

It's Watching  
Stacey Reeve (2022)

You can't sleep at night, knowing that it's watching. You've tried barricading the door and the window too. Every time you shut your eyes, you feel it's cold gaze, and the familiar walls of your bedroom feel like a cell that can't be escaped.

Of course, your mother doesn't know of the terror that lurks in your room at night. She'd be worried, scared even. Do you want that to happen? Too scared to ask for help, you are alone. She won't believe you. You're exaggerating. Besides, is it even there?

Last night, it perched on the end of your bed again, whispering. Its sound was husky, as if it were losing its voice. Its body was heavy, preventing you from pulling the covers up to shield your eyes as its flaky skin peeled from its jaw, fluttering in the moonlight as the breeze through your window carried the fragments away. It doesn't come closer, but one day it will, and then—maybe—everything will end. When you wake, it's vanished, but you know it's still there, watching.

You skip breakfast this morning. There's no time; you've slept in. Work starts in thirty minutes, and it's a fifteen-minute drive into town. You don't shower; you don't brush your hair. Instead, you search the living room for your backpack.

'What are you looking for?'

In your peripheral vision, you see your mother in the kitchen, making a cup of tea. With a grunt, you continue searching while pulling and pinching at your earlobe. It was here yesterday, you swear, right beside the couch.

'Did you move it? I mean, have you seen—'

The words trail off as your mother lifts the backpack onto the kitchen countertop. 'I figured that was the case.' She peers at the analogue clock hanging above the dining room bookshelf. 'You're late. Again.' There is mockery in her voice; you're always late.

You curse under your breath before retrieving the backpack, looking to see that she has packed leftovers for lunch as well as two water bottles. You raise your head to thank her, but there it is.

Watching.

It looms over her, as if it's intrigued by the conversation you are having. It isn't supposed to be here. It's dark, empty eyes bulge from its skull and, as if its suffering from malnourishment, its charcoal black skin is tight against its bones. You could probably count each rib in its chest. Your palms sweat and your body tightens as it stares in your direction.

Why has it shown itself in the daytime?

You avert your eyes and peer at the lunch in your backpack.

Your mother places her hand on her hip as she tilts her head. 'You alright? Don't look so bummed out; it's just leftovers from last night.' She smacks her lips as she zips the backpack up, concealing the food inside, before turning you to face the door. 'I'll see you this afternoon.'

With a little nudge, you head for the front door, not daring to look back at your mother. Before turning the knob of the door, you pause. 'Thanks.'

'Shoes,' she replies.

You scowl as you turn towards the kitchen. It's gone. Your mother stands alone. Shaking your head, you ask, 'What?'

'You need shoes.' She shrugs as she turns to the kitchen sink and rinses her mug.

You look at your feet. How did you forget to put shoes on? Your black shoes are next to the door; you drag them across the floor and force your feet in without untying the laces. With a hand on the doorknob, you say, 'Thanks, again.'

At work, you rush to the staffroom, grab your water bottle, and dump the backpack in the corner of the room. As you step out of the office, your co-worker, Jesse, sneaks up behind you.

'What the hell, man?' You chuckle, ashamed of being frightened so easily.

They sneer as they punch your arm before looking you up and down. 'Hey, are you okay? You look real tired. You're not throwing parties without me again, are you?'

'You know me, always doing—that.' You pick at the skin around your nail, understanding Jesse is concerned, before replying, 'I'm fine.'

They hesitate, then shrug before turning to walk down the aisle across from the staffroom. 'Come on,' they say in a melodic tone. 'We've got a lot to do today.'

Biting at your nail, you catch up with them. Pointing towards a trolley full of products, it's clear what Jesse expect you to do. Stocking shelves has never been a fun job and today isn't any different. But now you can feel it.

It's watching.

Your legs feel numb, as if they will collapse at any moment. There's a tightness in your chest that strengthens with every breath.

Why is it here?

Throughout the day, you find yourself looking over your shoulder, in case it is to show itself again. Your watch vibrates, signalling the sixteenth hour of the day. You've run out of time. Again. What the hell? Why can't you do anything right?

Once the store is closed, you and Jesse part ways, giving each other a nod and a goodbye. You scratch at your arm until it burns bright red as you panic.

It's still watching.

You sit in your car, buckle the seatbelt, start the engine, drive. Seven minutes pass. You're on the outskirts of town when it appears again, on the side of the road, a hunched figure sitting cross-legged, turning to watch as you drive past. You look in the rear-view mirror.

It's gone.

As soon as you look forward, it appears on the opposite side of the road. It stands in front of a large eucalyptus, its height reaching a quarter way up the tree. Drawn to the figure, you ask yourself why.

Why here? Why now? Why you?

As you drive past your heart flutters. In an instant, it appears again. This time, on the backseat of your car. Without a word, it smiles, revealing its crooked and blunt yellow teeth. You gaze from the figure to the road, then to the figure again.

Whispering, it reaches in your direction.

Gripping the steering wheel, you shudder as its long and thin fingers rest on your shoulder. It pulls itself towards you, and its words become clear. Warm breath blows into your ear.

'A disappointment. A failure. Worthless and stupid. You are suffering. Let me help you,' it chants, arm extending, holding the steering wheel. 'It will look like an accident. No one has to know.'

You take your hands off the wheel, allowing the creature to take control. The gravel on the side of the road flick up from underneath the tyres, clanging against the bottom of the car as it drifts off the highway.

Do you really want to do this? Could your mother cope with the loss of her child? Would Jesse forgive you for leaving them behind? Are you willing to hurt those who care about you?

This isn't right.

Stop.

You jolt, foot hitting the brake, and take hold of the steering wheel. The tyres screech as the car speeds towards another towering eucalyptus tree. A crunch echoes throughout the bush and down the highway.

And just like that, everything stops.

You lift your head from the car's air bag and unbuckle your seatbelt before falling out of the car. The grass scratches at your arms and legs, and again you find yourself asking why.

Why are you like this? Why did this happen? Why aren't you normal?

Tears form, blurring your vision. Everything aches, your pelvis more than anything else. You shout for help, but there is no one around to hear you except for a familiar figure who approaches as you cry. It kneels beside you, hugging its knees to its chest. You're eyebrows furrow.

'What do you want.' Your voice cracks. 'Leave me alone. Please.' You spit as blood mixed with salty tears run into your mouth.

Stooping over, it presses its palm onto your chest, and whispers, 'Let go. You don't have to feel this way anymore.'

You scrunch your nose as it pushes against your chest. The sound of your ribs cracking reverberates through your body. With the little strength you have left, you raise your arm and strike its bony knee.

It repeats, 'Let go.'

'No, I don't want to. I can't.'

You sob when it releases its hold and walks away as if nothing has happened.

It's over.

But now you're alone again, staring at the sky in agonising pain as you become aware of your injuries. Gasping for air, hyperventilating, you wonder if you had confided—if you had asked for help—would any of this have happened? Living can be hard; it's challenging, exhausting even. But you realise there's always hope and refuse to let go.

Not while it's watching.