

The protector

A porch on which sits a small table and chairs covers downstage right. A pitcher and two glasses gleam on the table.

In the chair closest to offstage right sits JIM's father. JACK, sits slumped, staring intently at center stage. In the chair to the left sits his wife, RACHEL. She gazes worriedly from her husband to her son, playing center stage.

A low fence lines upstage and grass covers the entirety of right, left and center stage. Center stage, JIM plays with a ball. He laughs and speaks incoherently to no visible receptor.

JIM's father massages his temples with his hand and reaches for his glass. After taking a small sip and grimacing, he turns to his wife.

JACK (*frustrated*): We can't just let him behave like this.

RACHEL shifts uncomfortably in her seat. Her gaze remains on JIM. She clears her throat lightly.

RACHEL (*nonchalantly*): What do you mean, sweetie?

RACHEL reaches for her glass now, JACK's eyes boring into her.

JACK: You can't simply brush this off, Rachel.

JACK turns from RACHEL to JIM. He motions to JIM. RACHEL's hands grip her cup tightly.

JACK: He talks to himself, plays by himself (*beat*). I mean, have you ever seen the kid with any of the neighbors' kids? There's something going on, something wrong with—

RACHEL swivels her head sharply towards JACK. The abruptness of the action interrupts JACK mid-sentence.

RACHEL (*shortly/hotly*): There's nothing wrong with our boy.

JACK meets Rachel's eyes for a moment and glares. RACHEL immediately retreats her confidence and slumps her head. JACK looks back over to JIM, playing in the grass.

JACK (*shortly*): I just need to fix the kid's head.

RACHEL's body tenses, but she stands and steps to JACK, resting a hand on Jack's shoulder. JACK shrugs her off coldly. RACHEL folds back in on herself and scampers offstage right.

Meanwhile, JIM pulls himself to his feet. He kicks the ball and chases it as the ball rolls into the wings, offstage left.

JACK tilts his head down and glares at Jim. Two sets of laughter float across the stage.

JIM exits from the curtains first, facing the wing. From the wing, the ball rolls out. A figure, PAT, struts from the curtain.

PAT dons a similar outfit to JIM and they both appear to be the same age.

PAT (*running to JIM and tagging his shoulder*): You're it!

JIM squeals and chases after PAT, racing across the stage to finally collapse center stage, lounging across from one another.

JIM (*happily*): That was fun! Can we play again?

PAT laughs joyously but shakes his head.

PAT: Not right now, friend. Should the weather hold, we shall later.

JIM sighs, then smiles.

JIM (*slowly*): Ok (*beat*). How about a story then?

PAT, smiling, nods and pats to the ground next to him. JIM flops down. JACK groans audibly and RACHEL returns from where she exits, looking at JACK warily.

JACK (*exasperated*): I mean look at him! He's tired himself out by running around alone!
(*Sputtering angrily*) I-I just don't understand!

JACK throws his glass to the ground, and it shatters. RACHEL jumps, then brushes her dress down with her skirt. RACHEL goes to her knees and begins cleaning the mess. As she cleans, PAT waits for JIM to sit upright, and begins his story. JIM listens wide-eyed. RACHEL then returns to her seat once more, her back straight.

PAT (*without rush, calmly*): When the first child played, laughed, and sung, he did so without worry, without fear. It was when the shadows grew in the depths of the night where the child's thoughts grew dim. This led to the terrible spread of (*beat*) The Marings of Night.

JIM gasps softly, and PAT looks to him warmly and holds his hand. JIM relaxes.

PAT: It was then when it was decided that children should not be troubled with that of a shadowed soul. So, friends like myself were sent down.

JACK moves to rise from his chair as RACHEL calls out.

RACHEL (*loudly, yet softly*): Jim! Baby! Can you come over here please?

Upon RACHEL calling JIM's name, both JIM and PAT sit up. JIM looks at PAT questioningly, but PAT simply shrugs his shoulders. JIM and PAT walk to RACHEL and JACK, meeting them center, center stage. JACK takes a knee and holds JIM's wrists lightly. PAT walks to JIM and stands next to him.

JACK glares at JIM. PAT watches JACK cautiously. JIM looks up at JACK and smiles cautiously, and then looks back to RACHEL.

RACHEL (*meticulously calm*): Baby (*beat*), how's your day going?

JIM smiles, and looks to his right, at PAT. PAT gives him a tight smile and two thumbs up. JACK studies JIM with anger, noting his shifting glances.

JIM: It's been so great! We played catch, and played tag, and then we talked!

RACHEL (*forcibly calm*): We?

JACK (*sharply*): Son, that's ridiculous.

JIM shifts uncomfortably. He looks at PAT for support. PAT puts his hand on JIM's shoulder. JACK releases JIM's wrist and grabs his chin to force JIM to look at him.

PAT (*loudly, with intent*): Sir! Stop that at once!

RACHEL (*anxiously*): James, you look at your father right now and explain yourself!

JIM tries to relieve himself from his father's grip. PAT attempts to get JACK off of JIM.

PAT (*loudly*): Sir! You're hurting him! Stop this!

RACHEL hesitates to intervene. PAM grunts as he tries to pry JACK's hands from JIM, to no avail. JIM shakes in fear.

JIM (*stuttering*): S-sir, what do you m-mean? I d-don't understand!

JACK (*angrily*): What do I mean?

JACK lets out a short, dry chuckle. He stands, dropping his hands from JIM. PAT immediately moves in front of JIM as to shield him. JACK takes a step toward JIM, and both PAT and JIM tumble to the stage floor, both cowering as JACK dwarfs the pair. PAT throws himself in front of JIM. Furiously, JACK points his finger at JIM and resumes yelling.

JACK: What do I mean? I demand you tell me what the hell is going through your head! Why you have decided to be the damndest child on the block! All you do is make me look like a joke!

JIM whimpers. RACHEL quietly walks behind Jack.

RACHEL (*lowly*): Sweetie, I think that Jimmy understands now-

RACHEL reaches to touch JACK's shoulder. Upon contact, JACK whirls around and backhands RACHEL in the face. She collapses, splayed on the grass. JACK turns and raises a fist toward JIM, causing JIM to sob even harder. PAT stands up and screams.

PAT (*screaming*): Enough!

JACK, RACHEL, and JIM freeze. The lights dim, with one spotlight illuminating PAT. PAT falls and sobs.

PAT (*painfully*): I'm sorry little one, (*beat*) I'm so sorry.

The spotlight fades to a blackout.