

*Based On A True Story*

The first time she saw him, she thought the light in the room had changed. It was late, the kind of late when the house feels hollow and sounds travel farther than it should. The television murmured softly in the living room, casting pale, flickering light across the walls. She sat cross-legged on the carpet, half watching, half drifting in that heavy quiet that settles over a house after everyone else has gone to bed. That was when the air shifted. Not a sound, nor a movement. Just a subtle tightening, as if the room had inhaled and forgotten to exhale. She turned her head slowly. He was already there.

Standing near the edge of the living room, almost flush with the wall, was a figure so tall it seemed misplaced inside the house. At least six feet. Maybe seven. His body was darker than the surrounding shadows, not simply black but absorbing the dim light around him. He wore what looked like a long coat that fell straight down without movement. His shoulders were broad, rigid. Still. And on his head sat a tall, narrow top hat. The brim angled downward, hiding his eyes entirely. What little of his face could be seen beneath it appeared distorted, blurred at the edges, as if reality itself refused to sharpen him into focus. His presence welcomed the uneasy feeling of butterflies protruding into the stomach .

He did not move, nor did he breathe. He simply stood there, facing her. For a long moment, neither of them broke the silence. The television continued flickering. The refrigerator hummed in the kitchen. Everything was ordinary except for him. His body twitched slightly, not enough to make sudden movements but enough to feel happening.

Her chest felt tight, but she could not look away. The longer she stared, the more certain she became that he was not a trick of shadow. He occupied space. He held posture. He was present.

When she finally blinked, her eyes stinging from the strain, the place where he had stood was empty. The room returned to itself as if nothing had happened. But something had.

In the grocery store, beneath the bright fluorescent lights and the steady hum of freezers, she would sense a presence at the end of an aisle. She would glance up and, for the briefest second, catch the suggestion of unnatural height rising above stacked cereal boxes and metal shelving. A shape too tall. Too narrow. When she looked directly, the aisle would be empty. A cart left crooked. A box slightly askew. Once, she found herself staring at the convex security mirror in the ceiling corner and for a split second, she thought she saw something dark standing behind her reflection. Taller than the shelves. Taller than anyone nearby. She spun around. Nothing.

At school, it was worse. She would feel him beside her during class. Not visibly, never visibly, but in the subtle displacement of air, the faint pressure in her ears like before a storm. The empty chair next to her never felt empty. Sometimes her pencil would roll off her desk for no reason. Sometimes the fine hairs along her arms would lift while the rest of the room remained warm and still. She began glancing toward the classroom door more than the board.

Once, while walking down a crowded hallway, she felt the sudden urge to look up. Above the moving sea of heads, past lockers and banners, she thought she saw the outline of a tall hat disappearing around a corner. It never arrived with noise or drama. It arrived quietly. Patiently. It felt less like being hunted and more like being observed. At night, the sensation grew stronger.

She stopped sleeping in her own room. The darkness there felt too deep, the corners too layered, as though shadow sat inside the shadow. Instead, she and her little brother began sleeping in their mother's bed. The room was small, leaving only enough space for the mattress to press against the wall. Across from it stood a tall dresser with a large mirror attached, positioned so that the doorway reflected perfectly in its glass.

She hated that mirror.

It doubled the dark.

There were smaller moments, too — the kinds that were easy to dismiss if she tried hard enough. The way her bedroom door would sometimes be slightly ajar when she was certain she had closed it. The way the television would flicker once, sharply, even when no one had touched the remote. Once, while brushing her teeth, she caught her reflection lagging half a second behind her movement in the mirror, just long enough to make her stomach drop before it corrected itself. She began to move carefully, deliberately, as if sudden gestures might attract attention. It felt as though something invisible was mapping her habits, learning the rhythm of her steps, memorizing the sound of her breathing. And the worst part was not the fear, it was the certainty that whatever it was, it was patient.

One night, she lay facing the wall while her brother slept beside her. Her mother's breathing was steady behind them. The house was silent except for the soft ticking of something mechanical she could never quite locate. Then the feeling returned. Not faint this time. Not distant; Immediate.

The hairs along her arms rose before she moved. Slowly, as if resisting something magnetic, she rolled onto her back and turned her head toward the doorway.

This time he stood within the frame. His height nearly reached the top of it, forcing his head to tilt slightly forward. The top hat brushed the upper molding. His face remained hidden beneath the brim, but she felt the direction of his gaze with crushing certainty. He was looking directly at her. He did not step inside the room. He did not gesture.

He simply watched.

Terror moved through her in a wave so strong it left her cold. She pulled the blanket over her head, pressing the fabric tight around her shoulders as though it could serve as a barrier. Underneath the covers, the air became thin and warm. She squeezed her eyes shut and counted her breaths, waiting for the feeling to fade. When she finally gathered enough courage to look again, the doorway was empty. Relief lasted only seconds. Because the feeling did not leave.

It shifted. It was closer now.

She lay still, barely breathing. The blanket near her feet lifted slightly. Not enough to see beneath it. Just enough to rise and fall. She told herself it was her imagination. A muscle twitch. A draft. Anything but what she feared.

Then the blanket rose again. Higher. Closer.

The fabric tented slowly, deliberately, as though something beneath it were advancing upward along her body. Her mind struggled to form a thought, but her body understood before she did. It was not at the door anymore. It was with her.

The blanket lifted a third time, closer to her knees now, the movement unmistakable in its direction. She screamed. The sound tore out of her before she knew she was making it. She threw the covers aside and scrambled backward against the headboard, shaking, scanning the bed for anything visible. There was nothing.

Her mother jolted awake. The room was filled with light. The doorway stood empty. The mirror reflected only three frightened faces and the harmless shape of furniture. But the air still felt wrong.

The next day, she told her mother everything — about the living room, the grocery store aisles, the classroom, the doorway, the blanket. She expected dismissal, laughter, or a gentle explanation about dreams. Instead, her mother listened. By evening, a small basket sat on the kitchen table. Inside it was a bundle of sage, a shell to catch ash, a small bottle of homemade protective spray, and a pink Himalayan salt lamp that glowed softly when plugged in. That night, they moved slowly through the house together. Smoke from the sage curled along ceilings and into corners. Her mother spoke firmly into the air, telling whatever did not belong there to leave, to be free, to go beyond the walls of their home.

The house felt unsettled during the cleansing, as though something resisted the words. At the end, her mother turned toward her. The sage burned steadily as she lifted it above her daughter's head. The moment the smoke drifted over her hair and down around her shoulders, something changed. The heaviness she had grown used to carrying vanished with startling suddenness. The constant pressure in her chest eased. The air felt lighter. Clearer. The house felt like a house again.

He never appeared after that. Not in mirrors. Not in doorways. Not at the foot of her bed.

Years later, she would sometimes think about the height of him, the deliberate stillness, the brim that hid his eyes. She would wonder whether he had been waiting to be seen, or whether seeing him had given him permission to stay.

She never found an answer.

She only knew that whatever had followed her, left the night the smoke rose above her head. And sometimes, in very quiet rooms, when the air tightens just slightly, she still feels aware of how thin the space between life and *death* can be.