

Candidate 6

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Inner Demons

Calling Sam Hendrix to Court Number One.

I had experienced nightmares before that, the odd one or two – everyone does. Those were the usual bad dreams; in school in my pants, drowning in the swimming pool, falling off the top of the house, those sorts of bad dreams. But at the age of seven they began in earnest. There would be monsters tapping on the wall. Creatures dragging their nails along the floor. Desperate, threatening, keening sounds, the monsters made as they clambered up the bedpost. Sounds that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Sounds that made me break out in a cold sweat. Inching closer and closer towards me, a monster would be just about to stretch out its long claws, to stroke my face. To devour me. I would wake up with a cry. Seconds later, one of my parents would be in my room. Comforting me. Telling me it was all a dream. It was okay now, they were there. My mum was the best. She would snuggle up under my Fireman Sam duvet with me, wrap her arms around me, and tell me stories until I fell asleep.

Hesitating, Sam peered round the door the officer was about to lead him through. He had a side view of the court. The judge was the one who had ordered he be called. She was wearing one of those puffy, curly-haired wigs. A grey wig. She might have been pretty without it. He could see a journalist on the other side of the room near the stairs. The journalist had a pad of paper on his knee. The type Sam would use in school. And a biro. A black one with the end chewed slightly. Not broken. Just nibbled. He looked eager, ready to write. To record. To hear what Sam had to say. Sam took a deep breath.

They thought I would grow out of it originally. My Mum spoke to other Mums in the playground “Does Jimmy still get nightmares? Yes? Oh, okay then”. My parents seemed to be reassured. But when I was still having the same dream at the age of ten, they began to worry. They contacted a psychologist. I spent hours discussing nightmares and learning relaxation techniques. I would write down my worries on a piece of paper and put them in a box. I wasn’t worried though. I was scared. As if a paper box would have done anything if I had been worried. They say it’s cowardly for boys to be scared. “They” have never heard that sound. “They” have never met the monsters. The doctor tried sleeping pills, breathing exercises. Nothing seemed to work. There would be brief periods, a day, three days, a week, even a month, when the dreams and screams would stop. Never longer though.

Sam looked at the floor as he entered the court room. Deep breath. Left foot forward. Deep breath. Right foot forward. Sam looked at his shoes as they moved him slowly but steadily towards the box. The stand where he would testify. He kind of wished they would stop. He felt sick. There was a bitter taste at the back of his mouth. But he kept breathing and the shoes, with their faded blue tongues and grubby white laces, continued to move one after the other in the direction of the stand.

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At the age of 10, my father suggested moving house. Maybe it was the old creepy atmosphere of the house, its grey bricks, its polished floors, its whispering draughts. Maybe that was what was causing his son to dream. But he quickly changed his mind. They were not going to abandon a beautiful house and move to some soulless one in a housing estate, filled with identical houses, in the hope that his son might feel a bit better. This house was an investment. Besides it was all in Sam's mind. And yet no matter what I did, the screeching, the tapping and sometimes, a cold manic laughter that sent shivers down my spine, none of it stopped.

The floor stuck to the soles of his shoes as he walked. The carpet was blue and sticky. It looked as though years of grime, make up and possibly vomit, had been ground into that carpet. There was the odd white circle of gum too. A sticky carpet trying to stop him moving. Stop him in his tracks. Stop him in time.

The monsters had stopped at the age of twelve. Progress, I was told. The noises would surely follow after. But they didn't. I started wearing ear plugs but the noises just got louder. Ripping, crunching, growling noises. All accompanied by that laughter. Screams too. Although I couldn't be sure. It might just have been my own screams I heard. My father gave up on me. He couldn't hear any screams. I just needed to "man up". But he was on the other side of the house; the old, creaky, broken, house. The sound would have been lost in the halls long before it reached him, I reasoned. I wasn't the boy my father wanted me to be, I wasn't manly, I wasn't strong, I didn't like rugby and I was afraid of the dark. However, my mother never gave up on me. She had suffered from nightmares as a child too. It was ok. I would find a way to cope - everyone did eventually. My mother always came running if she heard me in the night. Always. When my father gave up trying to teach me rugby, my mother taught me to paint, she was there for me.

He risked a look up as he walked. A quick glance to the left, before his head went down again to the sticky blue carpet. The one with the sticky blue shoes on it. He had seen two lawyers. They wore long black robes. Like crows. One was standing. He had scratched his nose and was looking down at his papers. His robe had fallen off both shoulders and was bunched up in his elbows. The other, shorter, grey haired, sat at a table. His robe hung off his left shoulder. He was shuffling his papers but not looking at them. His hair was thin. His head had a faint gleam in the court room light. His robe was in tatters at the hem as if it had been dragged along the floor too often, as if a dog had tried to chew it. Maybe both.

At the age of thirteen I stopped telling the psychologist things, she wanted to refer me to a psychiatrist. My mother told me not to worry, they had sent her to a psychiatrist for dreams but I didn't want to be thought of as mad. I knew my friends would think I was weird if I told them about it. I resolved to ignore the horrible, screeching, animalistic sounds. Sounds like nails on a black board. Sounds that made a cold sweat break out across my forehead - not something Calpol could cure. I decided to stop telling the psychologist about the noises. She pronounced me cured and said it was, "amazing, wonderful, superb". It was only my mother who knew I could still hear the

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sounds. She noticed the scratches on my arms that I put there to stop myself from screaming out loud. The dead skin I could never completely remove from under my nails. My father noticed too but he didn't say anything. He had lost his son at seven years old.

Everything felt loud. Each footfall seemed to echo throughout the room. His breathing sounded like he had been running. Everyone would be able to hear it. The journalist's pen scratched against the paper. He flinched, the sound so reminiscent of all those nightmares. All those scratches and wails. He took another step. Left right left. Two more and he would reach the stand. His thoughts were so loud; everyone must be able to hear them. They would be able to hear what he was thinking. Hear if he was lying. Not that it mattered, he wasn't going to lie. He didn't want to lie.

The year my psychologist stopped seeing me, so did my friends. We would still talk in school but they wouldn't come to my house. I had stopped telling them about bad dreams when I was younger. Cool people didn't talk about those things. Not cool guys anyway. Guys talked about Xbox, girls, partying. Not dreams. I had invited my mates round for an Xbox marathon – my father's suggestion; a half-hearted attempt at trying to have a normal life, at trying to have a normal relationship with his son, at trying to have a normal son. I hadn't heard any noises for the last week so I was sure I wouldn't scream in my sleep.

He reached the stand. He turned to face the judge, straight backed. He took the oath. He would tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He would tell them. They needed to know.

It had started at three in the morning. One of the other boys woke me. I had slept more fitfully knowing they were in the room with me. The rest of the boys were awake listening to the tapping "Sam, what's the noise?" they asked. We sat rigid in our sleeping bags, too scared to move. "I've heard it before" I admitted. Harry, the leader of the group, the bravest, tried to make us laugh, tried to reassure us "It's probably the pipes...or maybe it's a ghost". Harry wriggled under my bed to the side next to the wall. He wriggled like a caterpillar - too comic an image for the tension in the room. Harry tapped on the wall three times "tap, tap, tap...see nothing back, pipes don't reply, ghosts do...it's just old plumbing". A few of the boys gave a silent exhale of relief. Of course Harry was right, he always was. Then we heard it, a tap, tap, tap back. Harry tapped twice. Two taps in return. Then there was a bang, a screech, a howl and silence. Five minutes later, woken by the noise of screaming boys, my mother came in, "it's alright the plumbing makes that noise sometimes". "But plumbing doesn't re..." Mum only replied with a "Sssh it's alright, now just get to sleep". My friends hadn't come round again.

He stated for the record that, yes, he was 17 years old and yes, his name was Sam Hendrix. Yes, he lived at 12 Ochil Drive. What type of house was it? An old one. How big was it? It had four bedrooms but it was old, lots of studies, junk rooms - they were too dilapidated for use. Had he been in every room? He guessed so. He

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guessed so? But that could mean there were other rooms he hadn't been in? Yes, he supposed that was true. The lawyer with the dog chewed cape was clever, good at asking questions. Had he ever heard anything strange? Yes, but they were only dreams, nightmares!

The police had turned up at four in the afternoon. My mother had just returned from work. She was an accountant. There had been suspicious disappearances round these parts. They were inspecting everyone's house, not that they expected to find anything. But they had though. I had only seen it later. When I returned from football practise. I had scored a goal that day. It was the police tape that let me know something was wrong, not my parents. My Father claimed he didn't know anything about it. I thought he probably didn't, he wasn't smart enough to connect the dots. Then again, neither was I. They had taken my mother away before I came home. They hadn't wanted me to see but I pushed past the tape. Past the dozens of officers. Down the staircase I never knew existed. The room I entered was one I had never seen before. It would be adjacent to my room, the bed adjacent to my bed. Almost mirroring my room. Except this one had shackles. There was crusted, red-brown liquid on the floor. Blood. Around the room lay instruments. Burning liquid moved up my throat. I threw up. Clear acidic bile on the floor. Disgust and horror flowing through me. Nightmares they had said. Imaginings. Reality. I was going to faint. I crouched down. Those same hands that had tucked me into bed, played with me, cuddled me better had...I didn't want to understand but I did. I crouched down and didn't move. Closed my eyes and didn't move.