

The Boy with the Thorn in His Side

By Shawnee Small

The Boy with the Thorn in His Side  
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The boy with the thorn in his side  
Behind the hatred there lies  
A murderous desire for love  
How can they look into my eyes  
And still they don't believe me?  
How can they hear me say those words  
Still they don't believe me?  
And if they don't believe me now  
Will they ever believe me?  
And if they don't believe me now  
Will they ever, they ever, believe me?  
Oh ...

The boy with the thorn in his side  
Behind the hatred there lies  
A plundering desire for love  
How can they see the Love in our eyes  
And still they don't believe us?  
And after all this time  
They don't want to believe us  
And if they don't believe us now  
Will they ever believe us?  
And when you want to live  
How do you start?  
Where do you go?  
Who do you need to know?

“How come they don’t believe us? And if they don’t believe us now, will they ever believe us?” asked Oscar whining, the unshed tears shining in his eyes. His words reverberated around the cold, damp stone atrium. It was drizzling.

“Don’t be a nonce,” replied Jack who promptly punched Oscar in his chubby arm. “Whaddaya go and tell them for anyhow? You’re gonna make us look like right ol’ tossers.”

“They’re the *adults*.” Oscar continued to blubber on.

“We’re orphans. No one gives a rat’s arse what happens,” said Jack, getting right up in Oscar’s face. He was riled up as usual.

“Alright,” I said, giving Jack a shove. “He was only trying to help.”

“What are you Fatty McFatFat’s boyfriend now?” quipped Jack.

“Cut it out,” I growled. I took a step towards him.

Jack might’ve been the ginger roughneck in our little group but I was at least three inches taller than him. Sure, I was all arms and legs, but my height had advantages in times like these. I pushed my black mop of damp hair out of my face, giving Jack the evil eye.

“Fine. Keep your knickers on,” groaned Jack.

“What are we going to do?” whimpered Oscar. In another few seconds, he was going to burst into tears. The jelly wobble of his double chin gave it away. I tried to avoid his blue eyes and instead focused on the white cloud of vapor that billowed out of my mouth every time I exhaled. I hated winter days at Hallow Park.

“Come on,” I said to them. “We’re not having this conversation out here.” I turned on my heel, and trotted down the garden path towards the dormitory.

“I still don’t know what we’re supposed to do,” complained Oscar as we entered our room. He was past crying now thankfully. I set my books down on the desk that I shared with Jack, and turned on the small desk lamp.

“We ain’t gonna do anything, are we Rory?” said Jack, staring at me expectantly. He’d dropped his wet parker on the floor, where it sat forlornly in a puddle of water.

Oscar groaned. “But what if the boy with the thorn in his side comes back?”

“A great big sodding garden stake, more like,” muttered Jack. He flung himself down on his bed before crossing his arms across his chest.

“Look,” I said exasperated. “Let me think.”

Oscar sank down on the corner of my cot, a roll of flab sticking out over the waistband of his corduroy trousers. The springs complained under his weight, but he didn’t seem to notice. He looked down at his wellies instead of looking at me or Jack. His blond hair was plastered to the sides of his thick head, but once it dried, it would be curly again. He had a girl’s haircut, which didn’t help him out when we were out in the yard with the other lads. That and the crying, of course.

I pushed my hair back out of my eyes again. “As duly noted by Oscar’s actions, no one is going to believe us so we’re going to have to take care of it ourselves.”

“What? Are you a solicitor now?” snickered Jack. I threw a pencil at his head, but he ducked just in time. It ricocheted off the dirty wallpaper before landing on the floor and rolling under his bed.

“Hey! What’d you go in do that for?” complained Jack.

“Stop being a prat,” I replied.

“It’s just humor,” said Jack. “You know lighten the mood a little, that’s all.”

“Will he come back?” whispered Oscar, the fear in his eyes real.

I shrugged my shoulders nonchalantly like it was no big deal, but that was a lie. It *was* a big deal. The dreams had started over a month ago. At the beginning, each of us had had a different dream: Jack always at the fun fair, Oscar in a sweet shop, me, I always dreamt of my mum's flat. We'd each be in our own happy place and then weird things would start to happen. Weird things that turned into creepy things and finally horrible things. It always ended with a vision of the boy with the thorn in his side. He'd be smiling, beckoning to us to follow him, but we never did.

Then at some point our dreams had begun to merge into one.

"It's not fair," muttered Jack. He picked at his nose. "Why'd he have to go and choose us for, eh? Why are we the likely lads?"

Jack had a point. We were the only three having the dreams. We had checked in a rather roundabout way, of course, because the last thing we needed on top of all this was to get beaten up as well. None of the other boys were having the visions. It made us rather paranoid.

"I don't know," I said shaking my head, "but everyone will just think we're barking mad. We've got to keep it amongst ourselves."

"So what do we do?" asked Oscar. He was wringing his hands.

"We sleep in shifts," I said, having nothing better to offer. "One person sleeps at a time while the others watch. If the person asleep starts to act weird, we wake them up."

"How are we going to get to Oscar?" asked Jack, who seemed highly dubious. "We'll get in trouble if we get caught." Once lights were out, everyone was to stay in their own rooms, otherwise, a caning was guaranteed. And Mistress Moffat was a heavy hander at that.

"We'll have to risk it. Moley still snores, right?" I asked Oscar. Moley, whose real name was Thomas, but who resembled a small rodent hence the nickname was a heavy sleeper. We could use that to our advantage.

“Yeah, so?” asked Oscar.

“You let him fall asleep first and his snoring will mask our footsteps,” I said, feeling slightly more secure in my plan. “We’ll take first shift.” I nodded towards Jack.

“How about when it’s my turn?” asked Oscar. “How are you gonna cover me?”

“Ain’t our problem is it, mate?” said Jack. “You’ll have to walk like the wind, you know Bruce Lee style.”

“Oscar, you’re going to have to do your best,” I replied. “Moley should cover you as you leave your room, just like for us. You’ll have to wait until we get back to our room before you come over. Too many people up at once could raise an alarm.” It was like orchestrating a battle plan, but a very poor one.

“Fine,” puffed Oscar. “It’s all well and good until the fat kid gets it in the head.”

I shot Jack a warning glance. He kept his mouth shut. “Do you have a better plan?” I asked, my question directed at Oscar. “Cause if so, I’d like to hear it.” Oscar just looked at me plaintively, but he didn’t say a word.

“Good,” I replied, nodding my head. “It’s a plan.”

A week later, we were all worse for wear. So far we hadn’t had any more dreams, but we also hadn’t gotten much sleep either. By the time each one of us settled down and shut our eyes, it felt like it was time to get back up again. Jack had fallen asleep twice now in maths class and got his knuckles rapped. Oscar so far had resisted the urge to fall asleep in class, but that didn’t mean he got off unscathed. He’d ended up with marker all over his face one day at lunch when he’d fallen asleep before we got there. It took three days for him to get the marks off.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can stand,” said Jack one lunch time. He yawned.

“Yeah, me too,” said Oscar. He was sporting dark circles under his eyes that resembled bruises, purplish splotches mixed with an interesting shade of grey.

I knew I was worse for wear, too, although I tried to keep up appearances. “Maybe we can pull all-nighters instead,” I replied wearily. “That would mean we’d each get a full night’s sleep every three days.” Even when I said it out loud, it sounded like a bad idea.

Oscar and Jack groaned in unison.

“Okay, okay,” I sighed. “Yeah, it’s a rubbish idea.”

“What if we’re not the first ones to have the dreams,” interrupted Oscar. “What if there were others before us?”

“What do you mean?” asked Jack. He stared intently at Oscar.

“I mean what if a bunch of kids before us had the same dreams? What if there is a pattern or something?” said Oscar.

“He could be onto something,” said Jack, perking up.

“And how are we going to find out?” I asked, trying to be practical.

“The library,” replied Oscar. “They’ve got that new microfilm machine, don’t they? We could look up articles on Hallow Park.”

“It could take ages,” I countered.

“Yeah, so?” said Jack. “What else are we likely to do?”

He had a point. The longer it went on, the less social we were. We weren’t exactly pariahs yet, but we were getting there.

“Fine,” I sighed. “I’m in. So how do you want to play it?”

“I reckon our best bet is to skive off after third period. I’ve got independent study,” said Jack. He looked over at Oscar.

“Yeah, me too,” chirped in Oscar, grinning.

I groaned.

“You jammy bastards,” I uttered. “I’ll have to ditch English Lit. Arse.”

“Better you than me mate,” admitted Jack. “Burrows is a total nut job.”

“Yeah, thanks for that.” I scowled.

“No worries,” said Jack, adopting the same grin as Oscar.

I punched Jack’s arm and headed for class.

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Skiving off from English Lit had proved to be easier than expected. Although I had the unfortunate experience of running into Mr. Burrows in the hall, he didn’t say anything to me as I made my excuses to go to the infirmary. Oscar and Jack were already poring through microfilm when I finally showed up at the library.

“Bloody hell, would you have a look at this,” exclaimed Jack. Oscar and I shushed him in unison, but it did no good. Jack twitched around in his orange plastic chair like he was being electrocuted.

“Jesus, Jack, what?” I asked.

“Just read it, you pillock,” Jack hissed.

My mouth went dry. “Are you having me on?”

“Oh my God,” gasped Oscar. His eyes were practically bulging out of their sockets. “We are well and truly bugged.” I could think of a few choice expletives I would’ve used if I wasn’t in shock.

“So, what happened to them?” I asked.

“I dunno,” replied Jack with a new edge in his voice. “It was back in the ‘40s before the War ended. It just says the boys disappeared from Hallow Park. It sounds like most people thought they had enlisted.” Jack shook his head.

“What?” I asked.

“Well, they left everything behind. *Everything*.” Jack didn’t have to re-iterate for us. We knew all too well that what little things that we actually owed, we cherished. Being an orphan didn’t afford you many opportunities to acquire prized possessions. I thought about my mum’s locket that I kept stashed under the ticking of my mattress.

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence,” insisted Oscar.

“No way,” said Jack. “Read it for yourself. Their friends said that they kept saying they were cursed by a wooden boy. It’s him.”

I cleared my throat. “Okay, supposing it’s the boy with the thorn in his side. Does it say anything else?”

“Not exactly,” said Jack, clearly frustrated with me and Oscar. “It references another microfilm. Give me a sec.” Jack pulled back the lever of the machine causing the glass plate to pull up and expose the film. Jack gingerly removed the flimsy film and trotted off to the librarian’s desk. Oscar and I avoided making eye contact.

“Okay, here we go,” said Jack before promptly shutting up. His eyes scrunched up in concentration as he adjusted the viewing lens and started scanning across the film. Finally, he came to an abrupt stop on one particular marked frame. His face went rigid.

“Bollocks,” croaked Jack.

I didn’t even bother asking Jack questions this time around and read the article word for word myself. It was a historical essay on Hallow, and I didn’t know why someone would connect the piece to

the disappearance of the boys from Hallow Park - until I got to the part about the death of a young acolyte. Back then Hallow Park hadn't been an orphanage, it'd been a priory. He'd fallen out of a window to his death, which would've been horrible enough except that he was impaled by part of the priory gate on his way down. He never made it to the ground.

"Sod this for a game of soldiers," breathed Oscar. Jack and I looked at each other. Oscar had jumped up quickly, his face drawn and pale.

"Oscar," I began, but he'd already turned and fled. I watched in dismay as he squeezed his flabby buttocks through the field of library tables.

"Come on." I sighed and grabbed Jack's arm. He rolled his eyes at me, but didn't say anything. It didn't take long to catch up with Oscar.

"Oscar, wait up," I shouted. He turned and looked at us, but didn't slow his pace down any. If anything, he tried to speed up.

"Oi! Plonker!" shouted Jack.

That seemed to do the trick. Oscar stopped dead in his tracks.

"What gives?" I asked as I reached his side.

"I don't have it in me like you lot do," said Oscar sweeping his arm in our direction. "I'm weak and soft . . . I'm pathetic."

The silence that followed was uncomfortable.

"Look," Jack said. "Ain't none of us perfect, but that don't mean we have to dwell on it, do we?"

Oscar didn't look convinced.

For some reason, Oscar's cowardice made me lose my rag in a way that was utterly unexpected. I snapped. "At least your mum wanted you before the cancer got her," I said. "Me mum. She couldn't handle it. She'd rather have killed herself than be with me!"

“I didn’t mean-” stammered Oscar.

“You’re either in or you’re out. If you wanna give up then that’s your business, mate, but I’m gonna fight him the whole way.”

I didn’t wait for his answer as I strode off in the direction of Hallow Park, leaving my friends to gawk after me.

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I avoided my friends for a fortnight, not that that was easy to do sharing a room with Jack, and of course, the dreams had returned making things that much more stressful. If I’d been the bigger man then I would’ve reached out to them after the first night, but whether because I was stubborn or because my pride just wouldn’t let me cave in to my guilt, I didn’t. I walked around the grounds alone and miserable.

The one good thing was that it gave me an opportunity to have a think, and my thinking was this: Oscar’s idea had been a solid one. If the library proved anything, it was that it had information that might help get us out of this mess. I went back to the library several times on my own, and while I wasn’t having much luck with finding an antidote to wood boy, I was able to find a bunch of stuff on the occult in general. The more I looked up, the more certain I was that we were dealing with a ghost, a horrible creepy one at that.

I finally gave in and cornered Jack in the hallway after fifth period. He wasn’t exactly happy to see me.

“Alright?” I asked rather casually.

“Yeah,” he replied, his tone much like mine. “Alright?”

“Yeah, alright,” I replied.

In lad speak, that meant we were going to be okay.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said as we strolled back to the dorm. “I think he wants something.”

“What for?” asked Jack. “I mean it’s a ghost, isn’t it?”

“I reckon so,” I said. “But I’ve been in the library and they’ve got reason for . . .” I dropped my voice when two boys stared at me as they passed by “. . . being *around*.”

“Too right,” snorted Jack. “He’s in my dreams every night now.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know for how much longer,” I replied, unsure if it was the right time to tell Jack my suspicions. My frown might’ve been the dead giveaway that what I had to say wasn’t going to be pleasant.

“What in bloody blazes now?” complained Jack.

“I think he’s in our dreams because he can’t get out of them *yet*.” A shudder ran through me just saying it out loud.

“Are you taking the mick?” said Jack, practically shouting.

“No,” I hissed. I dragged him the rest of the way to Oscar’s room before saying anything else. Luckily Moley was out, but Oscar was in, eating a tart green apple on his bed while he worked on an assignment. Oscar just gazed up expectantly.

“It took you long enough,” he replied.

I sat down on the edge of Oscar’s bed and proceeded to tell him what I told Jack, making sure that I didn’t leave anything out. He didn’t blink or look shocked like Jack had been.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “I know how to use a library, too, you know.”

For the second time that day, Jack’s face looked like a slapped arse. He gaped at Oscar.

“Brilliant,” I uttered. “Just brilliant, Oscar.”

“What?” he asked defensively.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied, shaking my head. “We need a plan.”

“We need to figure out what he *wants*,” re-iterated Oscar.

“Fine, but I don’t know what that means,” I said.

“Well, what did he do in your dream? Before me and Jack came along?” asked Oscar.

I tried not to think about my dreams. They always involved my mum. When he had violated those sacred moments with her, it almost made it worse. I cleared my throat feeling highly uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. I’m with my mum and he just shows up, but he’s not all gruesome like. He looks normal, but a bit like a girl if you know what I mean,” I say half-heartedly. I hold back from saying more.

“What about you?” asked Oscar, turning towards Jack.

“Kinda the same, isn’t it,” said Jack. “I ain’t never met me mum, have I, but I reckon I know what she woulda looked like. We’re walking along in the funfair and me mum wants to go in the hall of mirrors, but I’m like ‘I ain’t goin’ in there’, but she goes anyhow. I’m like yellin’ for her to come back but she ain’t and then he’s there following her inside. He ain’t no girl, I’ll tell you that. He grabs her hand and drags her inside before I can do anything about it.” I patted Jack on the back, but he shrugged me off.

“Yeah, me too,” offered Oscar. “He always shows up in time to draw them away. Both my parents show up in my dream.”

“So why don’t you see my dream and I see yours?” I asked pointing out the obvious flaw. “I mean later on, I see you and Jack, but by that point my mum’s gone, and we’re not even in the flat anymore. We’re here,” I said pointing down towards the bed, but meaning the dormitory. “Half the time I think I’m awake by the end, but I know I’m not cause he’s still here.”

“I know what you mean,” said Oscar, his face more tense than it was before. “It’s the same for me. I’m in my dream and then you lot are there and the dream shifts to the dorm and it feels like I’m awake.”

Jack had been quiet during this whole exchange and I didn’t like how his face was turning the color of curdled whey. He took a big gulp, but didn’t look me in the eye, like what he was about to say was somehow inappropriate. This was Jack we were talking about here.

“I don’t think we wanna let him out,” said Jack quietly. “I think if we let him get out, we’re all stuffed. Not just us, but maybe like everyone.”

“But he’s just a ghost,” I replied.

“Yeah, in here he is,” said Jack pointing to his head. “But out here,” Jack pointed around the room, “I ain’t so sure.”

“Just down the hall you were asking me if I was taking the mick, but now all of a sudden, you’re a believer?”

Jack grimaced. “Yeah, I know, alright? But I’ve been thinking it through and if he could just roam outside of our dreams, why wouldn’t he? What’s the advantage of being in our heads?”

“Yeah, and what happened to the other boys?” asked Oscar. “Why did they disappear and why is he now just showing back up. Maybe he got out . . . for a while.”

The more they kept on, the more uncomfortable I got.

“So what are you saying?” I asked them both.

“I think Jack’s, right. I couldn’t explain why, but I just feel it, you know what I mean?” Oscar licked his lips nervously. His shirt had dark, wet patches under his armpits. It was the first time that he’d really acted nervous during this whole time. It was a new record for Oscar. “We have to banish him from our dreams before he figures a way out.”

“Banish him,” I said, “like an exorcism.”

“Maybe,” hedged Oscar. He was definitely nervous now.

“Bloody hell,” uttered Jack, who wasn’t going to be left out of the conversation. “It’s bad enough that we have to go to religious education, but what do we know about bloomin’ exorcisms?”

I ignored Jack and focused my attention on Oscar. “So, where are we going to find information on how to perform an exorcism? Back to the library?”

Oscar shook his head. “I think the chapter house is where we start.”

“I don’t want to have to deal with the nuns,” said Jack. “Again, it’s bad enough in RE class.”

Oscar started fidgeting with his hands. I gazed back and forth between my two friends. The nuns could be formidable, but would they be worse than the boy with the thorn in his side? Definitely not.

“We can sneak in when they’re in the refectory,” I said. “Worst case scenario, we get a caning. We know what that’s like, yeah?” No one needed to be reminded of the quick, sharp sting of the cane. It hurt like a bugger. When no one answered, I continued on, “Well that’s sorted then.”

It took us four days to find the opportunity to sneak into the chapter house. During that time, the dreams were becoming more vivid and unpleasant, but we tried to avoid talking about them as if keeping quiet would somehow keep the wood boy at bay. Yet, we knew it wasn’t true, he was becoming stronger. We were running out of time.

“What are we looking for exactly?” I addressed my question to Oscar, keeping my voice low and hushed. We were in one of the storage rooms of the chapter house.

“A book on exorcism,” said Oscar, somewhat doubtful. “The Catholics have a whole book of Latin stuff they use to, you know, banish demons and what not.”

“What? You think there’s going to be a book just lying around that has a big soddin’ arrow pointing over it saying ‘pick me I’m the exorcism book,” said Jack more sarcastically than was necessary. He was standing just behind the door with his hands on his hips.

That’s close to what happened, well *mostly*, except for the big arrow part. In fact, I tripped right over the damn thing. It hurt like hell, but I didn’t dare shout and alert the nuns; yet, that didn’t keep me from swearing under my breath and instinctively picking up the book preparing to hurl it across the room. Oscar grabbed my arm, stopping me mid-throw.

“Blimey!” exclaimed Oscar, yanking the book out of my hand. He shook my shoulder in excitement. “You jammy dodger. You couldn’t do it again if you tried.”

“What are you on about?” I asked.

Jack had already put two and two together. “You silly nonce,” said Jack. “You found the book, didn’t you? You just tripped over the blasted thing!”

“Oh.”

“Whatever,” said Jack. “Let’s just get the blazes out of here before we’re nicked.”

I didn’t need telling twice and neither did Oscar. The three of us crept back out the way we came and made our way back to the dormitory. It didn’t take us long to come up with our scheme.

The plan was pretty simple. Jack, who was the best Latin student of the bunch, would memorize the verses out of the book that we needed in order to send wood boy packing. Me and Oscar had the easier jobs: Oscar was to steal a vial of holy water from the font in the chapel and I had the unenviable task of stealing rosaries for each of us from the supply cupboard located on the other side of the chapel. The holy water and rosaries were more for comfort than anything else. We were a superstitious lot.

By Friday night, Jack had the verses down pat. We decided that tonight would be the night. The visions were becoming disturbingly real as it became harder and harder to tell what was a dream and

what wasn't. It could've been because the boy ghost was getting stronger or because the effects of our forced insomnia were greater. Either way, we all agreed that now was the time to execute our plan. Oscar would kip in Jack's bed and Jack would share my bed with me. It was hardly ideal, but there was no way anyone could share with Oscar.

"Okay," I said, fitting the rosary over my neck. I had already placed my mother's necklace into the breast pocket of my pajamas for good luck.

"Just remember this doesn't make me a poofta," grumbled Jack as he slid in next to me. I ignored his comment and looked over at Oscar who'd been unnaturally quiet. He was clutching his rosary between his chubby fingers trying desperately not to cry.

"Oscar," I said gently, "It's going to be alright, mate. The good guys always win, right?" He gave me a small, tight smile.

We were all scared, but trying not to show it.

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The first thing I noticed was that I couldn't hear Oscar snoring. My eyes snapped open and I jolted upright with a start.

Oscar wasn't in Jack's bed.

"Jack, wake up," I said. I shook his shoulder to wake him up. Jack muttered in his sleep beside me. I shoved hard on his arm this time. "Jack!"

"Wha? What time is it?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"I don't know," I replied, "but Oscar's gone. Get up."

"Maybe he's down the hall having a slash," mumbled Jack as he tried to turn over in the tiny space of the bed.

“Get up,” I ordered before pulling the covers back. “Something’s not right. Nothing’s happened.”

“What do you mean? I was sleeping, that was somethin’ wasn’t it?” complained Jack yet he pulled himself upright and looked around.

“No, you dolt. Our dreams. I didn’t see you or Oscar. It was just me and my mum again. We didn’t banish wood boy.”

“Fuckin’ hell, you’re right,” Jack said. He was alert now.

“Shite,” I uttered as I scrambled out of bed looking for my bathrobe and shoes. “We’ve gotta find Oscar. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

Jack didn’t argue.

With our shoes and bathrobes on, Jack and I tiptoed down the hall. Every room had the door wide open and each bed was filled with a dozing occupant. The rest of the hall sat still, blissfully asleep, and completely oblivious to our presence. The stillness unnerved me. It was almost too quiet. Nothing stirred - there wasn’t a single snort, wheeze, or sigh in the entire place.

“Wait here,” I whispered to Jack as I stuck my arm out.

“What are you doing?” Jack hissed, but I had already moved around him.

It seemed a crazy thing to do, but I crept into the closest room and looked down at the figures reclining in each bed. Neither moved nor made a sound. I reached down and yanked the bed linen off the figure on the left. There was no body. It was a pair of pillows.

I moved over to the other bed and did the same thing with the same result. No body just two faded cushions snuggled together on the cot. I ran back to the hallway not caring who heard me or not anymore. It was a ruse. It had always been.

We were still dreaming.

“Where is he?” Jack stammered. His eyes had widened causing the whites of his eyes to gleam in what little light there was.

“I don’t know.” There was no confusion as to who he referred to. “It doesn’t matter, we still have to find Oscar. Let’s go.” I tugged on his arm forcing Jack to follow me down the hallway towards Oscar’s room. Oscar’s bed was padded out with cushions just like every other bed we’d passed.

“Bollocks!” I uttered. “Where the blazes is Oscar?”

We got our answer as we traced our steps back out to the main corridor. There was a chilly breeze blowing gently down the stairwell that I didn’t remember being there before. It swirled around our ankles and picked at our bathrobes as we stood there, the dread sinking in. Someone had gone up, not down. And there was only one more stack of stairs that went up. It led to the roof. Jack and I looked at each other, each of us waiting for the other to move.

The roof was the last place we wanted to go.

“Maybe Oscar’s not up there,” prompted Jack. He knew better.

“We can’t leave him.” I paused. “If it was you up there, you’d want us to come.”

“I know,” said Jack trying to gather up his courage.

I gave him a quick clap on the back. Jack didn’t flinch this time. “Be ready with the verses,” I said as I stepped back.

He just nodded his head, his eyes full of fear.

“Let’s go.”

We took the stairs two at a time and reached the open door in less than minute. What hadn’t been obvious to us as we stood at the bottom of the stairwell was how windy it was atop of the roof. And bitterly cold. The wind whipped my bathrobe back and forth across the front of my legs causing me to shiver. I wished I had put socks on. And maybe even a hat and coat, too.

“Come on,” I shouted to Jack over the howl of the wind.

I sat down on the first ledge and hopped down as gingerly as I could. Jack followed my lead and we slowly crab walked our way down the first steep pitch towards the next roof. Jack went ahead of me this time and straddled the small foot gap to the next roof before scrambling sideways across the incline and back over the hipline heading for the valley between this roof and the next one in line. We continued this way for what felt like hours, carefully plotting our way towards the chapel roof, the place we both felt like we’d find Oscar. I couldn’t tell you why we thought that, but it was like we knew that that was exactly where he’d be.

Jack rounded the next bend in the roof and saw Oscar first. His shout surprised me and I missed my handhold, slipping several feet down the roof. My foot caught on the gutter and stopped my descent, but not a moment too soon. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I clutched the side of the roof, unwilling to look towards the ground. Jack scabbled down after me.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his face marred with concern.

“Yeah, help me back up will you?” Jack grabbed my cold fingers and tugged me back towards the ridge. We crouched down behind the backside of the roof as we tried to assess what Jack had just seen. Oscar had been sitting by himself on top of an eave. It sounded like he was talking to someone, but Jack couldn’t be sure. The boy with the thorn in his side was suspiciously absent.

“Maybe he was just wandering around or something?” asked Jack.

“Maybe,” I hedged, not really believing it. “Just keep your guard up, yeah? That last slip was enough of a close call for me.” Jack nodded and started to make his way over the ledge and towards Oscar. I followed him leaving enough of a gap between us that we wouldn’t bungle into each other, occasionally checking behind us to make sure we weren’t being followed.

Jack stopped when he reached the edge of the roof that connected to the eave. Oscar had really chosen a poor spot. The pitch of the roof that we were on was the steepest yet and it offered little in the way of hand or foot holds. To make matters worse, Oscar had somehow shimmied his big, blubbery frame out to the very tip of an eave that was dangerously in need of repair. Several slate tiles were missing and it looked like the ridge cap had started to crack under Oscar's weight. And if that wasn't enough, it started to rain, not a heavy downpour as such, but rather a light constant drizzle that soaked through our clothes and felt like it went all the way down to our bones.

Oscar was rattling off some nonsense.

"Behind the hatred there lies a murderous desire for love," said Oscar to no one in particular. "More than you'll ever know. His only desire is to die." Oscar let out a horrid little laugh before repeating the words again. His hair had started to droop with the weight of the rain.

"He's gone stark raving mad," whispered Jack.

"Oscar," I shouted out to him, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. The cold and now the rain were becoming a problem. I had no feeling in my toes anymore. "Oscar, come away from the ledge, mate. Come back to the roof so we can talk. We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Rory?" croaked Oscar. His voice broke on the second syllable.

"Yeah, Oscar. It's us. Rory and Jack. Your mates. Why don't you come down from there."

"I can't," he replied, his voice full of anguish.

"Why not, mate?" I asked taking a step towards him, trying to watch my footing on the slick roof.

Just then a hand slithered up over top of the eave and then another as the boy's head appeared over the top of the gutter. He had changed since the last time I'd seen him. He no longer looked effeminate like a young girl with light baby curls and a pair of brown eyes that held hidden mischief.

No, he was gruesome now. His eyes were blood shot as if the tiny capillaries around his irises had suddenly burst. His youthful smile had faded and in its place a ravaged menacing grin had bloomed, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on edge. If that wasn't enough, the wound in his side came into view as he swung his legs up on the roof. The gaping hole still had a large piece of wood the size of a cricket bat embedded in it, but it squirmed and writhed like it was alive. I looked closer and realized that what I'd taken for splinters were in fact maggots. I scurried back up the side of the roof away from Oscar.

“Now, Jack, now!”

Jack sat there dumbstruck. I reached up and punched him in the arm.

“Move your arse,” I bellowed at him.

Jack started rattling off Latin as if he was reading a telephone directory, but it wasn't working. The boy with the thorn in his side merely shook his head at us as if we were being naughty school boys. Jack fumbled over some of his words and started to break down, small gasps erupting from his chest as he sat staring at the thing that was crawling up the roof towards us.

In the midst of my hysteria, I had forgotten about Oscar. He had turned himself around on top of the eave with great difficulty, and was now trying to clamber off after the creature that had forced him out there in the first place. He kept shouting, “Behind the hatred is a desire to be loved! His only desire is to die.” I shook my head at him. The thing that had been a boy was close enough that I could almost reach out with my leg and touch him. Jack had given up on the Latin and was trying to lift himself over the ledge without taking his eyes off the boy.

“Why can't we wake up?” Jack screamed at me.

Oscar kept spitting out his confusing one man soliloquies that made no sense. I felt like I was going mad myself.

And then it happened. Oscar had been so focused on pulling his leg over the side of the eave that he didn't see the tile beneath his buttocks crack until it was too late. The slate tile shattered into tiny fragments of rock which in turn splintered and shattered the next two tiles beneath it and so forth until Oscar found himself falling sideways over the eave and towards the gutter.

"No," I shouted. I punched my foot into the side of the boy's head surprised when my foot collided with something solid. The blow had knocked wood boy sideways enough that I could use the moment to slide past him and towards Oscar who hung precariously over the side of the gutter. I scrambled to clutch onto something, anything, which would give me a better grip on Oscar.

Oscar was struggling to stay topside, but it didn't keep him from going on at me. "It's all about what he wants. He wants to be loved . . . just like everybody else does." I clenched my teeth and tried to pull Oscar up, but I could hear the copper piping groaning under his weight. My fingers screamed with the effort.

"How am I supposed to show love to that thing?" I rasped, slowly running out of energy. The muscles in my arms were starting to give in to the burning sensation of fatigue. I knew what would come next. They would start to shake and then it would only be a matter of minutes before I could no longer hold him. I knew that whatever happened I couldn't let Oscar die. If he died here, he'd be dead there, too, there was no question in my mind of that.

"Why do you think he entered our dreams, Rory? Because we were all looking for love ourselves. You have to show him what it means to be loved," gasped Oscar. He was losing his grip on the copper gutter.

"I can't," I cried.

"You've got it with you, I know you do. We always knew you kept it hidden in the mattress," said Oscar panting.

My mum's necklace. The only thing I had left of the woman who had given birth to me and then left me alone.

"It won't be enough," I said refusing to budge. "If I let go, you'll fall. That's no choice!"

"If you don't we're all dead and the next ones, too. You must end this, Rory." Oscar's face showed no fear; instead his face held a quiet resignation, a stoicism that crushed my heart.

I didn't look at his face again as I let go of his hand and scrambled back up the slick slate towards the boy with the thorn in his side. He had cornered Jack up against a chimney and Jack sat crunched up in a ball unable to move any further. Without thinking, I lunged at the boy, landing on top of his calf, and proceeded to use his leg as a makeshift ladder. He whipped his head around and glared at me, his mouth open and hissing. The odor that oozed out of his mouth smelled of rotting death. Clutching the jagged wood exposed in his side, I plunged my other hand in my pocket and pulled out my mother's necklace. The gold glistened in the rainy twilight.

"Here," I screamed at him. "She was the only mother I ever had and I loved her. All I ever wanted was her to love me." I shoved the necklace into his maw of a mouth and scabbled off him. He stared at me surprised before he pulled the necklace out and stared at it. It felt like minutes ticked by when in fact it had been mere seconds. As he stared at the necklace, the rain stopped.

The boy with the thorn in his side tilted his head slightly and gave me a sad smile. With the necklace in his hand, he stood up and walked to the place where I had abandoned Oscar. Without so much as a glance at us, he jumped off the ledge.

We never saw him again.