

For James
By Will Buxton '21
Short Story Honorable Mention

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"I'm sorry Jim... they- they didn't go for it." Jim Howell leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and ran his fingers back through his hair. He had been proud of his manuscript, and this wasn't exactly the news he had been expecting when he picked up the phone that evening. Jim's editor, Lorenzo, waited nervously on the other end for a response, and after a dreadfully long and terribly awkward silence, Jim spoke.

"Well... damn. Damn it."

"I'm sorry, Jim. I really am." And he really was. The truth is, Jim really needed a win that day, and Lorenzo knew it. You see, Jim had lost someone recently. Someone very important.

"I just don't get it, Ren. You read it. It was good, right?"

"It was, Jim. It- it really was." And it really was. The manuscript had been a story meant for children; it was a simple yet heartfelt tale about a young boy named James. In the story, James is transported into a special, magical world where he meets all kinds of odd and eccentric characters who try to help him find his way back home. It wasn't exactly groundbreaking, but Jim had put his heart and soul into it.

"Well, what exactly did they say? Did they not like it?"

"They thought it was good, Jim, but they just weren't interested in publishing a children's book... at least, not from you. Not from *his* son." Jim's blood ran cold.

"They want to give you another shot, Jim. They- they want you to write something scary. Like *he* did. They think it'll sell if it's scary. I know it's not what you had in mind, but-"

"I see... I'll- I'll talk to you later, Ren."

"Jim, wait-" But he had already hung up the phone. Jim sat still for a moment staring straight at the blank wall ahead of him. He could have sat there all night, content to just not *be* for a while- that way he wouldn't have to think about any of it. He probably would have remained seated, had he not suddenly become acutely aware of how uncomfortable his chair was. He stood and examined it- had it always been so small? It was at that moment that Jim decided to look at where he was- *really look*. He

began to scan the room, and as he did, for the first time, he noticed just how small his office was. His chair was small, his desk was small, his window was small, and the potted plant that he kept on the sill of the small window was terribly, dreadfully small. For the first time since his father died, Jim noticed just how small he was; just how small his life was.

Jim's father, James Howell, had been a widely renowned and highly respected horror author. He made his living writing stories that were thrilling and terrifying, and he was very, very good at it. When Lorenzo had first told Jim that a publisher was interested in his work, Jim had felt so proud; his father had died only a few weeks prior, but this chance, this opportunity, was a light in all the dark. He had started writing when he was young to try and emulate his father, whom he idolized, but now he was finally going to do his late father proud by becoming successful in his own right.

Jim chuckled sadly to himself. How could he have been so stupid? Of course they weren't interested in him or in his stupid kid's book. They didn't want Jim Howell- they wanted James Howell's son. Jim loved his father, and he missed him terribly, but no matter what he did in his life, he could never escape his family's legacy, and it haunted him like one of the ghosts in his father's stories. Jim didn't like ghosts; in fact, Jim had never particularly enjoyed the horror genre in general. He didn't like being afraid, and he couldn't understand how anyone else could enjoy such a dreadful feeling. Was it all really just for some cheap, manufactured adrenaline rush? Jim preferred the naive yet comforting simplicity of children's literature. He always had. When he was young, it hadn't been his Father's horror stories that had inspired him; it was the bedtime stories that he had told Jim every night, stories about good triumphing over evil against all odds, about magical creatures and fantastical worlds, and about how even the littlest person could be brave. It was those stories that had enchanted Jim as a boy, and he had always wanted to be able to give that feeling that his father had given him- that feeling of wonder, to others. Jim was feeling confused at this point- confused and frightened- but as he looked around his small office, he knew one thing for sure: he knew that in the wake of his father's death, everyone was suddenly looking to him. Alone in his small office he could feel their eyes watching him. Waiting. Waiting to see what he would do next. Jim knew what they wanted from him.

They wanted to be scared.

Jim sat back down in his small chair. His hands trembled as he opened his laptop. Bright white light illuminated the tears running down his cheeks as he began to write.

When Jim awoke, he found that he wasn't at his desk anymore. In fact, he wasn't in his office at all. He was in a large bookstore, sitting at a large table positioned at the end of a very, very large line of eager fans, each holding a copy of his new book,

“Skittering in the Shadows: A Collection of Horror Stories by Jim Howell.” One of the store employees gestured to the next person in line, and the young man stepped forward and placed his copy down onto the table. He said something generic along the lines of “I’m a big fan of yours” but Jim didn’t really hear him. He was too busy examining the book. The cover was a picture of some kind of grotesque-looking insect-creature lurking in a dark forest, preparing to pounce on an unsuspecting man holding a flashlight. The title of the book was printed on it of course, but what stood out most to Jim was that his name, printed in large, blood red letters, was much, much larger than the actual title. Jim turned his attention back toward the boy who had handed him the book and retrieved a pen from his pocket.

“Who’s it for?” Jim asked. The boy paused for a few moments before answering, considering the question carefully as if he wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“James,” he replied hesitantly, “it’s for James.” Jim chuckled nervously. It was funny- the boy actually looked quite a bit like the pictures he had seen of his father when he was young. Jim opened the book. He signed his name and some generic message for James on the inside of the cover.

“You know, he said as he signed, “James was actually my father’s-” Jim looked up, but the boy- James, he assumed, was gone. In fact, so was everyone else. Jim suddenly found himself completely and utterly alone in the bookstore. It was unnerving- being alone in a place that he had only ever seen full of people. He wasn’t so much confused or scared as he was disappointed- not for himself, but for James. Wherever he had gone, he had forgotten his book. Jim picked up the newly signed copy and stood. He turned it over in his hands. It was new. *Brand new*. Jim realized that James hadn’t read it yet. He didn’t know why, but he was suddenly overcome with emotion. He had to find James. He had to give him his book- he needed it. It was *for* him. It was *for* James.

“James?” Jim called out, his voice echoing through the shelves, “I have your book!” Jim began to drift away from the table, searching for the strange, familiar boy, book in hand. He wandered about the store, looking down each aisle and calling out for the boy, but after what seemed like hours of searching, James was nowhere to be found. Jim had just about resigned himself to failure with a heavy sense of shame when he heard it- the sound of a young boy chuckling somewhere far off.

“James?” Out of the corner of his eye, Jim caught sight of movement. He sprang into action, suddenly running faster than he ever had before, bobbing and weaving throughout the maze of bookshelves in pursuit of the enigmatic boy.

“Please!” He called out, “Come back! You left this behind!” Jim began to feel fatigued. How long had he been running for? He was close. He was so close, but he had to stop to catch his breath. He placed his hand on a nearby shelf to steady himself. He examined the spines of the books on the shelf, and suddenly became aware that every book on that shelf, and every book on every shelf, for that matter, was a copy of “Skittering in the Shadows.” It puzzled Jim that this store only seemed to sell one

book. *His book*. After all, it was a large store- a very large store, actually. In fact, Jim suddenly became aware of just how large- just how infinitely large the store was. Where had he come in? Where was the table he had sat at? In every direction, all he could see were shelves. More and more shelves, each filled to the brim with the stupid, stupid book that James didn't want.

Jim cried out in frustration. He opened the book and began to tear. He ripped out pages by the fistful, throwing them into the air with mad delight and watching them float away with the wind or get caught in the branches of the dark, twisted trees nearby. *Wind? Trees?*

Jim's outburst was interrupted by the realization that he was no longer in the store. He now stood in the middle of a very dark, and very familiar forest, surrounded by the scattered remains of his book. His eyes moved to the empty husk in his hand; now only the front and back cover remained intact. His gaze was locked on the cover image when he heard it. *The skittering*. His blood ran cold. Clicking. Somewhere behind him. Above him? He dropped the book and turned on his flashlight, which must've been in his hand all along.

"James..." A high-pitched voice called out softly. *Where? Where was it?*

"Jaaaaaaames... I need James..." Every bone in Jim's body, every fiber of his being, was screaming. He had to run, but he couldn't. He was frozen in place, enchanted by the honeyed voice that echoed through the trees. He closed his eyes. He was afraid. He was terribly, dreadfully afraid. The skittering sound drew closer and closer as tears ran down Jim's cheeks.

"I don't want this!" He cried. Closer now.

"Go away!" The sound stopped. The forest was silent. Jim knew then, that the creature was right behind him. He could feel it.

"Are you James?" the voice whispered. Jim could feel its breath on the back of his neck. His throat tightened.

"James Howell? You *are*, aren't you?"

"No." Jim replied, shaking, his eyes closed tightly.

"But... but... why not?" Jim could hear the disappointment in the creature's voice. It was almost child-like.

"I'm... I'm not him."

"But don't you want to be? He would have loved this. This is what we want from you. This is what *he* wanted from you."

"I don't care!" Jim shouted out into the void. He was cold.

"Yes you do." Jim stood and turned to face the creature, but his eyes remained closed. *Be brave*.

"I'm not *him*! I'm not my father! I'm not you!"

"Well, of course you aren't, buddy." The voice was different. It was lower, and a bit raspy. It was familiar. It was warm. He opened his eyes, and there, sitting in a plush armchair in the den of his childhood home, was his father.

“Dad.

“Is that what you think? That I wanted you to be just like me?” James Howell looked just like he did when Jim was a little boy.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you wanted. I don’t know what *I* want. I just miss you, dad. I wish you were still here. Now that you’re gone it feels like everyone is waiting for me to do something, but I don’t know what.” Jim’s father smiled.

“Please, dad,” Jim continued, “I’m so confused. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be?” James placed a reassuring hand on his son’s shoulder.

“You’re my son, Jim. You’re just supposed to be my son. Nothing more. I know you’re not me, and deep down, you know it too.” James paused. “Do you remember why you started writing?” Jim thought about his father’s question.

“I wanted to be like you.” James chuckled at this answer.

“Maybe. But that’s not the important part, is it, son?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you keep doing it? After you started, why didn’t you stop? Why didn’t you ever stop?” Jim considered this for a moment, and then he answered, more sure than he had ever been about anything.

“Because I fell in love. I loved it.” tears rolled down Jim’s cheeks as James embraced his son, and Jim felt safe- truly safe for the first time since losing his father.

“And you still do. Remember that, son. When you lose sight of what’s important, remember that you write because *you* love it. Don’t do it for me, and don’t do it for some money-hungry publisher. Do it for you.” Jim smiled.

“I- I just wanted to make you proud.”

“You already have.”

“I love you, dad.”

“I love you too, Jim.”

Jim woke up in his office, his head on his desk, morning light shining in through the window onto his face. When had he fallen asleep? He rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms out with a yawn. He looked at his laptop. On the screen was a single blank page. Jim looked at it and smiled. Written on it were a million different possibilities, and each of them was *his*.