

# It Gets Me

“Thirty. Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight. Twenty-seven. Twenty-six.”

The crosswalk outside your window counts down. It counts, even though there is no one to cross it, its stiff, centered words echoing through the empty streets with great certainty. A group of motorcycles idle at the red light, engines flaring, a crack in the dim.

The night presses against the glass. It peeks through your drawn shutters, fingers creeping to pull at the white plastic. The box fan whirrs, ever present, even as it draws in minty, chilled spring air.

It’s late. You really should go to sleep. Tomorrow, like all the rest of the days, is an early morning. You’ll have things to do. Plans set in place, to ensure the weekend is as blank and open as possible. There are things to worry about after all.

You are on your side. You’re staring at the wall. Your back faces the rest of the room.

And most importantly, or perhaps most pressingly, you are alone.

Or you’re supposed to be alone.

You don’t feel very alone.

The streetlights are on outside. The glow filters in, and it casts shadows like bars across the cracked paint. At the foot of the bed, the post of a barn inspects you. It finds you lacking. You find *it* lacking. You pull your blanket up further over your head, careful, slow.

There will be no sleep facing this direction.

The prickling on the back of your neck warns you, but this is a practiced movement. You barely have to make your choice before you’re twisting around as fast as you can, reshuffling your blanket, feet tucked in carefully, eyes darting across the darkened room you now have full access to.

Nothing’s there.

You’re alone. Remember?

Your roommate is out tonight. That's good. It means a good night's sleep, to make up for the late hour. To make up for the way your mind gently chinks away at tomorrow's schedule, repeating it over and over and over to cover up the *worry*. Always the worry.

Will it be done in time? Will they take that message in a bad way? Will the piece come out like crap? Will it rain, halfway through your bike to class? Will she be okay? Will it break, will it fall down in the middle of the presentation? Will it? Will they? Will—

And you are not alone.

There it is. Where it's always been, this entire time, by the door.

It is a dark thing. Single-eyed. One bright, white dot in the dim. There is nothing else to it. Just one, bright, one—just one eye, just looking at you, a shape in the darkness by the door, hidden by some of the coats, leaning against the wardrobe to peer in on the dorm.

You do not look at it. You're still alone, you think to yourself, careful with each blink.

It may watch you, but you do not look. If you look, it'll get you.

Eventually. *Eventually*, it will—or, perhaps, *no matter what* it will. The specifics aren't important. The thing doesn't go away. You should have known better.

The crosswalk determinedly informs you that there are thirteen seconds left on the clock, and a group of girls laugh together outside.

You pull the blanket over your head, and you go to sleep.

The sun gleams through the windows at noon. It lights up each corner, spirals through the dust particles that obsess over the beams. Warm, slightly liquid heat sits in my spine and cheeks, and my legs swing freely over the edge of the bed.

"It's nice out." I might have said, picking at the threads of my blanket.

She might have smiled at me, from over her notepad of words. She did that a lot. *We* did that a lot that day—nothing to worry about, nothing to fret over, just terrible laughter exchanged like Pokémon cards on the playground.

I don't even look at the entryway. I don't really remember in the mornings, especially when it's bright enough that there's no need to flip on the light. Not when my own notebook is flipped open happily before me, filled pages grinning so brightly.

Her hair is long and golden. I watch her hands spindle through it as we walk through the campus, passing through the forest behind the dorms, waltzing through the fallen leaves. Someone waves at me. I wave back and laugh to my friend, because I don't really remember who they are. But they seemed nice.

When I drive her home, I point things out from behind the dash. I nod my head towards the Union, passing along a review of their chicken fingers, and beam at my workplace, where it sits across from Bessy.

You know why I mention them. I didn't.

It's gorgeous outside, and the campus is bustling, even on a weekend.

Your back is to the wall. You can feel it, pressing against your spine. You've rolled too far in, but there is no rectifying it. Should have done that before your roommate left. Would have, if you were smart.

You were never all that smart.

People pass by outside. The thing in the entryway twinkles, its one, white eye winking. Its legs dance in the shifting shadows, head frozen in place like a chicken. The winter coat has made its shoulders broad, and you stare at the nothing before you.

You are still alone, you think, even as you watch its friends gather together in the lumps of clothes against your roommate's chair, in the corner of the ceiling that you cannot see from here, behind the barrier around her bed.

They're new, these ones. Or old. Or... something. Probably. But they're just lumps, formless shapes. The thud of music from two doors down drowns out the creaking from their throats.

You ignore them. You pull up the sheets over your head, block them out.

Sleep comes easier when you're safe.

I'm writing when my brother calls me. I don't remember what he said, but I remember his voice. The tone haunts me. His girlfriend calls me after, and I certainly remember what *she* said. She told me how to barricade my door.

She told me how to hide.

There's a minute there, where I smile, amused, and then I check my email and it's singular, serious alert, and I stand up from my chair. The wardrobe in the entryway moves easily, though it knocked over some of my things and nicked my leg.

I hear frustrated noises from the suite across from me.

My phone is a permanent, beaming white light on the bed. Each notification relights the beacon, and I'm drawn to it. They can't move their wardrobe, the suitemates say: that's what the noises were from. Theirs was glued to the ground.

Every single group chat I've ever been a part of is set on fire. I haven't spoken more than ten words to some of these, but reassurances and instructions are passed like gas masks in a bunker: some of their wardrobes are glued down, too.

I text my suitemates.

Use your chair. Jam it under the handle. Put your boxes and bags and everything you can reach in front of it, and then move your bed in front of the entryway. The music from two doors down turns off.

My roommate is fine, she insists. She's too close, I think, but I'm not entirely sure what's going on, and she's alive enough to text me. An old friend rises as if from the grave to ask after my health. I stand in the middle of my dorm, looking at the date of our last correspondence, and watch as she tells me her mother is afraid for my life.

They are how I find out about the police scanner.

I wish I never had.

I sit under my bed, and I play Animal Crossing. My phone burns beside me. Sometimes, the shooter is outside my window. Sometimes it's in the forest behind my dorm. Sometimes it's in *SnyPhi*, though they never call it that. Sometimes it's where it actually was.

I can't help the snort of laughter when I refresh my page. It makes me sit through a thirty second ad for a gambling site, and my fingers shake as I press the little 'x' to make it go away so I can hear whether I'll see my friend that lives in Brody ever again.

Someone runs through the halls and bangs on the doors. It's nobody.

When I finally crawl out from under the bed, it's still dark. I listen as the chopper groans overhead, and stand before my window.

There are police lights outside. Too many of them, and the red-white-blue flashes against my skin and makes the room feel small. For some reason, I'm not scared, so I make myself a bowl of Mini Wheats and sit on my desk chair, watching the lights, listening to the scanner.

All the colorful LEDs I'm so used to have gone out in all the windows.

They're all black.

Nobody home.

Please don't knock.

Cold fingers wrap around my cheeks and my ankles. The longer I sit there, staring, eyes going dry and stinging, the tighter they grip, harder, harder, harder. The scanner crackles to life again, and I remember my friend's mother, the fear in the texts she sent, despite only barely knowing me, and try not to think about those listening to this site and hearing the name of their child's dorm, their baby's safe space, the commotion and yelling— no, *screaming* on the other side of the police lines—

I breathe in. Careful. My spoon scrapes against the bottom of the Mini Wheats bowl, bringing up only sludge. It goes down my throat, sugary wood pulp. The glass between me and the outside world is a mile thick.

They haven't caught him. At this point, I don't even know if it's just a Him. Not yet. Won't look, not for a while.

I'm tired, though, so I go to bed.

I leave the wardrobe in front of the door.

You're facing the room. Your back is to the wall. Nobody makes a noise outside, except for that damned crosswalk. You look out of your blanket, but there is nothing out there to see.

You know it's there.

It is long. It is skinny, and riddled with rotting, festering holes the size of golf balls. Its ribs stick out like shelves from its spine, and there are no eyes, but it sees you just as well as you can see it.

It breathes, and you hear the static of the police scanner. You hear the knocking on doors. You hear dark windows, and blue-white-red lights.

It's so hot. You could only manage the thin sheet, pulled up to your shoulder. Your hand is laid curled on the mattress, and your eyes unfocus on the tips of your fingers, even as a sliding noise unfurls from the corner.

It stops.

Your heartbeat is slow. You steady your breathing, set your neck in stone. You don't move your feet, even as the sweltering heat crawls up your skin, gnaws at your core.

The hallway lights are not on. Or maybe they are. You forgot that you'd barricaded the door.

The floor creaks under footsteps. Dust parts around movement.

You know this dance. You pull up the sheet.

You close your eyes, anticipating sleep, but there is a voice, in the emptiness of the room.

"That never worked, you know."

And something is dug deep in your guts, and there is warmth spilling onto the sheets below you, and your eyes roll up behind the blanket, and the gasp is punched out before you register the bright, horrible cold starkness through your stomach, and the darkness, this time, is one unwilling.

It gets you.

I wake with the sun. Funnily enough, I'd had the forethought to turn off my alarm. The roomie still isn't there—not that I expected her to be, really.

I stand, in the clothes I wore last night, licking teeth that have sweaters, flexing a hand that had spent the past hours clutched around a dead phone, and laugh at the wardrobe pressed against the door.

It looks funny in the daylight. Useless. I wonder what good it would have actually done me.

I get dressed.

I don't remember if I left that night, or the next, or if I gave a shit either way, but I had to bike to my car so I could leave. Had to pile my things into a backpack, zip it up nice and tight, and step carefully onto the concrete outside.

Most people had already left. The lights are still out in the windows. It's sunny.

We all watch each other. Nobody stops to chat, nobody looks at you too long. Someone had a long, tall bag, and the people near them walk faster, even though we all know it's just laundry.

They are all haunted. Some haunts look like yours, like the troop that crawls on the ground behind you. They are long, skinny, hungry. They have holes. They are short and squat and mean. They look like coats on hangers. They look like men in hats. Some of them just look like people, and some of them are knocks on doors.

You are all more scared of each other than you are of the monsters, even the ones who still talk and smile and call friends. You sit under the sky, which has become a dark, heavy shadow, like a lid on the campus above. It makes the world low. Claustrophobic.

You are walking outside. You have a hood over your head.

You turn, and you can even see it coming, parting through the crowds of people like a starving shepherd, but there is no stopping it from getting you. Nobody even blinks as it passes.

Even out here.

Even with the sun out.

Now I remember. I did leave that night. I went home, drove the hour, hugged the dog—back then he was fluffy, to combat the cold. I remember the depth of his coat, the scent of puppy shampoo. We sat there and did nothing on my parent's couch together.

And three days later, I'm still home. My grandparents come over. We have pizza. Talk. We don't really talk about *it*, though, or I don't remember us doing so, but my cat jumps onto my lap and my laptop and notebook are still in my bag and I never take them out for all the days I spend at home.

When I do go back, there are rows and rows of signs by the streets, handwritten, but nobody out. The doors lock at fun new times. I forget them immediately.

Someone tells me that there's support everywhere, but no matter where I go, I can't seem to find it in places other than my iPhone.

There is the knowledge that you should fend it off. That you're supposed to be brave, to wield a flaming sword in the oppressive darkness, but you can't even have a toaster in your dorm, let alone a biblical burning weapon.

So you watch the hands reach for your roommate, from under her lofted bed. You watch them skitter after people down the hall, watch eyes pop out in the elevator that shudders a little too hard, watch the way that we all hold our breaths and wait for our IDs to let us into the dorms now. People turn faster, away from someone walking in, when a week ago, they would have held the door, would have made disparaging noises about the lock system, and went on their way, not a thought spared.

Or maybe that's just you. Maybe everyone else is fine. Maybe they don't notice the creature looming over their shoulder, watching every text they send.

You do try to defend yourself, anyway. You stare out into that darkness, hold the covers above your head, even in the smothering heat, and wrap one hand around the back of your neck.

But it never goes for the head.



And it gets you anyway.

It's cold outside.

I have my laptop open for the first time. It creaked at me. I felt sort of bad for abandoning it, but it operated like the sheet and there's no reason to use tools that don't work.

But tonight, I blink down at that white screen, and give it a go. Pull the sheet over my head.

There is no prose in my skull. But there is an idea, sort of, maybe something that could possibly happen at a later date, probably. It's just the beginnings. It doesn't mean anything, really, it's just the highest and the lowest notes.

The laptop gets closed pretty damn fast.

I stare out my window instead, monitoring the ice and the cold. If I listen close... behind the stately nature of the crosswalk, and the neighbor who has taken up their musical hobbies again, I can hear my planner screaming with agony.

Every class is twisted up with uncertainty. Due dates are scattered like leaves, mangled with terrified leniency, half the world sympathetic to a fault, the other half pleasantly pleased with closing its eyes and humming.

I guess, looking at it, that I'm not really writing yet. But I'm... I'm not *not* writing.

Your blanket is thicker, this time. Made of wool. You have to turn on the fan to suffer through it, but that suffocation is worth it, to hold the mass over your head. To press your cheek into the pillow and feel the *weight*.

You put boxes in the spaces under your bed. You tuck a sheet under the mattress to hang over the dark, to bracket it off from the rest of the room. The lights are on. Nobody sleeps in the bed opposite to you.

You stare at the entryway. There is no eye.

But you didn't check behind you.

So it still gets you. Of course.

When you awake in the morning, freshly bled, teeth aching and eyes glued shut with salt, the little monster from before is outside your window. In the dark. It swings in the shadows, dances with its bony shoulders, pin-prick eye flashing, long teeth gnashing, beating to the sound of your alarm, a whole hour early.

It's sort of over already. The reaction's fizzled out, all the bubbles gone flat. Some of the teachers continue with the leniency, but none of them are pleased with it anymore. I can put down due dates in my planner without fussing with white out later.

The book comes. Sort of.

In fits and starts. Nothing I would be proud to say I was doing. When someone asks what I'm writing, I say not much, because it doesn't feel like much. Everyone looks at me like I'm supposed to be making scripture, with all this bad stuff in my brain. Or maybe I'm overthinking it.

The words are janky, but the prologue eats its way out from behind my sternum and I submit it as my application to the Creative Writing minor, and then I stare at my screen with bagged eyes as it tells me to wait.

Yes. The words *were* janky, but they came out fast and they came out correct, and when I breathe, it's cold and fresh and the keys sound correct when I tap on them. The computer screen illuminates the dorm room.

You unlock the door.

The roommate is gone.

There are only two lights, but you take great pains to turn both of them off (Unplug the lamp, just in case). You take out everything from under the bed. You open the window. You put your sheet on the ground. You lay flat on your back.

And you close your eyes.

You are woken by a tapping on your shoulder. Your phone, awake with notifications you won't reply to, informs you that you're meant to be up in ten minutes anyway.

"What are you doing?"

You look up at the rotted thing before you.

"I'm sleeping."

It breathes.

"Where is your blanket?"

"It wasn't really working."

"I know that. Why did you take it off?"

I sit up. It's cold in here, with that window open. The others hang in the corners. The little anxiety monster is in the entryway, eye twinkling. More that I've become unfamiliar with, over time. Branch-like men in the window, spiders sitting on the loft, mistakes I tried to forget about draped over the chairs.

I turn my head, and I see that the buildings outside are again riddled with multicolored LED lit windows. Music plays from two doors down. The elevator makes that strange ringing noise, the crosswalk declares itself into the void.

My laptop sits on the desk, still open. The screen is dark. But I've memorized the words that would be there, if I were to wake it.

When I stand, the sort-of-forgottens scuttle back. Dark and spindly and bright colored and shying away when the monster lurches to follow me. It leaves a trail of gore behind it. Beating hearts, raw and bloody against a dusty floor, frayed nerves splayed against tile.

"What are you doing?"

It idles as I get dressed. Long, sharp fingers twist at its side. The sun begins to creep up over the horizon, and my alarm goes off.

I hold its hand. I don't look at the others, where they wait, where they've always been waiting.

But that morning, I take this one to class.

It gets me, yeah?