

Praise for A MONSTER CALLS

A Monster Calls has become a publishing sensation since it became the first book ever to win both the Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal. It was also a Los Angeles Times Book Prize Finalist, a New York Times Notable Book, and a Wall Street Journal Best Book of the Year.

“Last year I read ninety-six novels and there’s only one that will be considered a classic in fifty years’ time. One that combines arresting language with a central character whose struggle becomes the reader’s struggle: *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness.”

—John Boyne, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author
of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

“Brilliant and elegant, with all the thrills and ambition you would expect from the author of the Chaos Walking trilogy.” —Frank Cottrell Boyce, award-winning author
of *Millions* and *Cosmic*

“Haunting, lyrical, powerful, and true. Patrick Ness has crafted a masterful story about grief and loss, love and hope that lingers in the heart like a ghost.”

—Libba Bray, *New York Times* best-selling
author of *A Great and Terrible Beauty*

“Powerful and impressive.”

—Philip Pullman, *New York Times* best-selling
author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy

"Ness took the idea as a springboard, rather than as marching orders. The result is all his own, and it's powerful medicine: a story that lodges in your bones and stays there. . . . *A Monster Calls* is a gift from a generous storyteller and a potent piece of art."

— *The New York Times Book Review*

"Drenched in the supernatural, but not in any conventional way. . . . Beautiful and achingly sad."

— *The Wall Street Journal*

- ★ "If one point of writing is to leave something that transcends human existence, Ness has pulled a fast one on the Grim Reaper, finishing the story death kept Dowd from giving us." — *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
- ★ "Revelatory in its obviousness, beautiful in its execution, and fearless in its honesty. . . . Ness shines Dowd's glimmer into the deepest, most hidden darkness of doubt, and finds a path through." — *Booklist* (starred review)

A
MONSTER
CALLS

PATRICK
NESS

Inspired by an idea from

SIOBHAN DOWD



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the authors' imaginations or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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Quote from *An Experiment in Love* by Hilary Mantel.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

I never got to meet Siobhan Dowd. I only know her the way that most of the rest of you will—through her superb books. Four electric young adult novels, two published in her lifetime, two after her too-early death. If you haven't read them, remedy that oversight immediately.

This would have been her fifth book. She had the characters, a premise, and a beginning. What she didn't have, unfortunately, was time.

When I was asked if I would consider turning her work into a book, I hesitated. What I wouldn't do—what I *couldn't* do—was write a novel mimicking her voice. That would have been a disservice to her, to

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the reader, and most importantly to the story. I don't think good writing can possibly work that way.

But the thing about good ideas is that they grow other ideas. Almost before I could help it, Siobhan's ideas were suggesting new ones to me, and I began to feel that itch that every writer longs for: the itch to start getting words down, the itch to tell a story.

I felt—and feel—as if I've been handed a baton, like a particularly fine writer has given me her story and said, "Go. Run with it. Make trouble." So that's what I tried to do. Along the way, I had only a single guideline: to write a book I think Siobhan would have liked. No other criteria could really matter.

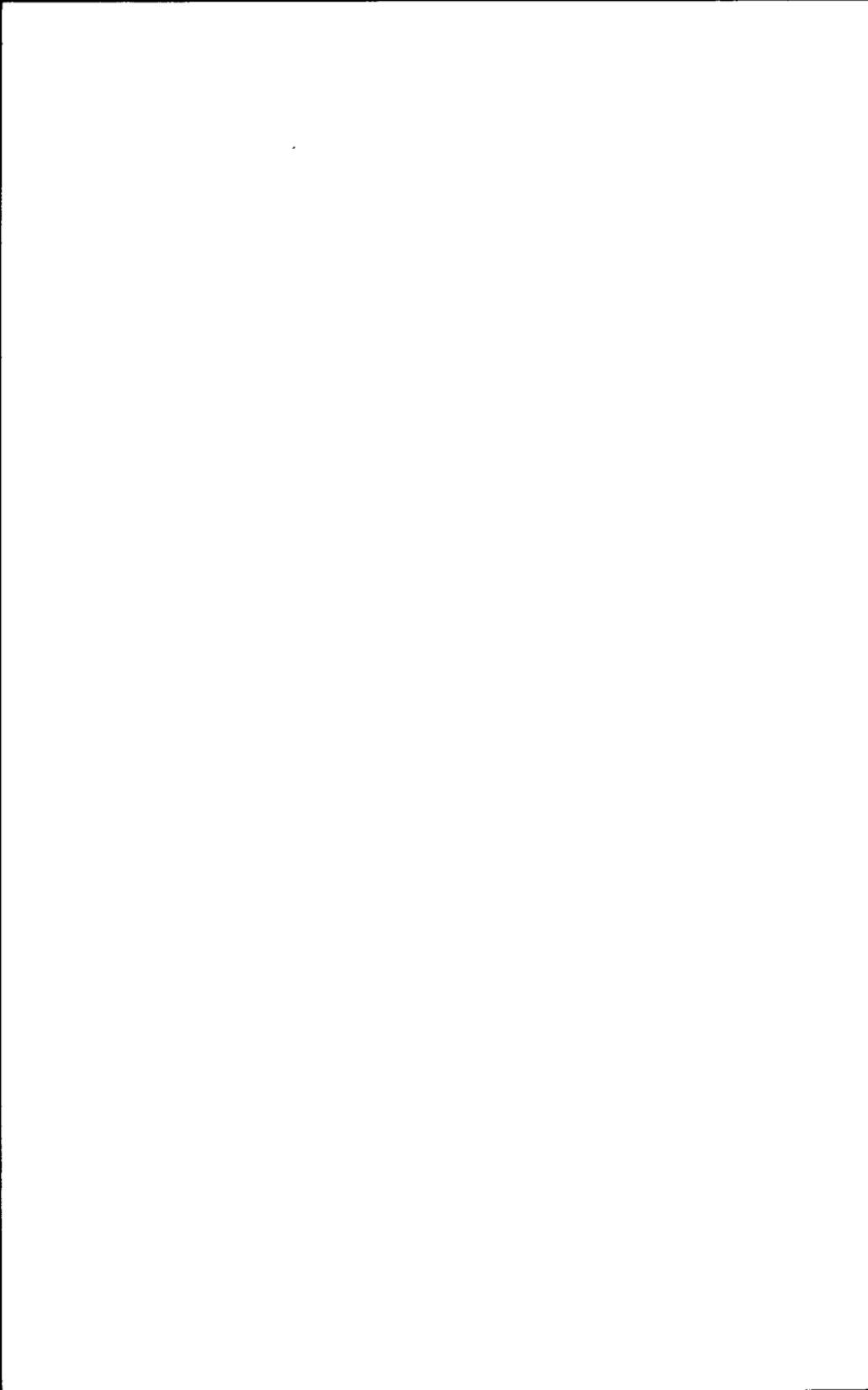
And now it's time to hand the baton on to you. Stories don't end with the writers, however many started the race. Here's what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it.

Make trouble.

Patrick Ness

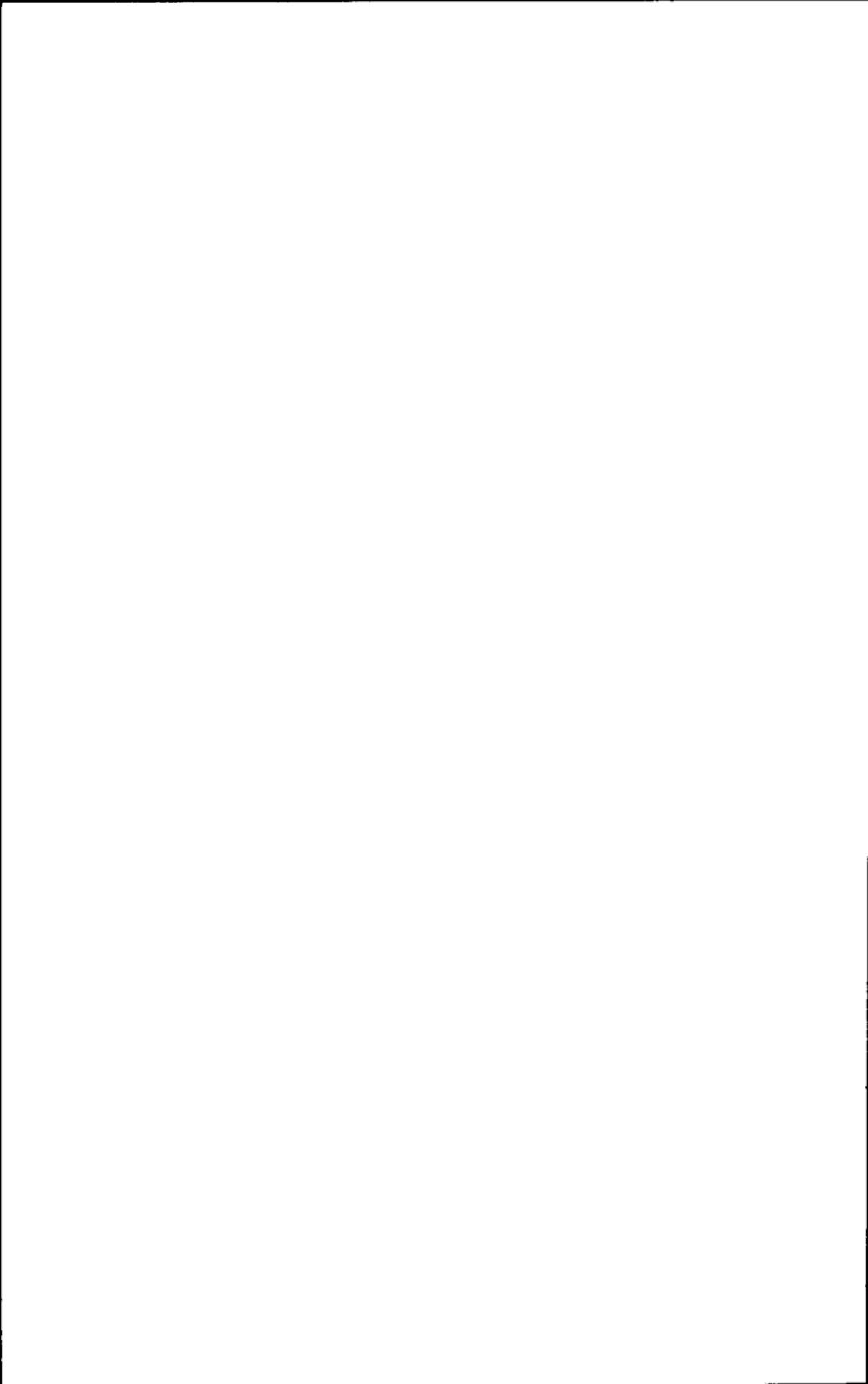
London, February 2011

For Siobhan



You're only young once, they say, but doesn't it go on for a long time? More years than you can bear.

Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love*



A MONSTER CALLS

The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do.

Conor was awake when it came.

He'd had a nightmare. Well, not *a* nightmare. *The* nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with—

“Go away,” Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. “Go away now.”

He glanced over at the clock his mum had put on his bedside table. 12:07. Seven minutes past midnight. Which was late for a school night, late for a Sunday, certainly.

He'd told no one about the nightmare. Not his mum, obviously, but no one else either, not his dad in their fortnightly (or so) phone call, *definitely* not his grandma, and no one at school. Absolutely not.

What happened in the nightmare was something no one else ever needed to know.

Conor blinked groggily at his room, then he frowned. There was something he was missing. He sat up in his bed, waking a bit more. The nightmare was slipping from him, but there was something he couldn't put his finger on, something different, something—

He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quiet house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum's room next door.

Nothing.

And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him.

Someone was calling his name.

Conor.

He felt a rush of panic, his guts twisting. Had it followed him? Had it somehow stepped out of the nightmare and—?

“Don’t be stupid,” he told himself. “You’re too old for monsters.”

And he was. He’d turned thirteen just last month. Monsters were for babies. Monsters were for bedwetters. Monsters were for—

Conor.

There it was again. Conor swallowed. It had been an unusually warm October, and his window was still open. Maybe the curtains shushing each other in the small breeze could have sounded like—

Conor.

All right, it wasn’t the wind. It was definitely a voice, but not one he recognized. It wasn’t his mother’s, that was for sure. It wasn’t a woman’s voice at all, and he wondered for a crazy moment if his dad

had somehow made a surprise trip from America and arrived too late to phone and—

Conor.

No. Not his dad. This voice had a quality to it, a *monstrous* quality, wild and untamed.

Then he heard a heavy creak of wood outside, as if something gigantic was stepping across a timber floor.

He didn't want to go and look. But at the same time, a part of him wanted to look more than anything.

Wide awake now, he pushed back the covers, got out of bed, and went over to the window. In the pale half-light of the moon, he could clearly see the church tower up on the small hill behind his house, the one with the train tracks curving beside it, two hard steel lines glowing dully in the night. The moon shone, too, on the graveyard attached to the church, filled with tombstones you could hardly read anymore.

Conor could also see the great yew tree that rose from the center of the graveyard, a tree so ancient it almost seemed to be made of the same stone as

the church. He only knew it was a yew because his mother had told him, first when he was little to make sure he didn't eat the berries, which were poisonous, and again this past year, when she'd started staring out of their kitchen window with a funny look on her face and saying, "That's a yew tree, you know."

And then he heard his name again.

Conor.

Like it was being whispered in both his ears.

"*What?*" Conor said, his heart thumping, suddenly impatient for whatever was going to happen.

A cloud moved in front of the moon, covering the whole landscape in darkness, and a *whoosh* of wind rushed down the hill and into his room, billowing the curtains. He heard the creaking and cracking of wood again, groaning like a living thing, like the hungry stomach of the world growling for a meal.

Then the cloud passed, and the moon shone again.

On the yew tree.

Which now stood firmly in the middle of his backyard.

And here was the monster.

As Conor watched, the uppermost branches of the tree gathered themselves into a great and terrible face, shimmering into a mouth and nose and even eyes, peering back at him. Other branches twisted around one another, always creaking, always groaning, until they formed two long arms and a second leg to set down beside the main trunk. The rest of the tree gathered itself into a spine and then a torso, the thin, needle-like leaves weaving together to make a green, furry skin that moved and breathed as if there were muscles and lungs underneath.

Already taller than Conor's window, the monster grew wider as it brought itself together, filling out to a powerful shape, one that looked somehow strong, somehow *mighty*. It stared at Conor the whole time, and he could hear the loud, windy breathing from its mouth. It set its giant hands on either side of his window, lowering its head until its huge eyes filled the frame, holding Conor with its glare. Conor's house gave a little moan under its weight.

And then the monster spoke.

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Conor O'Malley, it said, a huge gust of warm, compost-smelling breath rushing through Conor's window, blowing his hair back. Its voice rumbled low and loud, with a vibration so deep Conor could feel it in his chest.

I have come to get you, Conor O'Malley, the monster said, pushing against the house, shaking the pictures off Conor's wall, sending books and electronic gadgets and an old stuffed toy rhino tumbling to the floor.

A monster, Conor thought. A real, honest-to-goodness monster. In real, waking life. Not in a dream, but here, at his window.

Come to get him.

But Conor didn't run.

In fact, he found he wasn't even frightened.

All he could feel, all he *had* felt since the monster revealed itself, was a growing disappointment.

Because this wasn't the monster he was expecting.

"So come and get me then," he said.

. . .

A strange quiet fell.

What did you say? the monster asked.

Conor crossed his arms. "I said, come and get me then."

The monster paused for a moment, and then with a *roar* it pounded two fists against the house. Conor's ceiling buckled under the blows, and huge cracks appeared in the walls. Wind filled the room, the air thundering with the monster's angry bellows.

"Shout all you want," Conor shrugged, barely raising his voice. "I've seen worse."

The monster roared even louder and smashed an arm through Conor's window, shattering glass and wood and brick. A huge, twisted, branch-wound hand grabbed Conor around the middle and lifted him off the floor. It swung him out of his room and into the night, high above his backyard, holding him up against the circle of the moon, its fingers clenching so hard against Conor's ribs he could barely breathe. Conor could see raggedy teeth made of hard, knotted wood in the monster's open mouth, and he felt warm breath rushing up toward him.

A MONSTER CALLS

Then the monster paused again.

You really aren't afraid, are you?

"No," Conor said. "Not of you, anyway."

The monster narrowed its eyes.

You will be, it said. Before the end.

And the last thing Conor remembered was the monster's mouth roaring open to eat him alive.

BREAKFAST

"Mum?" Conor asked, stepping into the kitchen. He knew she wouldn't be in there—he couldn't hear the kettle boiling, which she always did first thing—but he'd found himself asking for her a lot lately when he entered rooms in the house. He didn't want to startle her, just in case she'd fallen asleep somewhere she hadn't planned to.

But she wasn't in the kitchen. Which meant she was probably still up in her bed. Which meant Conor would have to make his own breakfast, something he'd grown used to doing. Fine. *Good*, in fact, especially *this* morning.

He walked quickly to the trash and stuffed the plastic bag he was carrying down near the bottom,

covering it up with other rubbish so it wouldn't be obvious.

"There," he said to no one, and stood breathing for a second. Then he nodded to himself and said, "Breakfast."

Some bread in the toaster, some cereal in a bowl, some juice in a glass, and he was ready to go, sitting down at the little table in the kitchen to eat. His mum had her own bread and cereal which she bought at a health-food shop in town and which Conor thankfully didn't have to share. It tasted as unhappy as it looked.

He looked up at the clock. Twenty-five minutes before he had to leave. He was already in his school uniform, his rucksack packed for the day and waiting by the front door. All things he'd done for himself.

He sat with his back to the kitchen window, the one over the sink that looked out onto their small backyard, across the train tracks and up to the church with its graveyard.

And its yew tree.

Conor took another bite of his cereal. His chewing was the only sound in the whole house.

• • •

It had been a dream. What else *could* it have been?

When he'd opened his eyes this morning, the first thing he'd looked at was his window. It had still been there, of course, no damage at all, no gaping hole into the yard. *Of course* it had. Only a baby would have thought it really happened. Only a baby would believe that a tree—seriously, a *tree*—had walked down the hill and attacked the house.

He'd laughed a little at the thought, at how stupid it all was, and he'd stepped out of bed.

To the sound of a crunch beneath his feet.

Every inch of his bedroom floor was covered in short, spiky yew tree leaves.

He put another bite of cereal in his mouth, definitely not looking at the rubbish bin, where he had stuffed the plastic bag full of leaves he'd swept up this morning first thing.

It had been a windy night. They'd clearly blown in through his open window.

Clearly.

He finished his cereal and toast, drank the last of his juice, then rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Still twenty minutes to go. He decided to empty the rubbish bin altogether—less risky that way—and took the bag out to the wheelie bin in front of the house. Since he was already making the trip, he gathered up the recycling and put that out, too. Then he got a load of sheets going in the washer that he'd hang out on the line when he got home from school.

He went back to the kitchen and looked at the clock.

Still ten minutes left.

Still no sign of—

“Conor?” he heard, from the top of the stairs.

He let out a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding in.

“You've had breakfast?” his mum asked, leaning against the kitchen doorframe.

“Yes, Mum,” Conor said, rucksack in his hand.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Mum."

She looked at him doubtfully. Conor rolled his eyes. "Toast and cereal and juice," he said. "I put the dishes in the dishwasher."

"And took the rubbish out," his mum said quietly, looking at how neat he'd left the kitchen.

"There's washing going, too," Conor said.

"You're a good boy," she said, and though she was smiling, he could hear sadness in it, too. "I'm sorry I wasn't up."

"It's okay."

"It's just this new round of—"

"It's *okay*," Conor said.

She stopped, but she still smiled back at him. She hadn't tied her scarf around her head yet this morning, and her bare scalp looked too soft, too fragile in the morning light, like a baby's. It made Conor's stomach hurt to see it.

"Was that you I heard last night?" she asked.

Conor froze. "When?"

"Sometime after midnight, must have been," she

said, shuffling over to switch on the kettle. "I thought I was dreaming but I could have sworn I heard your voice."

"Probably just talking in my sleep," Conor said, flatly.

"Probably," his mum yawned. She took a mug off the rack hanging by the fridge. "I forgot to tell you," she said, lightly, "your grandma's coming by tomorrow."

Conor's shoulders sank. "Aw, *Mum*."

"I know," she said, "but you shouldn't have to make your own breakfast every morning."

"*Every morning?*" Conor said. "How long is she going to *be* here?"

"Conor—"

"We don't *need* her here—"

"You know how I get at this point in the treatments, Conor—"

"We've been okay so far—"

"*Conor*," his mum snapped, so harshly it seemed to surprise them both. There was a long silence. And then she smiled again, looking really, really tired.

"I'll try to keep it as short as possible, okay?" she said. "I know you don't like giving up your room, and I'm sorry. I wouldn't have asked her if I didn't need her to come, all right?"

Conor had to sleep on the settee every time his grandmother came to stay. But that wasn't it. He didn't like the way she *talked* to him, like he was an employee under evaluation. An evaluation he was going to fail. Plus, they *had* always managed so far, just the two of them, no matter how bad the treatments made her feel, it was the price she paid to get better, so why—?

"Only a couple of nights," his mum said, as if she could read his mind. "Don't worry, okay?"

He picked at the zipper on his rucksack, not saying anything, trying to think of other things. And then he remembered the bag of leaves he'd stuffed into the rubbish bin.

Maybe grandma staying in his room wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

"There's the smile I love," his mum said, reaching for the kettle as it clicked off. Then she said,

with mock-horror, "She's going to bring me some of her old *wigs*, if you can believe it." She rubbed her bare head with her free hand. "I'll look like a zombie Margaret Thatcher."

"I'm going to be late," Conor said, eyeing the clock.

"Okay, sweetheart," she said, teetering over to kiss him on the forehead. "You're a good boy," she said again. "I wish you didn't have to be quite *so* good."

As he left to head off for school, he saw her take her tea over to the kitchen window above the sink, and when he opened the front door to leave, he heard her say, "There's that old yew tree," as if she was talking to herself.

SCHOOL

He could already taste the blood in his mouth as he got up. He had bitten the inside of his lip when he hit the ground, and it was what he focused on now as he stood, the strange metallic flavor that made you want to spit it out immediately, like you'd eaten something that wasn't food at all.

He swallowed it instead. Harry and his cronies would have been thrilled beyond words if they knew Conor was bleeding. He could hear Anton and Sully laughing behind him, knew exactly the look on Harry's face, even though he couldn't see it. He could probably even guess what Harry would say next in that calm, amused voice of his that seemed to mimic every adult you never wanted to meet.

“Be careful of the steps there,” Harry said. “You might fall.”

Yep, that'd be about right.

It hadn't always been like this.

Harry was the Blond Wonder Child, the teachers' pet through every year of school. The first pupil with his hand in the air, the fastest player on the soccer field, but for all that, just another kid in Conor's class. They hadn't been friends exactly—Harry didn't really have friends, only followers; Anton and Sully basically just stood behind him and laughed at everything he did—but they hadn't been enemies, either. Conor would have been mildly surprised if Harry had even known his name.

Somewhere over the past year, though, something had changed. Harry had started noticing Conor, catching his eye, looking at him with a detached amusement.

This change hadn't come when everything started with Conor's mum. No, it had come later, when Conor

started having the nightmare, the *real* nightmare, not the stupid tree, the nightmare with the screaming and the falling, the nightmare he would never tell another living soul about. When Conor started having *that* nightmare, that's when Harry noticed him, like a secret mark had been placed on him that only Harry could see.

A mark that drew Harry to him like iron to a magnet.

On the first day of the new school year, Harry had tripped Conor coming into the school grounds, sending him tumbling to the pavement.

And so it had begun.

And so it had continued.

Conor kept his back turned as Anton and Sully laughed. He ran his tongue along the inside of his lip to see how bad the bite was. Not terrible. He'd live, if he could make it to class without anything further happening.

But then something further happened.

"Leave him alone!" Conor heard, wincing at the sound.

He turned and saw Lily Andrews pushing her furious face into Harry's, which only made Anton and Sully laugh even harder.

"Your poodle's here to save you," Anton said.

"I'm just making it a fair fight," Lily huffed, her wiry curls bouncing around all poodle-like, no matter how tightly she'd tied them back.

"You're bleeding, O'Malley," Harry said, calmly ignoring Lily.

Conor put his hand up to his mouth too late to catch a bit of blood coming out of the corner.

"He'll have to get his baldy mother to kiss it better for him!" Sully crowed.

Conor's stomach contracted to a ball of fire, like a little sun burning him up from the inside, but before he could react, Lily did. With a cry of outrage, she pushed an astonished Sully into the shrubbery, toppling him all the way over.

"Lillian Andrews!" came the voice of doom from halfway across the yard.

They froze. Even Sully paused in the act of getting up. Miss Kwan, their Head of Year, was storming over to them, her scariest frown burnt into her face like a scar.

"They started it, Miss," Lily said, already defending herself.

"I don't want to hear it," Miss Kwan said. "Are you all right, Sullivan?"

Sully shot a quick glance at Lily, then got a pained look across his face. "I don't know, Miss," he said. "I might need to go home."

"Don't milk it," Miss Kwan said. "To my office, Lillian."

"But Miss, they were—"

"*Now*, Lillian."

"They were making fun of Conor's mother!"

This made everyone freeze again, and the burning sun in Conor's stomach grew hotter, ready to eat him alive.

(—and in his mind, he felt a flash of the nightmare, of the howling wind, of the burning blackness—)

He pushed it away.

"Is this true, Conor?" Miss Kwan asked, her face as serious as a sermon.

The blood on Conor's tongue made him want to throw up. He looked over to Harry and his cronies. Anton and Sully seemed worried, but Harry just stared back at him, unruffled and calm, like he was genuinely curious as to what Conor might say.

"No, Miss, it's not true," Conor said, swallowing the blood. "I just fell. They were helping me up."

Lily's face turned instantly into hurt surprise. Her mouth dropped open, but she made no sound.

"Get to your classes," Miss Kwan said. "Except for you, Lillian."

Lily kept looking back at Conor as Miss Kwan pulled her away, but Conor turned from her.

To find Harry holding his rucksack out for him.

"Well done, O'Malley," Harry said.

Conor said nothing, just took the bag from him roughly and made his way inside.

LIFE WRITING

Stories, Conor thought with dread as he walked home.

It was after school, and he'd made his escape. He'd gotten through the rest of the day avoiding Harry and the others, though they probably knew better than to risk causing him another "accident" so soon after nearly getting caught by Miss Kwan. He'd also avoided Lily, who had returned to lessons with red, puffy eyes and a scowl you could hang meat from. When the final bell rang, Conor had rushed out fast, feeling the burden of school and of Harry and of Lily drop from his shoulders as he put one street and then another between himself and all of that.

Stories, he thought again.

"*Your stories*," Mrs. Marl had said in their English

lesson. "Don't think you haven't lived long enough to have a story to tell."

Life writing, she'd called it, an assignment for them to write about themselves. Their family tree, where they'd lived, holiday trips, and happy memories.

Important things that had happened.

Conor shifted his rucksack on his shoulder. He could think of a couple of important things that had happened. Nothing he wanted to write about, though. His father leaving. The cat wandering off one day and never coming back.

The afternoon when his mother said they needed to have a little talk.

He frowned and kept walking.

But then again, he also remembered the day *before* that day. His mum had taken him to his favorite Indian restaurant and let him order as much vindaloo as he wanted. Then she'd laughed and said, "Why the hell not?" and ordered plates of it for herself, too. They'd started farting before they'd even got back in the car. On the drive home, they could hardly talk from laughing and farting so hard.

Conor smiled just thinking about it. Because it *hadn't* been a drive home. It had been a surprise trip to the cinema on a school night, to a film Conor had already seen four times but knew his mum was sick to death of. There they were, though, sitting through it again, still giggling to themselves, eating buckets of popcorn and drinking buckets of Coke.

Conor wasn't stupid. When they'd had the "little talk" the next day, he knew what his mum had done and why she had done it. But that didn't take away from how much fun that night had been. How hard they'd laughed. How anything had seemed possible. How anything good could have happened to them right then and there and they wouldn't have been surprised.

But he wasn't going to be writing about *that* either.

"Hey!" A voice calling behind him made him groan. "Hey, Conor, wait!"

Lily.

• • •

"Hey!" she said, catching up with him and planting herself right in his way so he had to stop or run into her. She was out of breath, but her face was still furious. "Why did you do that today?" she said.

"Leave me alone," Conor said, pushing past her.

"Why didn't you tell Miss Kwan what really happened?" Lily persisted, following him. "Why did you let me get into trouble?"

"Why did you butt in when it was none of your business?"

"I was trying to *help* you."

"I don't need your help," Conor said. "I was doing fine on my own."

"You were not!" Lily said. "You were bleeding."

"It's none of your *business*," Conor snapped again and picked up his pace.

"I've got detention *all week*," Lily complained. "*And* a note home to my parents."

"That's not my problem."

"But it's your fault."

Conor stopped suddenly and turned to her. He looked so angry she stepped back, startled, almost like

she was afraid. "It's *your* fault," he said. "It's *all* your fault."

He stormed off back down the pavement. "We used to be friends," Lily called after him.

"*Used* to be," Conor said without turning around.

He'd known Lily forever. Or for as long as he could remember, which was basically the same thing.

Their mums were friends from before Conor and Lily were born, and Lily had been like a sister who lived in another house, especially when one mum or the other would babysit. He and Lily had only been friends, though, none of the romantic stuff they got teased for sometimes at school. In a way, it was hard for Conor to even look at Lily as a *girl*, at least not in the same way as the other girls at school. How could you when you'd both played sheep in the same nativity play, aged five? When you knew how much she used to pick her nose? When *she* knew how long you'd needed a night-light after your father

moved out? It had just been a friendship, normal as anything.

But then his mum's "little talk" had happened, and what came next was simple, really, and sudden.

No one knew.

Then Lily's mum knew, of course.

Then Lily knew.

And then everyone knew. Everyone. Which changed the whole world in a single day.

And he was never going to forgive her for that.

Another street and another street more and there was his house, small but detached. It had been the one thing his mum had insisted on in the divorce, that it was theirs free and clear and they wouldn't have to move after his dad had left for America with Stephanie, the new wife. That had been six years ago, so long now that Conor sometimes couldn't remember what it was like having a dad in the house.

Didn't mean he still didn't think about it, though.

He looked up past his house to the hill beyond, the church steeple poking up into the cloudy sky.

And the yew tree hovering over the graveyard like a sleeping giant.

Conor forced himself to keep looking at it, making himself see that it was just a tree, a tree like any other, like any one of those that lined the railway track.

A tree. That's all it was. That's all it *ever* was.
A tree.

A tree that, as he watched, reared up a giant face to look at him in the sunlight, its arms reaching out, its voice saying, *Conor*—

He stepped back so fast, he nearly fell into the street, catching himself on the hood of a parked car.

When he looked back up, it was just a tree again.

THREE STORIES

He lay in his bed that night, wide awake, watching the clock on his bedside table.

It had been the slowest evening imaginable. Cooking frozen lasagna had tired his mum out so badly she fell asleep five minutes into *EastEnders*. Conor hated the program but he made sure it recorded for her, then he spread a duvet over her and went and did the dishes.

His mum's mobile had gone off once, not waking her. Conor saw it was Lily's mum calling and let it go to voice mail. He did his schoolwork at the kitchen table, stopping before he got to Mrs. Marl's Life Writing homework, then he played around on the Internet for a while in his room before brushing his

teeth and seeing himself to bed. He'd barely turned out the light when his mum had very apologetically—and very groggily—come in to kiss him good night.

A few minutes later, he'd heard her in the bathroom, throwing up.

“Do you need any help?” he'd called from his bed.

“No, sweetheart,” his mum called back, weakly. “I'm kind of used to it by now.”

That was the thing. Conor was used to it, too. It was always the second and third days after the treatments that were the worst, always the days when she was the most tired, when she threw up the most. It had almost become normal.

After a while, the throwing up had stopped. He'd heard the bathroom light click off and her bedroom door shut.

That was two hours ago. He'd lain awake since then, waiting.

But for what?

His bedside clock read 12:05. Then it read 12:06. He looked over to his bedroom window, shut tight

even though the night was still warm. His clock ticked over to 12:07.

He got up, went over to the window, and looked out.

The monster stood in his yard, looking right back at him.

Open up, the monster said, its voice as clear as if the window wasn't between them. *I want to talk to you.*

"Yeah, sure," Conor said, keeping his voice low. "Because that's what monsters always want. To *talk*."

The monster smiled. It was a ghastly sight. *If I must force my way in*, it said, *I will do so happily.*

It raised a gnarled woody fist to punch through the wall of Conor's bedroom.

"No!" Conor said. "I don't want you to wake my mum."

Then come outside, the monster said, and even in his room, Conor's nose filled with the moist smell of earth and wood and sap.

"What do you want from me?" Conor said.

The monster pressed its face close to the window.

It is not what I want from you, Conor O'Malley, it said. It is what you want from me.

"I don't want anything from you," Conor said.

Not yet, said the monster. But you will.

"It's only a dream," Conor said to himself in the backyard, looking up at the monster silhouetted against the moon in the night sky. He folded his arms tightly against his body, not because it was cold, but because he couldn't actually believe he'd tiptoed down the stairs, unlocked the back door, and come outside.

He still felt calm. Which was weird. This nightmare—because it was surely a nightmare, of course it was—was so different from the other nightmare.

No terror, no panic, no darkness, for one thing.

And yet here was a monster, clear as the clearest night, towering thirty or forty feet above him, breathing heavily in the night air.

"It's only a dream," he said again.

But what is a dream, Conor O'Malley? the monster said, bending down so its face was close to Conor's. *Who is to say that it is not everything else that is the dream?*

Every time the monster moved, Conor could hear the creak of wood, groaning and yawning in the monster's huge body. He could see, too, the power in the monster's arms, great wiry ropes of branches constantly twisting and shifting together in what must have been tree muscle, connected to a massive trunk of a chest, topped by a head and teeth that could chomp him down in one bite.

"What are you?" Conor asked, pulling his arms closer around himself.

I am not a "what," frowned the monster. *I am a "who."*

"Who are you, then?" Conor said.

The monster's eyes widened. *Who am I?* it said, its voice getting louder. *Who am I?*

The monster seemed to grow before Conor's eyes, getting taller and broader. A sudden, hard wind swirled up around them, and the monster spread its arms out wide, so wide they seemed to reach to

opposite horizons, so wide they seemed big enough to encompass the world.

I have had as many names as there are years to time itself! roared the monster. *I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man!*

A great arm swung down and snatched Conor up in it, lifting him high in the air, the wind whirling around them, making the monster's leafy skin wave angrily.

Who am I? the monster repeated, still roaring. *I am the spine that the mountains hang upon! I am the tears that the rivers cry! I am the lungs that breathe the wind! I am the wolf that kills the stag, the hawk that kills the mouse, the spider that kills the fly! I am the stag, the mouse, and the fly that are eaten! I am the snake of the world devouring its tail! I am everything untamed and untameable!* It brought Conor up close to its eye. *I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O'Malley.*

"You look like a tree," Conor said.

The monster squeezed him until he cried out.

I do not often come walking, boy, the monster said, *only for matters of life and death. I expect to be listened to.*

The monster loosened its grip, and Conor could breathe again. "So what do you want with *me*?" Conor asked.

The monster gave an evil grin. The wind died down and a quiet fell. *At last*, said the monster. *To the matter at hand. The reason I have come walking.*

Conor tensed, suddenly dreading what was coming.

Here is what will happen, Conor O'Malley, the monster continued, *I will come to you again on further nights.*

Conor felt his stomach clench, like he was preparing for a blow.

And I will tell you three stories. Three tales from when I walked before.

Conor blinked. Then blinked again. "You're going to tell me *stories*?"

Indeed, the monster said.

"Well—" Conor looked around in disbelief. "How is *that* a nightmare?"

Stories are the wildest things of all, the monster rumbled. *Stories chase and bite and hunt.*

"That's what *teachers* always say," Conor said. "No one believes them either."

And when I have finished my three stories, the monster said, as if Conor hadn't spoken, *you will tell me a fourth.*

Conor squirmed in the monster's hand. "I'm no good at stories."

You will tell me a fourth, the monster repeated, *and it will be the truth.*

"The truth?"

Not just any truth. Your truth.

"O-kay," Conor said, "but you said I'd be scared before the end of all this, and that doesn't sound scary at all."

You know that is not true, the monster said. *You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O'Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of.*

Conor stopped squirming.

It couldn't mean—

There was no *way* it could mean—

There was no way it could know *that*.

No. No. He was *never* going to say what happened in the real nightmare. Never in a million years.

A MONSTER CALLS

You will tell it, the monster said. For this is why you called me.

Conor grew even more confused. "Called you? I didn't call you—"

You will tell me the fourth tale. You will tell me the truth.

"And what if I don't?" Conor said.

The monster gave the evil grin again. *Then I will eat you alive.*

And its mouth opened impossibly wide, wide enough to eat the whole world, wide enough to make Conor disappear forever—

He sat up in bed with a shout.

His bed. He was back in his bed.

Of course it was a dream. Of course it was. *Again.*

He sighed angrily and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. How was he ever going to get any rest if his dreams were going to be this tiring?

He'd get himself a drink of water, he thought as he threw back the covers. He'd get up and he'd start

this night over again, forgetting all this stupid dream business that made no sense whatso—

Something squished under his foot.

He switched on his lamp. His floor was covered in poisonous red yew tree berries.

Which had all somehow come in through a closed and locked window.

GRANDMA

"Are you being a good boy for your mum?"

Conor's grandma pinched Conor's cheeks so hard he swore she was going to draw blood.

"He's been *very* good, Ma," Conor's mother said, winking at him from behind his grandma, her favorite blue scarf tied around her head. "So there's no need to inflict quite so much pain."

"Oh, nonsense," his grandma said, giving him two playful slaps on each cheek that actually hurt quite a lot. "Why don't you go and put the kettle on for me and your mum?" she said, making it sound not like a question at all.

As Conor gratefully left the room, his grandma placed her hands on her hips and looked at his mother.

"Now then, my dear," he heard her say as he went into the kitchen. "What *are* we going to do with you?"

Conor's grandma wasn't like other grandmas. He'd met Lily's grandma loads of times, and *she* was how grandmas were supposed to be: crinkly and smiley, with white hair and the whole lot. She cooked meals where she made three separate eternally boiled vegetable portions for everybody and would giggle in the corner at Christmas with a small glass of sherry and a paper crown on her head.

Conor's grandma wore tailored pantsuits, dyed her hair to keep out the gray, and said things that made no sense at all, like "Sixty is the new fifty" or "Classic cars need the most expensive polish." What did that even *mean*? She emailed birthday cards, would argue with waiters over wine, and still had a *job*. Her house was even worse, filled with expensive old things you could never touch, like a clock she wouldn't even let the cleaning lady dust. Which was another thing. What kind of grandma had a cleaning lady?

"Two sugars, no milk," she called from the sitting room as Conor made the tea. As if he didn't know that from the last three thousand times she'd visited.

"Thank you, my boy," his grandma said when he brought in the tea.

"Thank you, sweetheart," his mum said, smiling at him out of view of his grandma, still inviting him to join with her against her mother. He couldn't help himself. He smiled back a little.

"And how was school today, young man?" his grandma asked.

"Fine," Conor said.

It hadn't really been fine. Lily was still fuming, Harry had put a marker pen with its cap off deep in his rucksack, and Miss Kwan had pulled him aside to ask, with a serious look on her face, How He Was Holding Up.

"You know," his grandma said, setting down her cup of tea, "there's a tremendous independent boys' school not half a mile from my house. I've been

looking into it, and the academic standards are quite high, much higher than he's getting at the comprehensive, I'm sure."

Conor stared at her. Because this was the other reason he didn't like his grandma visiting. What she'd just said could have been her being a snob about his local school.

Or it could have been more. It could have been a hint about a possible future.

A possible *after*.

Conor felt the anger rising in the pit of his stomach—

"He's happy where he is, Ma," his mum said, quickly, giving him another look. "Aren't you, Conor?"

Conor gritted his teeth and answered, "I'm fine right where I am."

Dinner was Chinese take-away. Conor's grandma "didn't really cook." This was true. Every time he'd stayed with her, her fridge had held barely anything more than an egg and half an avocado. Conor's mum

was still too tired to cook herself, and though Conor could have made something, it didn't seem to occur to his grandma that this was even a possibility.

He'd been left with the cleanup, though, and he was shoving the foil packages down onto the bag of poisonous berries he'd hidden at the bottom of the rubbish bin when his grandma came in behind him.

"You and I need to have a talk, my boy," she said, standing in the doorway and blocking his escape.

"I have a name, you know," Conor said, pushing down on the bin. "And it's not *my boy*."

"Less of your cheek," his grandma said. She stood there, her arms folded. He stared at her for a minute. She stared back. Then she made a tutting sound. "I'm not your enemy, Conor," she said. "I'm here to help your mother."

"I know why you're here," he said, taking out a cloth to wipe an already clean countertop.

His grandma reached forward and snatched the cloth out of his hand. "I'm here because thirteen-year-old boys shouldn't be wiping down counters without being asked to first."

He glowered back at her. "Were *you* going to do it?"

"Conor—"

"Just go," Conor said. "We don't need you here."

"Conor," she said more firmly, "we need to talk about what's going to happen."

"No, we don't. She's *always* sick after the treatments. She'll be better tomorrow." He glared at her. "And then *you* can go home."

His grandma looked up at the ceiling and sighed. Then she rubbed her face with her hands, and he was surprised to see that she was angry, *really* angry.

But maybe not at him.

He took out another cloth and started wiping again, just so he wouldn't have to look at her. He wiped all the way over to the sink and happened to glance out of the window.

The monster was standing in his backyard, big as the setting sun.

Watching him.

"She'll *seem* better tomorrow," his grandma said, her voice huskier, "but she won't be, Conor."

Well, this was just wrong. He turned back to

her. "The treatments are making her better," he said. "That's why she goes."

His grandma just looked at him for a long minute, like she was trying to decide something. "You need to talk to her about this, Conor," she finally said. Then she said, as if to herself, "She needs to talk about this with *you*."

"Talk to me about what?" Conor asked.

His grandma crossed her arms. "About you coming to live with me."

Conor frowned, and for a second the whole room seemed to get darker, for a second it felt like the whole house was shaking, for a second it felt like he could reach down and tear the whole floor right out of the dark and loamy earth—

He blinked. His grandma was still waiting for a response.

"I'm not going to live with you," he said.

"Conor—"

"I'm *never* going to live with you."

"Yes, you are," she said. "I'm sorry, but you are. And I know she's trying to protect you, but I think

it's vitally important for you to know that when this is all over, you've got a home, my boy. With someone who'll love you and care for you."

"When this is all over," Conor said, fury in his voice, "you'll leave and we'll be fine."

"Conor—"

And then they both heard from the sitting room, "Mum? Mum?"

His grandma rushed out of the kitchen so fast that Conor jumped back in surprise. He could hear his mum coughing and his grandma saying, "It's okay, darling, it's okay, shh, shh, shh." He glanced back out of the kitchen window on his way to the sitting room.

The monster was gone.

His grandma was on the settee, holding on to his mum, rubbing her back as she threw up into a small bucket they kept nearby just in case.

His grandma looked up at him, but her face was set and hard and totally unreadable.

THE WILDNESS OF STORIES

The house was dark. His grandma had finally gotten his mum to bed and then had gone into Conor's bedroom and shut the door, not asking if he wanted anything out of it before she went to sleep herself.

Conor lay awake on the settee. He didn't think he'd be able to sleep, not with the things his grandma had said, not with how his mother had looked tonight. It was three full days after the treatment, about the time she usually started feeling better, except she was still throwing up, still exhausted, for far longer than she should have been—

He pushed the thoughts out of his head but they returned and he had to push them away again. He must have eventually drifted off, but the only way he

really knew he was asleep was when the nightmare came.

Not the tree. The *nightmare*.

With the wind roaring and the ground shaking and the hands holding tight but still somehow slipping away, with Conor using all his strength but it still not being enough, with the grip losing itself, with the falling, with the *screaming*—

“NO!” Conor shouted, the terror following him into waking, gripping his chest so hard it felt as if he couldn’t breathe, his throat choking, his eyes filling with water.

“No,” he said again, more quietly.

The house was silent and dark. He listened for a moment, but nothing stirred, no sound from his mum or his grandma. He squinted through the darkness to the clock on the DVD player.

12:07. Of course it was.

He listened hard into the silence. But nothing happened. He didn’t hear his name, he didn’t hear the creak of wood.

Maybe it wasn’t going to come tonight.

A MONSTER CALLS

12:08, read the clock.

12:09.

Feeling vaguely angry, Conor got up and went into the kitchen. He looked out of the window.

The monster was standing in his backyard.

What took you so long? it asked.

It is time for me to tell you the first story, the monster said.

Conor didn't move from the garden chair, where he'd sat himself after he'd gone outside. He had his legs pulled up to his chest and his face pressed into his knees.

Are you listening? the monster asked.

"No," Conor said.

He felt the air swirl around him violently again. *I will be listened to!* started the monster. *I have been alive as long as this land and you will pay the respect owed to me—*

Conor got up from the chair and headed back toward the kitchen door.

Where do you think you're going? demanded the monster.

Conor whirled around, and his face looked so furious, so pained, that the monster actually stood up straight, its huge, leafy eyebrows raising in surprise.

"What do *you* know?" Conor spat. "What do you know about *anything*?"

I know about you, Conor O'Malley, the monster said.

"No, you don't," Conor said. "If you did, you'd know I don't have time to listen to stupid, boring stories from some stupid, boring tree that isn't even real—"

Oh? said the monster. *Did you dream the berries on the floor of your room?*

"Who cares even if I didn't?!" Conor shouted back. "They're just stupid berries. Woo-hoo, *so scary*. Oh, please, please, save me from the *berries!*"

The monster looked at him quizzically. *How strange,* it said. *The words you say tell me you are scared of the berries, but your actions seem to suggest otherwise.*

"You're as old as the land and you've never heard of sarcasm?" Conor asked.

Oh, I have heard of it, the monster said, putting its huge branch hands on its hips. *But people usually know better than to speak it to me.*

“Can’t you just leave me *alone?*”

The monster shook its head, but not in answer to Conor’s question. *It is most unusual,* it said. *Nothing I do seems to make you frightened of me.*

“You’re just a *tree,*” Conor said, and there was no other way he could think about it. Even though it walked and talked, even though it was bigger than his house and could swallow him in one bite, the monster was still, at the end of the day, just a yew tree. Conor could even see more berries growing from the branches at its elbows.

And you have worse things to be frightened of, said the monster, but not as a question.

Conor looked at the ground, then up at the moon, anywhere but at the monster’s eyes. The nightmare feeling was rising in him, turning everything around him to darkness, making everything seem heavy and impossible, like he’d been asked to lift a mountain with his bare hands and no one would let him leave until he did.

"I thought," he said, but had to cough before he spoke again. "I saw you watching me earlier when I was fighting with my grandma and I thought . . ."

What did you think? the monster asked when Conor didn't finish.

"Forget it," Conor said, turning back toward the house.

You thought I might be here to help you, the monster said.

Conor stopped.

You thought I might have come to topple your enemies. Slay your dragons.

Conor still didn't look back. But he didn't go inside either.

You felt the truth of it when I said that you had called for me, that you were the reason I had come walking. Did you not?

Conor turned around. "But all you want to do is tell me *stories*," he said, and he couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice, because it *was* true. He had thought that. He'd *hoped* that.

The monster knelt down so its face was close to

Conor's. *Stories of how I toppled enemies, it said. Stories of how I slew dragons.*

Conor blinked back at the monster's gaze.

Stories are wild creatures, the monster said. When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?

The monster looked up, and Conor followed its gaze. It was looking at Conor's bedroom window. The room where his grandma now slept.

Let me tell you a story of when I went walking, the monster said. Let me tell you of the end of a wicked queen and how I made sure she was never seen again.

Conor swallowed and looked back at the monster's face.

"Go on," he said.

THE FIRST TALE

Long ago, the monster said, before this was a town with roads and trains and cars, it was a green place. Trees covered every hill and bordered every path. They shaded every stream and protected every house, for there were houses here even then, made of stone and earth.

This was a kingdom.

("What?" Conor said, looking around his backyard. "Here?")

(The monster cocked its head at him curiously. *You have not heard of it?*)

("Not a kingdom around here, no," Conor said. "We don't even have a McDonald's.")

Nevertheless, continued the monster, it was a kingdom, small but happy, for the king was a just king, a man

whose wisdom was born out of hardship. His wife had given birth to four strong sons, but in the king's reign, he had been forced to ride into battles to preserve the peace of his kingdom. Battles against giants and dragons, battles against black wolves with red eyes, battles against armies of men led by great wizards.

These battles secured the kingdom's borders and brought peace to the land. But victory came at a price. One by one, the king's four sons were killed. By the fire of a dragon or the hands of a giant or the teeth of a wolf or the spear of a man. One by one, all four princes of the kingdom fell, leaving the king only one heir. His infant grandson.

(“This is all sounding pretty fairy tale-ish,” Conor said, suspiciously.)

(You would not say that if you heard the screams of a man killed by a spear, said the monster. Or his cries of terror as he was torn to pieces by wolves. Now be quiet.)

By and by, the king's wife succumbed to grief, as did the mother of the young prince. The king was left with only the child for company, along with more sadness than one man should bear alone.

"I must remarry," the king decided. "For the good of my prince and of my kingdom, if not for myself."

And remarry he did, to a princess from a neighboring kingdom, a practical union that made both kingdoms stronger. She was young and fair, and though perhaps her face was a bit hard and her tongue a bit sharp, she seemed to make the king happy.

Time passed. The young prince grew until he was nearly a man, coming within two years of the eighteenth birthday that would allow him to ascend to the throne on the old king's death. These were happy days for the kingdom. The battles were over, and the future seemed secure in the hands of the brave young prince.

But one day the king grew ill. Rumor began to spread that he was being poisoned by his new wife. Stories circulated that she had conjured grave magicks to make herself look far younger than she actually was and that beneath her youthful face lurked the scowl of an elderly hag. No one would have put it past her to poison the king, though he begged his subjects until his dying breath not to blame her.

And so he died, with still a year left before his

grandson was old enough to take the throne. The queen, his step-grandmother, became regent in his place, and would handle all affairs of state until the prince was old enough to take over.

At first, to the surprise of many, her reign was a good one. Her countenance—despite the rumors—was still youthful and pleasing, and she endeavoured to carry on ruling in the manner of the dead king.

The prince, meanwhile, had fallen in love.

(“I *knew* it,” Conor grumbled. “These kinds of stories always have stupid princes falling in love.” He started walking back to the house. “I thought this was going to be *good*.”)

(With one swift movement, the monster grabbed Conor’s ankles in a long, strong hand and flipped him upside down, holding him in mid-air so his T-shirt rucked up and his heartbeat thudded in his head.)

(As I was saying, said the monster.)

The prince had fallen in love. She was only a farmer’s daughter, but she was beautiful, and also smart, as the daughters of farmers need to be, for farms are complicated businesses. The kingdom smiled on the match.

The queen, however, did not. She had enjoyed her time as regent and felt a strange reluctance to give it up. She began to think that perhaps it was best that the crown remained in the family, that the kingdom be run by those wise enough to do it, and what could be a better solution than for the prince to actually marry her?

“That’s disgusting!” Conor said, still upside down. “She was his grandmother!”

(Step-grandmother, corrected the monster. Not related by blood, and to all intents and appearances, a young woman herself.)

(Conor shook his head, his hair dangling. “That’s just wrong.” He paused a moment. “Can you maybe put me down?”)

(The monster lowered him to the ground and continued the story.)

The prince also thought marrying the queen was wrong. He said he would die before doing any such thing. He vowed to run away with the beautiful farmer’s daughter and return on his eighteenth birthday to free his people from the tyranny of the queen. And so one night, the prince and the farmer’s daughter raced away on

horseback, stopping only at dawn to sleep in the shade of a giant yew tree.

(“You?” Conor asked.)

(Me, the monster said. But also only part of me. I can take any form of any size, but the yew tree is a shape most comfortable.)

The prince and the farmer’s daughter held each other close in the growing dawn. They had vowed to be chaste until they were able to marry in the next kingdom, but their passions got the better of them, and it was not long before they were asleep and naked in each other’s arms.

They slept through the day in the shadows of my branches, and night fell once again. The prince woke. “Arise, my beloved,” he whispered to the farmer’s daughter, “for we ride to the day where we will be man and wife.”

But his beloved did not wake. He shook her, and it was only as she slumped back in the moonlight that he noticed the blood staining the ground.

(“Blood?” Conor said, but the monster kept talking.)

The prince also had blood covering his own hands, and he saw a bloodied knife on the grass beside them,

resting against the roots of the tree. Someone had murdered his beloved and done so in a way that made it look like the prince had committed the crime.

"The queen!" cried the prince. "The queen is responsible for this treachery!"

In the distance, he could hear villagers approaching. If they found him, they would see the knife and the blood, and they would call him murderer. They would put him to death for his crime.

(*"And the queen would be able to rule unchallenged,"* Conor said, making a disgusted sound. *"I hope this story ends with you ripping her head off."*)

There was nowhere for the prince to run. His horse had been chased away while he slept. The yew tree was his only shelter.

And also the only place he could turn for help.

Now, the world was younger then. The barrier between things was thinner, easier to pass through. The prince knew this. And he lifted his head to the great yew tree and he spoke.

(*The monster paused.*)

(*"What did he say?"* Conor asked.)

(He said enough to bring me walking, the monster said. I know injustice when I see it.)

The prince ran toward the approaching villagers. "The queen has murdered my bride!" he shouted. "The queen must be stopped!"

The rumors of the queen's witchery had been circulating long enough, and the young prince was so beloved of the people, that it took very little for them to see the obvious truth. It took even less time when they saw the great Green Man walking behind him, high as the hills, coming for vengeance.

(Conor glanced again at the monster's massive arms and legs, at its raggedy, toothy mouth, at its overwhelming monstrosity. He imagined what the queen must have thought when she saw it coming.)

(He smiled.)

The subjects stormed the queen's castle with such fury that the stones of its very walls tumbled. Fortifications fell and ceilings collapsed, and when the queen was found in her chambers, the mob seized her and dragged her to the stake right then to burn her alive.

("Good," Conor said, smiling. "She deserved it.")

He looked up at his bedroom window where his grandmother slept. "I don't suppose you can help me with her?" he asked. "I mean, I don't want to burn her alive or anything, but maybe just—")

The story, said the monster, is not yet finished.