained, openly shaking - I asked it what it was, and it reacted. I asked if it could hear us, and it reacted... It was just a smile but... It understands.
- Oh, Christopher, dear... - She rose, putting her book beside her seat. - Come here. - She affectionately embraced. - It's ok. Remember: this is all happening inside your head. It can't harm you, and it is only as strong as you let it be. It's reacting because you were probably afraid that it would become more than just a figure, and so it did. Again: - She insisted. - It is all in your head. You can control it. It'll be fine.

She angled herself and kissed her husband for a few seconds, managing to make his shaking subside.

- You're right. - He agreed. - You're right... Thank you. - He hugged her again.

"I'm going to start keeping a journal to see how this develops. Sarah is probably right, but I need something to give me perspective on what has been changing. The fact that he reacted scared the dickens out of me... There may be more to it. If he can react, then what else can it do? But for now, I'll just catalog what happened up to now. If anything, in case someone sees this at a later date, they may be able to find out what it is and stop someone else from suffering from it."

- Interesting... - Ms. Goodwood mused to herself, leaning back on her chair at home, leg crossed on top of the other. - Was the reaction possible since the start? Is it just his fear manifesting itself? But why always in the same form? And why did it take so long for the figure to do something? Why did it dislike getting ignored? - She groaned in frustration, shaking her head and clenching the pen on her hand. - It's killing me having this many questions!!!

The office wasn't that big. Not that there was any need for it to be. It comprised of a single desk, pointed at the other end of the room with a window behind it that gave a view of both the garden down below, as well as the city in the distance. Besides the owner's seat, there were two others in front of it. Additionally, there were three big bookshelves, one to the left, one to the right, and one at the window's opposite wall, which were mostly filled with books regarding multiple technical topics. Finally, there was a divan at the end of the room where the action was really happening.

Christopher was laying there, his right arm extended with a couple of cuts on it, willingly bleeding to a bowl as the doctor spoke to him.

- So you've been keeping away from anything with images or reflections in order to avoid seeing him? - She asked. It was the same woman the ophthalmologist had previously recommended. She was slim and taller than Christopher himself by some margin. Her skin was slightly tanned and her light brown hair reached her shoulders. - For how long have you done that?
- Today would be the third day. - He replied, a bit weak. He had been bleeding for a few minutes now and had begun to feel some level of faintness. - I have managed to not see it since. I just focused on getting work done.
- And did anything strange happen in between? Anything that made you think it was his doing? Some kind of manifestation? - Christopher had bled enough (his humours were probably as balanced as they were ever going to be), so she took hold of some gauze and had begun dressing the cuts while the conversation continued.
- Not that I noticed. They were the first calm days since this started.
- Well, we should at least see if anything's changed. - She looked around. - Is there anything we can use to try and get him to appear?

He didn't like the idea, but was willing to check, sitting up in the divan.

- I think... - He scanned through the bookshelves for a second. - Yes! On the left shelf, there should be a book about atomic theory which should have some images.

With a quick search, the psychologist found it and flipped through it until reaching a picture of a man in glasses with short, lightly-coloured hair, looking to side with a hand in between the buttons of his shirt. Underneath it there was a label saying "John Dalton".

- Do you see it? - She flipped it around. Christopher shook his head.
- Keep showing me more. - He suggested, rotating his wrist in circles. - He doesn't appear in all of them.

And so she did, but while she flipped pages looking for another picture to test it on, a figure stepped from behind the psychologist's back. He was considerably taller, which is why he had to unarch himself as he gained space. The figure, clearly human, had very black hair with receding hairlines on both sides of the forehead, as well as thick eyebrows of the same colour. He looked angry.

Christopher immediately sprung to his feet and jumped behind the divan, a new wave of dread crashing onto him.

It no longer needed an image, nor a reflection, to appear...

- How...? - He fearfully asked - How are you outside...?

The figure grinned, and a few seconds of silence passed while the psychologist looked around her in confusion.

- How!?! - He shouted.

The figure did not answer.

- Wait, - She interjected - where is he?
- It... - He corrected. - is right beside you. - Christopher pointed without taking his eyes off of it.
- Very well, - She turned in the figure's direction, hands on her hips. - then we can start. - Her head then turned in Christopher's direction. - Let's try something simple. Ask it who he is.

Exchanging looks between the two, Christopher motioned the figure to answer, knowing it had heard it.

Instead, what he got was but a small chuckle. Or at least the action of a chuckle. It produced no sound.

- It's mocking me. Chuckling.
- Alright, - The doctor continued. - then how about where it came from
- You heard her. - Christopher threw at him. His look suspicious and his tone unfriendly. - Where do you come from?

The figure, slowly, pointed in his direction, letting it linger for a few seconds; enough to get Christopher to tense up before then tapping his own head a few times. All done with an insultingly toothy grin that left the other with nothing but a scornful gaze in response.

- My head. - He relayed, before asking something else, out of his own initiative. - You don't talk, do you?

A simple headshake was given as a reply, but done so with the same expression as before, implying that there was no need to even care about it.

- I'll also assume that you cannot write. - The figure did not react. - Can I at least know what you want with me? Why do you always look at me like you are angry?

"It's just how things are." was the interpretation Christopher got out of the casual shrug of the figure, who then sunk the hands of its open arms into its pockets, assuming a rather relaxed posture as its back slightly slacked to the side.

At the sight of her patient's growingly angry face, the psychologist interrupted the shout that was inevitably about to come out of his mouth.

- Before things get heated up...
- This isn't working! It's just making fun of us. It doesn't even talk! - He protested, arms thrown in the figure's direction, who seemed all too amused at the scene.
- Perhaps we should approach it differently, then. - She suggested. - It may not be answering seriously because it thinks it's something you should already know. Are you sure you have never seen it before?
- I have no doubt that I had not seen it before this whole thing.
- Then perhaps... - She kept talking, but Christopher was no longer listening. The figure had decided to simply walk away from the office.

- Hey! - He called, but there was no reaction. The figure reached for the door as the psychologist stopped talking. - Hey! Where are you going!? - Again, no reaction. He merely opened the door and walked past, closing it behind him as the doctor asked what was going on. Christopher gave chase without responding. - Come back here!

He opened the entrance again. The figure had been gone for but a second, and yet, it was nowhere in sight. He looked, more than once, but all he found was James right beside the door. He had been listening in.

- Son, - He asked, kneeling, his tone deep. - Did someone besides me open this door just now?

He seemed confused and a bit afraid. He knew he shouldn't have been listening in, and was expecting reprimand.

- James! - He called again, slightly louder. He flinched. - Answer me.
- N-No, father - He stuttered. - I didn't see anyone.
- Mr. Winslow! - The psychologist interrupted, looking through the door frame. - What is going on?

He looked at her for a few seconds before turning to his son:

- Go find mother. - He told him, gently. - Tell her you were eavesdropping on my appointment. I'll check on you later, ok?
- Yes, father. - He reluctantly complied, leaving after a pat on his head and a smile from his parent.

Once he was gone from the room, Christopher rose up, slightly woozy, and faced the doctor, who stood at the door waiting with slight annoyance.

- It left. According to James, however, I was the only one who opened the door. And yet, - He deepened his tone - I saw it move, I heard the door, I saw this room while it was open...
- Let's sit down and deconstruct that, then.

Christopher merely raised his hand and said, shaking his head:

- No. I think that's enough for today. I need to rest. We'll continue on our next appointment.

"It's out. How is it out? Why is it out? What else can it do if it can get out? It can interact with the environment, at the very least. I saw it use the door. I heard it use the door. It walked through that door. But wait. If it can interact with things, then does that mean I can interact with it? It would make sense. I have to try. The rest doesn't seem to work. And I really don't want to let that doctor perform bloodletting on me again. I have to try."

There was a knock at the door to Ms. Goodwood's study.

- Lady Alice! Master Alexander is calling everyone for dinner. - A man of older looks claimed after opening the door. - And he won't allow you to do the same as yesterday.
- Oh, shoot! Already? - She startled herself, standing in a hurry. - Thank you, William! I'll be right there!

The sound of chatter became clear as the door to the dining room opened.

- Oh, Cecil! - Alice remarked in light surprise, her face neutral save for her slightly widened eyes. - I wasn't aware you were eating with us, otherwise I would have arranged myself a little better.
- Ah! Good evening, Alice! - Cecil joyfully greeted as he rose from his chair to greet her. - It's fine. You look lovely. - Cecil claimed before they kissed each other's cheeks twice before he escorted Alice to her seat, making sure to both pull and push it as needed before returning to where he was. Alice's parents watched the scene with a smile on their faces as Alice greeted them.

Straight brown hair as well as eyes, Cecil's nose was a bit large, and he wasn't the tallest (just slightly shorter than Alice), but he compensated by being a gentle soul, and a member of the Mander house, a known family of entrepreneurs which the Goodwoods had arranged a marriage with to guarantee their sustainability for the next few generations, in exchange for their prestige and support in court. The fact that the two of them had been friends for years, however, made the upcoming transition much easier.

- Mother. Father. - She greeted, nodding to each.

They were a contrasting pair. The father was a large and well-built man, standing as the tallest in the room with greying hair that was now closer to white than the black it once so proudly displayed. His eyes were a piercing brown, aided by the intense look he naturally had, despite the friendlier appearance his moustache gave him. The mother, on the other hand, looked almost frail, with her paler skin tone and overly skinny body, but the look on her face cleared any doubts one could have about her health. She was perfectly healthy. Her light brown hair flowed straight all the way past her shoulders, curling at the end, and her brown eyes appeared kind to anyone looking in her direction, inviting, even, to the shyest of people.

- About time you got here, Alice. - The father pointed out. He smiled, but it was obvious he was not pleased, given the tone.
- Apologies, father. - She bowed her head slightly as a cordial gesture. - I did not take note of time passing by. I was reading for my thesis.
- Was that why I had to ask William to bring you dinner last night?
- Please be more mindful of time, dear - The mother asked of her daughter in mild worry. - It's not healthy to work for that long without food.

All she gave was a sign of understanding before changing topics, turning to Cecil with the smirk of someone about to have fun with their newfound victim. He visibly grew nervous the moment he noticed.

- You didn't tell me you were coming.
- Right. I... - He hesitated, slightly looking away. - I... intended to surprise you. I had a bit of unexpected free time from my teaching duties and thought I should come see you. I didn't realise you were that deep into your research though, so I didn't wish to bother.
- Oh. You actually managed to get some free time from Hoffkins? What? Did he realise he's finally about to croak and decided to be less of a slave driver?
- Alice! - Her mother scolded, mouth open at her audacity as a plate of soup was brought in front of her and her daughter by a maid. The father scowled, too, before turning his head and thanking when Cecil's and his' came. The father soon gave the order to begin eating.
- You would say the same if you knew how he treats his assistant professors, mother. - She dismissed. - He-
- Before this gets into another discussion about self-censoring... - Cecil jumped in, aware of what it was about to devolve into. - What were you reading that got you so interested, Alice?
- Yesterday, - She answered, smiling in appreciation for his action. - during the afternoon, I went to visit the head of the Winslows under Brailsford's recommendation.
- The Winslows? - The father interjected with a raised eyebrow, looking in his wife's direction. - Didn't the previous head of the house just suddenly go mad a few decades ago?
- Yes, I believe so. - She thought out loud. - What was his name...? Charles?
- Christopher. - Cecil corrected, to the surprise of the rest. - Grandfather was a friend of his.

Alice's eyes immediately lit up.

- Did your grandfather know about Mr. Winslow's condition? - She pressed
- From what I heard from him, he had a common friend who even witnessed one of his episodes. Mr. Winslow tried to attack... *something* only he could see. Nearly shot him with a revolver, if I recall.
- What!? What else can you remember? Do you know the whole story? Did your grandfather witness or hear anything else about it? - She then bombarded, even leaning forward a bit with her hands on the table, confusing Cecil with the sudden shift of tone
- Woah! Easy, Alice. Why such an interest?

Understanding what she was doing, she relaxed and returned to a more proper position before speaking again.

- The book Mr. James Winslow gave me, - She explained. - was about his father's journey with whatever this problem he developed was. It wasn't just lunacy, it's something more, but I don't think anyone really knows what it is. I want to figure it out, so please, Cecil: what more information do you have on this? I'm sure the book won't tell me enough.

Cecil collected himself for a few moments in thought, trying to remember as much as he could.

- I do recall grandfather giving a more grandiose retelling of the tale at a family dinner when I was younger. But that is all I remember of him speaking about his friend's condition. That, and hearing about the bizarre way he passed away.
- Five minutes of uninterrupted screaming and brain rotten from the inside? - She completed. - Mr. Winslow told me. - She then added after a few moments when Cecil showed surprise.
- ...Yes. Precisely.
- Wait. That was real? - The father interrupted midway through bringing another spoonful to his mouth. - That sounded more like an exaggeration when I first heard of it.
- Grandfather saw the body himself, open, and heard the rest directly from his wife.
- Could... - The mother interrupted, slightly uncomfortable. - Could we speak of this after the meal, please? This isn't the kind of topic you talk about at the table.
- Oh! - Cecil jumped in his voice. - Apologies, Madam Goodwood. You're right. I got distracted.

After a confirmation that all was fine, the dinner continued without incident, despite the clear eagerness from Alice in getting it over with as soon as possible. The conversation limited itself to chatter about each of the younger couple's studies, and the goings-on of the parents' days. There was even an amusing story from the father's days in the military thrown in there.

As soon as Etiquette allowed, Alice not so much as asked, but *commanded* Cecil to the living room, not even bothering to wait for his response before walking there, bemusing the parents when the boy understood the tone and slightly scrambled to begin following her. They, too, followed soon after.

- It was a shame you couldn't come. - Jonathan lamented. He was a rather tall fellow, going as far as being nearly a head taller. His hair was a nearly blonde brown and his eyes a clear blue. He was very lean. - Are you sure you're alright? This is the first hunting trip you miss in a while. Peter caught a massive boar because you weren't there to catch it first.

Both Christopher and Jonathan were sitting down in the former's office. Him behind a very messy desk with a myriad of papers and letters and books and writing utensils strewn about, the visitor choosing not to sit on one of the chairs just ahead of it and instead opting to just pace around as he talked.

- Yeah, I'm fine. - Christopher replied in a mild sigh. - I'm just not fine enough to go out hunting. Maybe next time. Thank you for checking in on me, though. I appreciate it. - He then faintly smiled, but Jonathan did not look convinced.
- By the look on your face, you don't think you'll be better by next time either. - Walking to the desk, he leaned on it, supported by his hands, and looked his friend in the eyes. - Seriously, we've known each other for years, what's wrong? It's not just the hunting trip. You've barely left the house the past couple of weeks and your wife and staff are certainly hiding something, given the way they answered me when I asked them the same. This isn't like you.

After a few seconds of silence, Christopher sighed in resignation.

- You're right. But I don't even know how to explain it to you, because it's more than just me going mad.
- Going mad?
- Going mad. There's this... figure that I've been seeing. - As if on cue, as Christopher rose from his chair, he noticed, previously perfectly covered by Jonathan, the figure itself in the back, flipping through one of the books in his shelves with an amused look on his face. He knew he had now been seen. - It looks human, and if you were to turn around - Which he motioned Jonathan to do, to his compliance. - and see what I see, - And Christopher pointed in its direction. - you would notice that there is a very tall man, even taller than you, standing right there flipping one of my books.
- But... I don't see anyone. - Jonathan stated, confused.
- Precisely. - And they turned to face each other again. - Neither you, nor anyone else, can see the bloody thing. Which means I'm going mad. - He paused for a moment, looking to the side with his eyes closed and his foot tapping before looking back. - But there's more to this. I'm sure of it.
- How come? - The figure, seemingly bored with the book, put it back where it was and looked in Chris' direction with a scowl.
- None of the doctors seem to really know what it is, some kind of variation of whatever term they used at best, but things seem to be way too specific for it to really fit. I mean, - The figure started to walk towards the duo, stopping next to Jonathan to listen in. - the guy is always the same, and the way things have gotten worse... - The scowling man took hold of a letter opener. Christopher tried to stop him, but it was swiped away faster than he could get it. - What are you...? - He asked him in slight fear before realising that all he was doing was appreciating the unusual design of the tool
- What am I what? - Wondered Jonathan.
- What? Oh... Not you. He's right next to you. - He pointed. - Just messing with the letter opener. I thought he was going to do something with it.
- You mean this one?

Jonathan went to grab it as he spoke, leaning to do so, but the moment he started to speak, the figure casually put it back exactly as it was before he reached it.

- Yes. He put it back just before you grabbed it.

- I did not see it move. - He commented while fiddling with it just as the figure did. It was an ornate little letter opener. Shaped like a dueling sword, the golden guard only covered one side in an arch all the way to the gem-encrusted pommel with an intricate pattern. There was also a small etching of the Winslow's coat of arms at the hilt of the blade. - Where did you get this, anyway?
- Sarah had it made for me a year ago for my birthday. I had lost my previous one. But do you see why I couldn't go hunting? It's best if I stay here.

Jonathan hesitated in agreeing, but he could at least now understand better as to why he had been absent.

He was about to ask a different question when he heard a very loud slam against a drawer, shaking the entire desk and startling his attention out of the letter opener and into Christopher, who was looking to the side very seriously, hand solidly gripping the drawer's handle.

He followed it with a question about what it was doing, to which the figure responded with a simple attempt at a push, doing little more than to slightly nudge him.

The contents of the drawer seemed rather important to Christopher, as his following reaction was to throw a hook aimed at the figure's jaw, which although it connected, it did absolutely nothing. It didn't even make any sound. It's like it wasn't real. He could sense that his fist had hit something, but what it was, was best described as nothing. It had no consistency; it had no feel to the touch; it wasn't rough, it wasn't smooth, it wasn't grainy; it was nothing. It was the physical representation of nothing. It was there, you could touch it, but it felt like it wasn't there. It was paradoxical. And while Christopher stood, perplexed, wrapping his head around it, the figure made quick work of throwing him to the ground as Jonathan dropped the letter sword and stepped around the desk.

- Chris! Are you ok? - He asked in worry as he kneeled and grabbed his friend's head.

As he was about to help him up, Christopher still shaking off the hit and getting his bearings, there was a sudden arm jerk, followed by a very loud scream.

The figure had just grabbed the letter opener again and pulled Chris' arm, immediately slicing it diagonally just above the wrist, before placing it back, like it hadn't just been tainted with blood, and walking away. The blade wasn't necessarily sharp, it didn't need to, but it was enough to do what it did, and Chris kept screaming about it as Jonathan was very confusedly trying to understand what was causing him such pain

- Can't you fucking see my arm is bleeding!?! - Christopher pointed it at his friend.
- No, I actually can't! - He nervously confirmed. - What do you mean!?

And so it clicked to him. This too was something only he could see and feel. It scared him, but he remembered. There was something he hadn't tried yet.

As the figure walked to the same door he had left before, Christopher ignored his friend's attempts at talking for a moment and jumped towards the drawer he had been impeding it from accessing just a few moments back. From it, he took out a Belgian pinfire revolver and took aim at the back of the figure's head, firing just moments before Jonathan took the weapon and Chris let himself turn and slide down, clutched to his bleeding arm.

- What the hell? Why are you firing that inside the house?
- I... - Christopher tried to speak. - It was about to leave, I had to take a shot. To see if it killed it...

Just a few seconds later, a couple of footmen house servants busted into the office shouting about a gunshot before noticing the two men behind the desk and running towards them.

Jonathan explained the situation the best he could, but Christopher just kept shouting for medical aid for his arm, despite no-one else being able to see it. More surprisingly, however, none of it was even working when he tried to apply it himself. In the end, there was nothing he could do but to send Jonathan home and try to wait the bleeding out, letting it drip onto a bowl as he got used to the pain. But while he was laying in his room, he was made aware of a few details. Every drop of blood that fell made no sound, the letter opener that the figure used did have blood marks on it, but only he could see them, and the bullet that he fired seemed to have missed. It was found penetrated into one of Christopher's books with merely its pin and gunpowder burnt.

- Impressive. - Alice remarked as she swapped her focus from the book on her lap back to Cecil. - Outside of the direction in which the revolver fired, the story seems to match most of what's written here. I wonder who's changing the facts. - She then mused, rubbing her chin.
- I don't know. Grandfather wasn't necessarily the most precise storyteller.
- But wait, - Interrupted the mother. - Was Christopher's problem something to do with him seeing things that aren't real? Isn't that just hallucinations?
- It's similar in that yes, they are like hallucinations so they aren't real, but different because you can actually physically interact with them. It looks to be closer to hebephrenia. Anyway, thanks for telling me that story, Cecil. - She said with a smile that filled him with joy. - Is there any way I can talk to him personally?
- He moved to our summer home earlier this year because of his health. If you want to make the two day trip to get there, then I can send him a letter asking.
- Oof! - She grimaced at the notion of it. - I'll... warn you if it comes to that. And you'll be coming with me if I do so. - She added at the end.
- Of course! - He joyfully agreed.

"It can't be hurt, but it can hurt me. And yet I can't heal it. Just what the hell is this!? I'm writing this with a left arm that was still bleeding not long ago (thank God I'm not left-handed!). I feel faint, and nothing is working. I'm not even sure the bullet actually missed! It probably just went right through it and it didn't feel a blasted thing. But then, what can I do? If I can't fight back, do I just give up and live in fear of it? Do I try to appease it? I tried to speak to it, but it doesn't seem to be even marginally interested in bargaining. Is there really no"

There was something strange in this note. More than just stopping mid-sentence, the paper it was written on was smaller than the others. The reason for that seemed to rest on

the fact that this one had been torn just below the existing text. The following one, also on the same page, just to add to the weirdness, had a completely different tone.

"It's coming for me. I'm going to die. It no longer hides when it decides to appear. Just now, it came to me as I was writing this and showed me, oh God it showed me, just how I'm going to meet my end. It's... It's going to eat my brain... But I don't even know why! Why me? Why this torment? And why such cruelty? And why so sudden? I... I don't know what to do..."

The note showed signs of a dry liquid in the form of blots, something that Alice found safe to assume to have been tears.

- He realised he was going to die before his time for a reason he did not understand. I can't fault him for being afraid. - Commented the father from his sofa
- Yeah. - She absent-mindedly agreed as she pondered something else, head resting on her fist while staring at the pages.
- You're making that face. - Interjected Cecil, smiling, to which Alice asked for clarification. - That face where you found something else you can follow up on.
- I guess. Do you know the family name of this Jonathan?
- I... - Cecil thought out loud. - don't... Sorry. I'll ask father if he does and send a letter to grandfather if not. I'll tell you as soon as I know.
- Wonderful. Thank you, Cecil. - She smiled, again filling him with joy.
- In the meantime, you should probably head home, and I should head to bed. - She got up from her place and kissed him on the cheek. - Goodbye, Cecil. I'll see you tomorrow. And thank you for the information.

With all the formalities taken care of, everyone went their way until the next day.

- Alice! Alice! - Shouted a familiar voice across the campus' courtyard, running awkwardly as he was out of breath.
- Oh my, Cecil! - She stopped in slight worry, turning in his direction as he reached her. - What is it? You didn't have to run like this.
- I've... - He took a few breaths, hands on his knees. - I've found Jonathan's family. I've... I've been looking... for you... all morning...
- What? Spit it out, then! - She demanded.
- You... you won't believe it... It's... - And he took a few moments more, twirling his wrist as he caught a bit more of his breath to indicate he really needed it, in front of a rapidly impatient Alice. - It's Brailsford. - And her eyes grew in surprise. - Jonathan... was Professor Brailsford's... father.
- A-Are you sure? - She stuttered.

Cecil nodded, trying to avoid speaking.

- Then let's find the Professor and ask him. - She ordered, grabbing his arm.

He protested, about his breath, and about his work, but was promptly ignored on both, as all that was in her mind was to find the man.

Eventually, she apologised and let him go, but he had to set his foot on the floor and insist he really couldn't accompany her today. By then, she had learned that the professor had not attended today and was on her way to visit him. While she waited, she took the book off her bag. There only seemed to be only one more chapter in it.

Christopher was sitting in his living room. He looked dreadful. He had been up the whole night for the second time now. His hair was entirely dishevelled; his arms were wrapped in ligaments, even if it really did nothing for him; his clothes were messy and his skin pale. In front of him stood two women. His wife and the psychologist, both of them quite worried for his state. He had been insisting on transferring the management of his house affairs and enterprises over to Sarah, given he was no longer in condition to manage them himself but, while she was certainly capable of doing such, she did not wish to accept it as she, and the psychologist, understood it as him giving up on ever getting better.

- Just... please, Sarah. - Christopher insisted. - If anything, just in the event that something *does* happen to me. So you'll be ready to take over as quickly as possible.
- That's not the point! I just... - Her eyes grew teary. - I don't want to take control because you lost hope in living, Christopher.

A knock on the door had Alice faced with an adult maid in her thirties politely asking her who she was and to state her business which, after hearing them, asked for a few moments of patience before letting her let in.

Eventually guided to the living room, she was asked to sit in one of the chairs while she waited for someone to come meet her, something that did not take long.

A man in his late 50s, looking to be a butler, met her. He was tall and with broad shoulders, his grey moustache was well groomed and slightly twirled at the sides. He looked dignified in his black suit and impeccable posture.

- Good afternoon, Madam. - He gracefully greeted, to which Alice responded in kind. - My name's Richard and I'm Master Brailsford's personal butler. Unfortunately, he's not feeling well and is currently sleeping in his bedroom so he cannot see you. However, - He grinned, after seeing Alice's face regain the momentarily lost hope. - I may be able to assist you. I've been serving Master Brailsford for over twenty-five years. I know him almost as well as he knows himself. How may I help you?
- At least have a good night's sleep before deciding that. - Suggested the psychologist.
- That's not the kind of thing you should decide the way you are.
- I... - Hesitated Christopher. - I can't really sleep. I know it's going to come for me.
- And what good is it going to do to you if you're just too tired to even try anything when it does come? - She refuted. - Get some sleep. I'll prescribe you something to help with that, if you want.
- ...I'd appreciate that. - He conceded.
- You're *allowing* that attitude? - Sarah turned to the psychologist in disbelief.

- Madam Winslow, look at your husband. - She showed with her arm. - That's a man who's not going to be dissuaded by anyone's words right now. He hasn't slept in two days and he probably spent most of that time pondering what to do before that figure comes for him. Even if he's not exactly thinking straight right now, he probably knew that you were going to react like this. Your best shot is in letting him sleep and convince him in the morning when he's rested and feeling less crazy.

After a few moments of silence, she understood her reasoning and agreed with her. Christopher would be taking a small dose of an opium-based sleeping drug that night.

- I see. - Mused the butler, sitting across Alice, rubbing his chin. - Well, yes, Master Jonathan was in fact a childhood friend of Mr. Christopher. They did go out hunting fairly regularly along with a few others. I wasn't around at that time, but Master David did mention a few of the stories his father got up to during those.
- But did he ever speak of a story where Mr. Winslow almost shot Mr. Brailsford's father in his office?
- I do recall... - He tried to remember. - Something along those lines. About some kind of being that he couldn't see?
- Yes! - She almost jumped out of her seat. - I'd like to confirm the details of that story and ask a few more things regarding Christopher Winslow's condition from the eyes of someone else that may have heard or seen it better.
- Then perhaps-

His suggestion got cut short by a sudden and loud scream coming from upstairs. Both of them recognised the voice as Brailsford's.

Without a second thought, both dashed in that direction, the butler going first.

Christopher placed the vial he had been given on his nightstand and then turned to look at his wife, gently grabbing her head.

- Sarah, I love you. And I'm sorry that I'm putting you through all of this, but I'm not going to change my mind, not now and not tomorrow.
- We'll see, dear. - She kissed him. - Sleep well.

Returning the well-wish, they both tried to fall asleep which, thanks to the medicine, didn't take long. But after a couple of hours, in the middle of the silence of the night, Christopher felt himself waking up. And at the edge of the room, contrasting against the moonlight coming from the window, there stood the figure. He tried to jerk himself back against the bed guard, but he was stuck. And he didn't understand why. Nothing below his neck moved. He was paralyzed, and the figure knew that.

It smiled, as if this wasn't the first time it did this. As if it expected this outcome. And so it walked towards Christopher with casualness, uncovering an unusually shaped, bladed object from its back in an impossible fashion. It seemed to materialise as it pulled it, as it did not look like it should fit in its back that easily.

It appeared meant to fit around a cranium, and all the blades were in an area that strapped around it, looking to not just pierce skin, but actually go through the bone too in as

clean a cut as possible without going deep enough to damage the brain itself. All activated through a simple, but very strong, spring mechanism activated in the handle.

Seeing such, Christopher started to scream in fear as it started to sit on top of him and placing the contraption, waking his wife up along with it, who immediately started asking what was wrong. But in that moment, the spring was pulled and the contraption worked exactly as expected, cutting perfectly around the cranium to allow for a smooth removal of the top. And that's when Christopher really screamed.

When Alice and Richard reached Brailsford's room, they merely found the scene of a man laid utterly still in his bed screaming unendingly at a constant tone. He reacted to no one. Not the couple of servants in his room already, who were immediately ordered to go find a doctor, nor Richard or Alice, who stood by him trying to understand what was going on.

- It's the brain rot that Winslow told me! - Shouted a rapidly nervous Alice
- The what!? - He shouted back, just as tense.
- The same thing Christopher had! He's going to die!
- Then what do we do!?
- I don't know!

There was arguing in Christopher's room:

- What do you mean you don't know!? - Shouted an extremely nervous Sarah to the servant that came in amidst the uninterrupted screaming. - Aren't you a doctor?
- I've never seen this before, Madam! - He shouted back as he examined the patient. - His body doesn't show signs of anything other than fatigue from lack of sleep. He shows nothing wrong!

They could not see the scene of the figure quickly ripping apart chunks of Christopher's brain and devouring them whole like a feeding beast as he helplessly saw it all happen in front of his eyes and paralyzed body.

A couple more minutes went by like this and it was then that, in all the confusion, James slipped into the room, scared, sleepy and confused, trying to understand what was going on with all of this disconcerting noise.

He saw it. From between his mother and the doctor, he saw for a single moment a man climb out from on top of his father as he grew quiet and looked him dead in the eyes with ravenous intent, before disappearing in the next blink.

He knew who that was.

She saw it. From between Richard and the doctor that arrived then, she saw for a single moment a man climb out from on top of professor Brailsford as he grew quiet and look her dead in the eyes with ravenous intent, before disappearing in the next blink.

She knew who that was.