

## Courage

Jack's bed squeaked gently as he cautiously sat upward. His eyes locked uneasily onto a shadow that stretched across the wall opposite him. It swayed unevenly back and forth, as if dancing on glass. His eyes didn't leave the performance for a second. He didn't want the ritual to lose its pace. Or worse, stop completely.

Without breaking eye contact, Jack switched on his bedside lamp. The light illuminated as far as the end of his bed, but didn't manage to scare the shadow away. It continued its horrible rhythm, taunting him the awful ideas. Amidst the ever-darkening thoughts, one managed to shine through. He needed to increase his range.

Still not daring to look away, Jack quickly opened up his dresser drawer and fumbled around inside it, hoping that his hand would find what he needed. After a few intense seconds of searching, his skin bumped against a familiar shape, and Jack pulled out his weapon of choice. He aimed it at the terrible shade and flicked the switch.

Suddenly, a powerful beam of light shot through his room, hitting the menace right in the center. Jack allowed himself a halfhearted chuckle. His bedroom flashlight. A gift from Connor. His best friend always seemed to give him the most practical presents.

"Flashlights are one of the most useful tools in the world!" Jack exclaimed in a miserable attempt to impersonate Connor. "Don't want to be caught in the dark by yourself, do you?"

Jack returned to his usual voice. "Nope. No I do not. Thanks Connie."

The beam of light was holding strong against the shady invader. Jack wanted to keep pointing the magical tool at the creature, but realized that it would be fruitless. He was tired, and his arm would give out at some point. Meanwhile, the horror would simply abide its time. It didn't need sleep or arms to terrorize him. It had the advantage.

He knew what needed to be done. He needed to confront the source. The shadow had to be coming from somewhere. Based on the way it stretched upon his wall, Jack concluded that the origin was coming from outside his window. The realization made Jack shiver.

If his calculations were correct, then that meant getting out of bed, traversing on the floor, and having to look outside. At night. With minimal light. A strong sense of fear enveloped Jack. The last thing he wanted to do was move. But he had to. It was the only way his mind would be at peace. Then he could rest easy.

"Come on Jack," he mumbled lowly. "It's just walking across your room. You've done it a thousand times. What's one more? What would Connor be doing?"

He envisioned the scenario. Connor wouldn't have even thought the situation was scary. In fact, Jack was sure that Connor would be pleased with the shadow. He might've even danced along with it. That's the kind of person he was. The kind of person Jack needed to be right now.

The thoughts of his friend slightly eased his panic. Connor wouldn't dillydally, so why was he? Jack took a breath, then quietly threw off his covers. Swiftly, he swung to one side of his bed, nervously placed his feet on the ground, and stood up.

Jack noticed his body was shaking after a few seconds of standing still. He tried to calm down, but it was the reality of the situation which frightened him. Now that he was up, he had to keep moving. Keep pushing toward the source of the shade. Something he still didn't really want to do. Alas, it was necessary.

So, with a shake in his step, Jack placed one foot in front of the other tediously. He imagined he was on a battlefield and landmines had been placed in unknown spots around the area. It made his snail pace seem reasonable. Anywhere could be a potential trap. Anywhere could send him to his doom.

Eventually, he made it over to the window. Halfheartedly, Jack put his hands on the windowsill and lifted himself up to see whatever monster was casting the shadow. Except, he didn't open his eyes. He managed to keep them shut for a few more seconds as he mentally prepared to gaze upon something horrible. When time was up, they blinked open.

A large branch smacked the glass exactly where Jack's face would have been if he'd been on the other side. The impact made a loud cracking noise, making Jack jump backwards and scream at the same time.

His reaction resulted in Jack losing his footing and crashing into the side of his bed. Even though the mattress was reasonably soft, the hit made his back ache. Jack groaned softly as he recovered from both the scare and the injury. In the distance, he could quietly hear a light switch flick on, and footsteps heading his way. He'd woken someone up.

As he lay dazed on the floor, Jack's door slammed open and his lights were turned on. He adjusted his eyes to the new illumination and turned to see who it was. A tall, muscular figure was standing in the doorway, seemingly assessing the situation.

"Dude," started the figure, "what happened in here? It looks like a war zone."

Concerned, yet slightly sarcastic tone. Jack shook his head to fix his eyes and finally saw the figure clearly. His sister. That made sense. Her room was right next door. He must've given her a rude awakening.

"No war. Just me being me."

His sister crossed her arms. "You get scared by something again?"

Jack flushed. "Y-yeah."

"What was it this time?" she asked as she entered the room, looking for the possible answer to her question.

"Tree."

"What?"

Jack pointed to his window. "Tree. Smacked into the glass and scared me half to death."

Curious, his sister made her way across the room and stopped at the scene of the incident. Just like him, she had her hands on the sill and peered outside. Within seconds, the branch returned, swatting the same spot. Unlike him, she barely reacted. She actually yawned.

"Looks like the wind kicked up. Have the same problem in my room," she remarked.

"If you have the same issue, how do you deal with the noise?" Jack asked.

His sister grinned. "I sleep with ear muffers on."

Jack had never considered that. "Oh. Cool."

"Yep. It is." His sister turned to face him. "You know, you've got to stop getting scared of every little thing. You're almost sixteen. And it interferes with my sleep."

"I-I know," Jack said ashamedly. "I'm trying to work on it."

"Maybe you should take pointers from that friend of yours. Uh, what's his name? Casper. Wait. Costello?"

"Connor."

His sister nodded. “Yeah, that guy. He’s a weird little dude, but I’ve never seen him scared. Doesn’t he watch scary movies for fun?”

Jack hmped. “Yes, he does. I hate it because he tries to make me watch them with him.”

“Well, anyway, you could learn a few things from him. Gain some courage.”

He shrugged in response and his sister sighed. Without another word, she started to walk back to her room. When she passed him, she ruffled his hair gently and let out a small laugh. She reached his door and closed it behind her. Jack listened as she went into her bedroom and locked herself in. Then he heard nothing.

With a grunt, Jack lifted himself off the floor. Sleepily, he rearranged his surroundings until they were back to the way they were before his scare. When he was satisfied, he crawled back into bed and pulled the covers up to his shoulders.

Before he tried falling back asleep, Jack took one last look at the window. The tree whipped the glass again, in what almost seemed like a warning. Instead of freaking out, Jack merely frowned, flipped onto his side facing away from the window, and surrendered to sleep. Within minutes, Jack was out like a light.

Then, he dreamed of hanging with Connor.