

THE REST OF THE FIRST TALE

"It's not?" Conor asked. "But the queen was overthrown."

She was, said the monster. But not by me.

Conor hesitated, confused. "You said you made sure she was never seen again."

And so I did. When the villagers lit the flames on the stake to burn her alive, I reached in and saved her.

"You *what?*" Conor said.

I took her and carried her far enough away so that the villagers would never find her, far beyond even the kingdom of her birth, to a village by the sea. And there I left her, to live in peace.

Conor got to his feet, his voice rising in disbelief. "But she murdered the farmer's daughter! How could

you possibly save a murderer?" Then his face dropped and he took a step back. "You really *are* a monster."

I never said she killed the farmer's daughter, the monster said. *I only said that the prince said it was so.*

Conor blinked. Then he crossed his arms. "So who killed her then?"

The monster opened its huge hands in a certain way, and a breeze blew up, bringing a mist with it. Conor's house was still behind him, but the mist covered his backyard, replacing it with a field with a giant yew in the center and a man and a woman sleeping at its base.

After their coupling, said the monster, *the prince remained awake.*

Conor watched as the young prince rose and looked down at the sleeping farmer's daughter, who even Conor could see was a beauty. The prince watched her for a moment, then wrapped a blanket around himself and went to their horse, tied to one of the yew tree's branches. The prince retrieved something from the saddlebag, then untied the horse, slapping it hard on the hindquarters to send it

running off. The prince held up what he'd taken out of the bag.

A knife, shining in the moonlight.

"No!" Conor said.

The monster closed its hands and the mist descended again as the prince approached the sleeping farmer's daughter, his knife at the ready.

"You said he was surprised when she didn't wake up!" Conor said.

After he killed the farmer's daughter, said the monster, the prince lay down next to her and returned to sleep. When he awoke, he acted out a pantomime should anyone be watching. But also, it may surprise you to learn, for himself. The monster's branches creaked. Sometimes people need to lie to themselves most of all.

"You said he asked for your help! And that you gave it!"

I only said he told me enough to make me come walking.

Conor looked wide-eyed from the monster to his backyard, which was reemerging from the dissipating mist. "What did he tell you?" he asked.

He told me that he had done it for the good of the kingdom. That the new queen was in fact a witch, that his grandfather had suspected it to be true when he married her, but that he had overlooked it because of her beauty. The prince couldn't topple a powerful witch on his own. He needed the fury of the villagers to help him. The death of the farmer's daughter saw to that. He was sorry to do it. Heartbroken, he said, but as his own father had died in defence of the kingdom, so did his fair maiden. Her death was serving to overthrow a great evil. When he said that the queen had murdered his bride, he believed, in his own way, that it was actually true.

“That’s a load of crap!” Conor shouted. “He didn’t need to kill her. The people were behind him. They would have followed him anyway.”

The justifications of men who kill should always be heard with skepticism, said the monster. And so the injustice that I saw, the reason that I came walking, was for the queen, not the prince.

“Did he ever get caught?” Conor said, aghast. “Did they punish him?”

He became a much beloved king, the monster said, who ruled happily until the end of his long days.

Conor looked up to his bedroom window, frowning again. "So the good prince was a murderer and the evil queen wasn't a witch after all. Is that supposed to be the lesson of all this? That I should be *nice* to her?"

He heard a strange rumbling, different from before, and it took him a minute to realize the monster was *laughing*.

You think I tell you stories to teach you lessons? the monster said. You think I have come walking out of time and earth itself to teach you a lesson in niceness?

It laughed louder and louder again, until the ground was shaking and it felt like the sky itself might tumble down.

"Yeah, all right," Conor said, embarrassed.

No, no, the monster said, finally calming itself. The queen most certainly was a witch and could very well have been on her way to great evil. Who's to say? She was trying to hold on to power, after all.

"Why did you save her then?"

Because what she was not, was a murderer.

Conor walked around the garden a bit, thinking. Then he did it a bit more. "I don't understand. Who's the good guy here?"

There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.

Conor shook his head. "That's a terrible story. And a cheat."

It is a true story, the monster said. Many things that are true feel like a cheat. Kingdoms get the princes they deserve, farmers' daughters die for no reason, and sometimes witches merit saving. Quite often, actually. You'd be surprised.

Conor glanced up at his bedroom window again, imagining his grandma sleeping in his bed. "So how is that supposed to save me from her?"

The monster stood to its full height, looking down on Conor from afar.

It is not her you need saving from, it said.

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Conor sat up straight on the settee, breathing heavily again.

12:07, read the clock.

“Dammit!” Conor said. “Am I dreaming or not?”

He stood up angrily—

And immediately stubbed his toe.

“What *now?*” he grumbled, leaning over to flick on a light.

From a knot in a floorboard, a fresh, new and very solid sapling had sprouted, about a foot tall.

Conor stared at it for a while. Then he went to the kitchen to get a knife to saw it out of the floor.

UNDERSTANDING

"I forgive you," Lily said, catching up with him on the walk to school the following day.

"For what?" Conor asked, not looking at her. He was still irritated at the monster's story, from the cheating and twisting way it went, none of which was any help at all. He'd spent half an hour sawing the surprisingly tough sapling out of the floor and had felt as though he'd barely fallen asleep again before it was time to get up, something he'd only found out because his grandma had started yelling at him for being late. She wouldn't even let him say good-bye to his mum, who she said had had a rough night and needed her rest. Which made him feel guilty because

if his mum had had a rough night, then *he* should have been there to help her, not his grandma who had barely let him brush his teeth before shoving an apple in his hand and pushing him out of the door.

"I forgive you for getting me in trouble, stupid," Lily said, but not too harshly.

"You got yourself in trouble," Conor said. "You're the one who pushed Sully over."

"I forgive you for *lying*," Lily said, her poody curls shoved painfully back into a band.

Conor just kept on walking.

"Aren't you going to say you're sorry back?" Lily asked.

"Nope," Conor said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm *not* sorry."

"Conor—"

"I'm not sorry," Conor said, stopping, "and *I* don't forgive *you*."

They glared at each other in the cool morning sun, neither wanting to be the first to look away.

"My mum said we need to make allowances for you," Lily finally said. "Because of what you're going through."

And for a moment, the sun seemed to go behind the clouds. For a moment, all Conor could see was sudden thunderstorms on the way, could *feel* them ready to explode in the sky and through his body and out of his fists. For a moment, he felt as if he could grab hold of the very air and twist it around Lily and rip her right in two—

"Conor?" Lily said, looking startled.

"Your mum doesn't know *anything*," he said. "And neither do you."

He walked away from her, fast, leaving her behind.

It was just over a year ago that Lily had told a few of her friends about Conor's mum, even though he hadn't said she could. Those friends told a few more, who told a few more, and before the day was half through, it was like a circle had opened around him, a dead area with Conor at the center, surrounded by

land mines that everyone was afraid to walk through. All of a sudden, the people he'd thought were his friends would stop talking when he came over, not that there were so very many beyond Lily anyway, but *still*. He'd catch people whispering as he walked by in the corridor or at lunch. Even teachers would get a different look on their faces when he put up his hand during lessons.

So eventually he stopped going over to groups of friends, stopped looking up at the whispers, and even stopped putting up his hand.

Not that anyone seemed to notice. It was like he'd suddenly turned invisible.

He'd never had a harder year of school or been more relieved for a summer holiday to come around than this last one. His mother was deep into her treatments, which she'd said over and over again were rough but "doing the job," the long schedule of them nearing its end. The plan was that she'd finish them, a new school year would start, and they'd be able to put all this behind them and start afresh.

Except it hadn't worked out that way. His mum's

treatments had carried on longer than they'd originally thought, first a second round and now a third. The teachers in his new year were even worse because they only knew him in terms of his mum and not who he was before. And the other kids still treated him like *he* was the one who was ill, especially since Harry and his cronies had singled him out.

And now his grandma was hanging around the house and he was dreaming about trees.

Or maybe it *wasn't* a dream. Which would actually be worse.

He walked on angrily to school. He blamed Lily because it *was* mostly her fault, wasn't it?

He blamed Lily, because who else was there?

This time, Harry's fist was in his stomach.

Conor fell to the ground, scraping his knee on the concrete step, tearing a hole in his uniform trousers. The hole was the worst part of it. He was terrible at sewing.

"Are you sick or something, O'Malley?" Sully said,

laughing behind him somewhere. "It's like you fall every day."

"You should go to a doctor for that," he heard Anton say.

"Maybe he's drunk," Sully said, and there was more laughter, except for a silent spot between them where Conor knew Harry wasn't laughing. He knew, without looking back, that Harry was just watching him, waiting to see what he would do.

As he stood, he saw Lily against the school wall. She was with some other girls, heading back inside at the end of break time. She wasn't talking to them, just looking at Conor as she walked away.

"No help from Super Poodle today," Sully said, still laughing.

"Lucky for you, Sully," Harry said, speaking for the first time. Conor still hadn't turned back to face them, but he could tell Harry wasn't laughing at Sully's joke. Conor watched Lily until she was gone.

"Hey, *look* at us when we're talking to you," Sully said, burning from Harry's comment no doubt and grabbing Conor's shoulder, spinning him around.

"Don't touch him," Harry said, calm and low, but so ominously that Sully immediately stepped back. "O'Malley and I have an understanding," Harry said. "I'm the only one who touches him. Isn't that right?"

Conor waited for a moment and then slowly nodded. That did seem to be the understanding.

Harry, his face still blank, his eyes still locked on Conor's, stepped up close to him. Conor didn't flinch, and they stood, eye-to-eye, while Anton and Sully looked at each other a bit nervously.

Harry cocked his head slightly, as if a question had occurred to him, one he was trying to puzzle out. Conor still didn't move. The rest of their class had already gone inside. He could feel the quiet opening up around them, even Anton and Sully falling silent. They would have to go soon. They needed to go *now*.

But nobody moved.

Harry raised a fist and pulled it back as if to swing it at Conor's face.

Conor still didn't flinch. He didn't even move. He just stared into Harry's eyes, waiting for the punch to fall.

But it didn't.

Harry lowered his fist, dropping it slowly down by his side, still staring at Conor. "Yes," he finally said, quietly, as if he'd worked something out. "That's what I thought."

And then, once more, came the voice of doom.

"You boys!" Miss Kwan called, coming across the yard toward them like terror on two legs. "Break was over three minutes ago! What do you think you're still doing out here?"

"Sorry, Miss," Harry said, his voice suddenly light. "We were discussing Mrs. Marl's Life Writing homework with Conor and lost track of time." He slapped a hand on Conor's shoulder as if they were lifelong friends. "No one knows about stories like Conor here." He nodded seriously at Miss Kwan. "And talking about it helps get him out of himself."

"Yes," Miss Kwan frowned, "that sounds entirely likely. Everyone here is on first warning. One more problem today, and that's detention for all of you."

"Yes, Miss," Harry said brightly, with Anton and Sully mumbling the same. They trudged off back to lessons, Conor following in step just behind.

"A moment please, Conor," Miss Kwan said.

He stopped and turned to her but didn't look up at her face.

"Are you sure everything's all right between you and those boys?" Miss Kwan said, putting her voice into its "kindly" mode, which was only slightly less scary than full-on shouting.

"Yes, Miss," Conor said, still not looking at her.

"Because I'm not blind to how Harry works, you know," she said. "A bully with charisma and top marks is still a bully." She sighed, annoyed. "He'll probably end up Prime Minister one day. God help us all."

Conor said nothing, and the silence took on a particular quality, one he was familiar with, caused by how Miss Kwan's body shifted forward, her shoulders dropping, her head leaning down toward Conor's.

He knew what was coming. He knew and hated it.

"I can't imagine what you must be going through, Conor," Miss Kwan said, so quiet it was almost

A MONSTER CALLS

a whisper, "but if you ever want to talk, my door is always open."

He couldn't look at her, couldn't see the care there, couldn't *bear* to hear it in her voice.

(Because he didn't deserve it.)

(The nightmare flashed in him, the screaming and the terror, and what happened at the end—)

"I'm fine, Miss," he mumbled, looking at his shoes. "I'm not going through anything."

After a second, he heard Miss Kwan sigh again. "All right then," she said. "Forget about the first warning and come back inside." She patted him once on the shoulder and recrossed the yard to the doors.

And for a moment, Conor was entirely alone.

He knew right then he could probably stay out there all day and no one would punish him for it.

Which somehow made him feel even worse.

LITTLE TALK

After school, his grandma was waiting for him on the settee.

“We need to have a talk,” she said before he even got the door shut, and there was a look on her face that made him stop. A look that made his stomach hurt.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

His grandmother took in a long, loud breath through her nose and stared out of the front window, as if gathering herself. She looked like a bird of prey. A hawk that could carry off a sheep.

“Your mother has to go back to the hospital,” she said. “You’re going to come and stay with me for a few days. You’ll need to pack a bag.”

Conor didn't move. "What's wrong with her?"

His grandma's eyes widened for just a second, as if she couldn't believe he was asking a question so cataclysmically stupid. Then she relented. "There's a lot of pain," she said. "More than there should be."

"She's got medicine for her pain—" Conor started, but his grandmother clapped her hands together, just the once, but *loud*, loud enough to stop him.

"It's not working, Conor," she said, crisply, and it seemed like she was looking just over his head rather than at him. "It's not working."

"What's not working?"

His grandma tapped her hands together lightly a few more times, like she was testing them out or something, then she looked out of the window again, all the while keeping her mouth firmly shut. She finally stood, concentrating on smoothing down her dress.

"Your mum's upstairs," she said. "She wants to talk to you."

"But—"

"Your father's flying in on Sunday."

He straightened up. "Dad's coming?"

"I've got some calls to make," she said, stepping past him and out of the front door, taking out her mobile.

"Why is Dad coming?" he called after her.

"Your mum's waiting," she said, pulling the front door shut behind her.

Conor hadn't even had a chance to put down his rucksack.

His father was coming. His *father*. From *America*. Who hadn't come since the Christmas before last. Whose new wife always seemed to suffer emergencies at the last minute that kept him from visiting more often, especially now that the baby was born. His father, who Conor had grown used to not having around as the trips grew less frequent and the phone calls got further and further apart.

His father was coming.

Why?

"Conor?" he heard his mum call.

. . .

She wasn't in her room. She was in *his*, lying back on his bed on top of the duvet, gazing out of the window to the churchyard up the hill.

And the yew tree.

Which was just a yew tree.

"Hey, darling," she said, smiling at him from where she lay, but he could tell by the lines around her eyes that she really was hurting, hurting like he'd only seen her hurt once before. She'd had to go to the hospital then as well and hadn't come out for nearly two weeks. It had been last Easter, and the weeks at his grandma's had almost been the death of them both.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Why are you going back to the hospital?"

She patted the duvet next to her to get him to come and sit down.

He stayed where he was. "What's wrong?"

She still smiled but it was tighter now, and she traced her fingers along the threaded pattern of the duvet, grizzly bears that Conor had outgrown years

ago. She had tied her red rose scarf around her head, but only loosely, and he could see her pale scalp underneath. He didn't think she'd even pretended to try on any of his grandma's old wigs.

"I'm going to be okay," she said. "I really am."

"Are you?" he asked.

"We've been here before, Conor," she said. "So don't worry. I've felt really bad and I've gone in and they've taken care of it. That's what'll happen this time." She patted the duvet cover again. "Won't you come and sit down next to your tired old mum?"

Conor swallowed, but her smile was brighter and—he could tell—it was a real one. He went over and sat next to her on the side facing the window. She ran her hand through his hair, lifting it out of his eyes, and he could see how skinny her arm was, almost like it was just bone and skin.

"Why is Dad coming?" he asked.

His mother paused, then put her hand back down into her lap. "It's been a while since you've seen him. Aren't you excited?"

"Grandma doesn't seem too happy."

His mother snorted. "Well, you know how she feels about your dad. Don't listen to her. Enjoy his visit."

They sat in silence for a moment. "There's something else," Conor finally said. "Isn't there?"

He felt his mother sit up a little straighter on her pillow. "Look at me, son," she said, gently.

He turned his head to look at her, though he would have paid any amount of money not to have to do it.

"This latest treatment's not doing what it's supposed to," she said. "All that means is they're going to have to adjust it, try something else."

"Is that it?" Conor asked.

She nodded. "That's it. There's lots more they can do. It's normal. Don't worry."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Because," and here Conor stopped for a second and looked down at the floor. "Because you could tell me, you know."

And then he felt her arms around him, her thin,

thin arms that used to be so soft when she hugged him. She didn't say anything, just held on to him. He went back to looking out of the window and after a moment, his mother turned to look, too.

"That's a yew tree, you know," she finally said.

Conor rolled his eyes, but not in a bad way. "Yes, Mum, you've told me a hundred times."

"Keep an eye on it for me while I'm away, will you?" she said. "Make sure it's still here when I get back?"

And Conor knew this was her way of telling him she *was* coming back, so all he did was nod, and they both kept looking out at the tree.

Which stayed a tree, no matter how long they looked.

GRANDMA'S HOUSE

Five days. The monster hadn't come for five days.

Maybe it didn't know where his grandma lived. Or maybe it was just too far to come. She didn't have much of a yard anyway, even though her house was *way* bigger than Conor and his mum's. She'd crammed her backyard with sheds and a stone pond and a wood-paneled "office" she'd had installed across the back half, where she did most of her real-estate agent work, a job so boring Conor never listened past the first sentence of her description of it. Everything else was just brick paths and flowers in pots. No room for a tree at all. It didn't even have *grass*.

"Don't stand there gawping, young man," his grandma said, leaning out of the back door and

hooking in an earring. "Your dad'll be here soon, and I'm going to see your mum."

"I wasn't gawping," Conor said.

"What's that got to do with the price of milk? Come inside."

She vanished into the house, and he slowly trudged after her. It was Sunday, the day his father would be arriving from the airport. He would come here and pick up Conor, they'd go and see his mum, and then they'd spend some "father-son" time together. Conor was almost certain this was code for another round of *We Need To Have A Talk*.

His grandma wouldn't be here when his father arrived. Which suited everyone.

"Pick up your rucksack from the front hall, please," she said, stepping past him and grabbing her handbag. "No need for him to think I'm keeping you in a pigsty."

"Not much chance of that," Conor muttered as she went to the hall mirror to check her lipstick.

His grandma's house was cleaner than his mum's hospital room. Her cleaning lady, Marta, came on

Wednesdays, but Conor didn't see why she bothered. His grandma would get up first thing in the morning to vacuum, did laundry four times a week, and once cleaned the bath at midnight before going to bed. She wouldn't let dinner dishes touch the sink on their way to the dishwasher, once even taking a plate Conor was still eating from.

"A woman my age, living alone," she said, at least once a day, "if I don't keep on top of things, who will?"

She said it like a challenge, as if defying Conor to answer.

She drove him to school, and he got there early every single day, even though it was a forty-five minute drive. She was also waiting for him every day after school when he left, taking them both straight to the hospital to see his mum. They'd stay for an hour or so, less if his mum was too tired to talk—which had happened twice out of the previous five days—and then go home to his grandma's house, where she'd make him do his homework while she ordered whatever take-out they hadn't already eaten so far.

It was like the time Conor and his mum had

stayed in a bed-and-breakfast one summer in Cornwall. Except cleaner. And bossier.

"Now, Conor," she said, slipping on her suit jacket. It was a Sunday but she didn't have any houses to show, so he wasn't sure why she was dressing up so much just to go to the hospital. He suspected it probably had something to do with making his dad uncomfortable.

"Your father may not notice how tired your mum's been getting, okay?" she said. "So we're going to have to work together to make sure he doesn't overstay his welcome." She checked herself in the mirror again and lowered her voice. "Not that *that's* been a problem."

She turned, gave him a flash of starfish hand as a wave, and said, "Be good."

The door clattered shut behind her. Conor was alone in her house.

He went up to the guest room where he slept. His grandma kept calling it *his* room, but he only ever

called it the guest room, which always made his grandmother shake her head and mumble to herself.

But what did she expect? It didn't *look* like his room. It didn't look like *anybody's* room, certainly not a boy's. The walls were bare white except for three different prints of sailing ships, which was probably as far as his grandma's thinking went toward what boys might like. The sheets and duvet covers were a bright, blinding white, too, and the only other piece of furniture was an oak cabinet big enough to have lunch in.

It could have been any room in any home on any planet anywhere. He didn't even like *being* in it, not even to get away from his grandma. He'd only come up now to get a book since his grandma had forbidden handheld computer games from her house. He fished one out of his bag and made to leave, glancing out of the window to the backyard as he went.

Still just stone paths and sheds and the office.

Nothing looking back at him at all.

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The sitting room was one of those sitting rooms where no one ever actually sat. Conor wasn't allowed in there at any time, lest he smudge the upholstery somehow, so of course this was where he went to read his book while he waited for his father.

He slumped down on her settee, which had curved wooden legs so thin it looked like it was wearing high heels. There was a glass-fronted cabinet opposite, filled with plates on display stands and teacups with so many curlicues it was a wonder you could drink from them without cutting your lips. Hanging over the mantelpiece was his grandma's prize clock, which no one but her could ever touch. Handed down from her own mother, Conor's grandma had threatened for years to take it on *Antiques Roadshow* to get it valued. It had a proper pendulum swinging underneath it, and it chimed, too, every fifteen minutes, loud enough to make you jump if you weren't expecting it.

The whole room was like a museum of how people lived in olden times. There wasn't even a television. That was in the kitchen and almost never switched on.

He read. What else was there to do?

He had hoped to talk to his father before he flew out, but what with the hospital visits and the time difference and the new wife's convenient migraines, he was just going to have to see him when he showed up.

Whenever that would be. Conor looked at the pendulum clock. Twelve forty-two, it said. It would chime in three minutes.

Three empty, quiet minutes.

He realized he was actually nervous. It had been a long time since he'd seen his father in person and not just on Skype. Would he look different? Would *Conor* look different?

And then there were the other questions. Why was he coming *now*? His mum didn't look great, looked even worse after five days in hospital, but she was still hopeful about the new medicine she was being given. Christmas was still months away and Conor's birthday was already past. So why now?

He looked at the floor, the center of which was

covered in a very expensive, very old-looking oval rug. He reached down and lifted up an edge of it, looking at the polished boards beneath. There was a knot in one of them. He ran his fingers over it, but the board was so old and smooth, you couldn't tell the difference between the knot and the rest of it.

"Are you in there?" Conor whispered.

He jumped as the doorbell rang. He scrambled up and out of the sitting room, feeling more excited than he'd thought he would. He opened the front door.

There was his father, looking totally different but exactly the same.

"Hey, son," his dad said, his voice bending in that weird way that America had started to shape it.

Conor smiled wider than he had for at least a year.

CHAMP

“How you hanging in there, champ?” his father asked him while they waited for the waitress to bring them their pizzas.

“*Champ?*” Conor asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Sorry,” his father said, smiling bashfully. “America is almost a whole different language.”

“Your voice sounds funnier every time I talk to you.”

“Yeah, well.” His father fidgeted with his wine-glass. “It’s good to see you.”

Conor took a drink of his Coke. His mum had been really poorly when they’d gotten to the hospital. They’d had to wait for his grandma to help her out of the bathroom, and then she was so tired all she

was really able to say was "Hi, sweetheart," to Conor and "Hello, Liam," to his father before falling back to sleep. His grandma ushered them out moments later, a look on her face that even his dad wasn't going to argue with.

"Your mother is, uh," his father said now, squinting at nothing in particular. "She's a fighter, isn't she?"

Conor shrugged.

"So, how are *you* holding up, Con?"

"That's like the eight hundredth time you've asked me since you got here," Conor said.

"Sorry," his father said.

"I'm *fine*," Conor said. "Mum's on this new medicine. It'll make her better. She looks bad, but she's looked bad before. Why is everyone acting like—?"

He stopped and took another drink of his Coke.

"You're right, son," his father said. "You're absolutely right." He turned his wineglass slowly around once on the table. "Still," he said. "You're going to need to be brave for her, Con. You're going to need to be real, real brave for her."

"You talk like American television."

His father laughed, quietly. "Your sister's doing well. Almost walking."

"*Half*-sister," Conor said.

"I can't wait for you to meet her," his father said. "We'll have to arrange for a visit soon. Maybe even this Christmas. Would you like that?"

Conor met his father's eyes. "What about Mum?"

"I've talked it over with your grandma. She seemed to think it wasn't a bad idea, as long as we got you back in time for the new school term."

Conor ran a hand along the edge of the table. "So it'd just be a visit then?"

"What do you mean?" his father said, sounding surprised. "A visit as opposed to . . ." He trailed off, and Conor knew he'd worked out what he meant. "Conor—"

But Conor suddenly didn't want him to finish. "There's a tree that's been visiting me," he said, talking quickly, starting to peel the label off the Coke bottle. "It comes to the house at night, tells me stories."

His father blinked, baffled. "*What?*"

"I thought it was a dream at first," Conor said,

scratching at the label with his thumbnail, "but then I kept finding leaves when I woke up and little trees growing out of the floor. I've been hiding them all so no one will find out."

"Conor—"

"It hasn't come to grandma's house yet. I was thinking she might live too far away—"

"What are you—?"

"But why should it matter if it's all a dream, though? Why wouldn't a dream be able to walk across town? Not if it's as old as the earth and as big as the world—"

"Conor, *stop* this—"

"*I don't want to live with grandma,*" Conor said, his voice suddenly strong and filled with a thickness that felt like it was choking him. He kept his eyes firmly on the Coke bottle label, his thumbnail scraping the wet paper away. "Why can't I come and live with you? Why can't I come to America?"

His father licked his lips. "You mean when—"

"Grandma's house is an old lady's house," Conor said.

His father gave another small laugh. "I'll be sure to tell her you called her an old lady."

"You can't touch anything or sit anywhere," Conor said. "You can't leave a mess for even two seconds. And she's only got Internet out in her office and I'm not allowed in there."

"I'm sure we can talk to her about those things. I'm sure there's lots of room to make it easier, make you comfortable there."

"I don't *want* to be comfortable there!" Conor said, raising his voice. "I want my own room in my own house."

"You wouldn't have that in America," his father said. "We barely have room for the three of us, Con. Your grandma has a lot more money and space than we do. Plus, you're in school here, your friends are here, your whole *life* is here. It would be unfair to just take you out of all that."

"Unfair to who?" Conor asked.

His father sighed. "This is what I meant," he said. "This is what I meant when I said you were going to have to be brave."

"That's what everyone says," Conor said. "As if it means anything."

"I'm sorry," his father said. "I know it seems really unfair, and I wish it was different—"

"Do you?"

"Of *course* I do." His father leaned in over the table. "But this way is best. You'll see."

Conor swallowed, still not meeting his eye. Then he swallowed again. "Can we can talk about it more when Mum gets better?"

His father slowly sat back in his chair again. "Of course we can, buddy. That's exactly what we'll do."

Conor looked at him again. "*Buddy?*"

His father smiled. "Sorry." He lifted his wineglass and took a drink long enough to drain the whole glass. He set it down with a small gasp, then he gave Conor a quizzical look. "What was all that you were saying about a tree?"

But the waitress came and silence fell as she put their pizzas in front of them. "Americano," Conor frowned, looking down at his. "If it could talk, I wonder if it would sound like you."

AMERICANS DON'T GET MUCH HOLIDAY

"Doesn't look like your grandma's home yet," Conor's father said, pulling up the rental car in front of her house.

"She sometimes goes back to the hospital after I go to bed," Conor said. "The nurses let her sleep in a chair."

His dad nodded. "She may not like me," he said, "but that doesn't mean she's a bad lady."

Conor stared out of the window at her house. "How long are you here for?" he asked. He'd been afraid to ask before now.

His father let out a long breath, the kind of breath that said bad news was coming. "Just a few days, I'm afraid."

Conor turned to him. "That's *all*?"

"Americans don't get much holiday."

"You're not American."

"But I live there now." He grinned. "You're the one who made fun of my accent all night."

"Why did you come then?" Conor asked. "Why bother coming at all?"

His father waited a moment before answering. "I came because your mum asked me to." He looked like he was going to say more, but he didn't.

Conor didn't say anything either.

"I'll come back, though," his father said. "You know, when I need to." His voice brightened. "And you'll visit us at Christmas! That'll be good fun."

"In your cramped house where there's no room for me," Conor said.

"Conor—"

"And then I'll come back here for school."

"Con—"

"Why did you come?" Conor asked again, his voice low.

His father didn't answer. A silence opened up in

the car that felt like they were sitting on opposite sides of a canyon. Then his father reached out a hand for Conor's shoulder, but Conor ducked it and pulled on the door handle to get out.

"Conor, *wait*."

Conor waited but didn't turn around.

"You want me to come in until she gets home?" his father asked. "Keep you company?"

"I'm fine on my own," Conor said, and got out of the car.

The house was quiet when he got inside. Why wouldn't it be?

He was alone.

He slumped on the expensive settee again, listening to it creak as he fell back into it. It was such a satisfying sound that he got up and slumped back down into it again. Then he got back up and jumped on it, the wooden legs moaning as they scraped a few inches across the floor, leaving four identical scratches on the hardwood.

He smiled to himself. That felt *good*.

He jumped off and gave the settee a kick to push it back even further. He was barely aware that he was breathing heavily. His head felt hot, almost like he had a fever. He raised a foot to kick the settee again.

Then he looked up and saw the clock.

His grandma's precious clock, hanging over the mantelpiece, the pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth, like it was getting on with its own, private life, not caring about Conor at all.

He approached it slowly, his fists clenched. It was only a moment before it would *bong bong bong* its way to nine o'clock. Conor stood there until the second hand glided around and reached the twelve. The instant the *bongs* were about to start, he grabbed the pendulum, holding it at the high point of its swing.

He could hear the mechanism of the clock complaining as the first *b* of the interrupted *bong* hovered in the air. With his free hand, Conor reached up and pushed the minute and second hands forward

from the twelve. They resisted but he pushed harder, hearing a loud *click* as he did so that didn't sound especially good. The minute and second hands sprung suddenly free from whatever was holding them back, and Conor spun them around, catching up with the hour hand and taking it along, too, hearing more complaining half-*bongs* and painful *clicks* from deep inside the wooden case.

He could feel drops of sweat gathering on his forehead, and his chest felt like it was glowing with heat.

(—almost like being in the nightmare, that same feverish blur of the world slipping off its axis, but this time *he* was the one in control, this time *he* was the nightmare—)

The second hand, the thinnest of the three, suddenly snapped and fell out of the clockface completely, bouncing once on the rug and disappearing into the ashes of the hearth.

Conor stepped back quickly, letting go of the pendulum. It dropped to its center point but didn't start swinging again. Nor did the clock make any of

the whirring, ticking sounds it usually made as it ran, its hands now frozen solidly in place.

Uh-oh.

Conor's stomach started squeezing as he realized what he'd done.

Oh, no, he thought.

Oh, *no*.

He'd broken it.

A clock that was probably worth more than his mum's whole beaten-up car.

His grandma was going to kill him, maybe actually, literally *kill* him—

Then he noticed.

The hour and minute hands had stopped at a specific time.

12:07.

As destruction goes, the monster said behind him, *this is all remarkably pitiful*.

• • •

Conor whirled around. Somehow, some way, the monster was in his grandma's sitting room. It was far too big, of course, having to bend down very, very low to fit under the ceiling, its branches and leaves twisting together tighter and tighter to make it smaller, but here it was, filling up every corner.

It is the kind of destruction I would expect from a boy, it said, its breath blowing back Conor's hair.

"What are you doing here?" Conor asked. He felt a sudden surge of hope. "Am I asleep? Is this a dream? Like when you broke my bedroom window and I woke up and—"

I have come to tell you the second tale, the monster said.

Conor made an exasperated sound and looked back at the broken clock. "Is it going to be as bad as the last one?" he asked, distractedly.

It ends in proper destruction, if that is what you mean.

Conor turned back to the monster. Its face had rearranged itself into the expression Conor recognized as the evil grin.

“Is it a cheating story?” Conor asked. “Does it sound like it’s going to be one way and then it’s a total other way?”

No, said the monster. *It is about a man who thought only of himself.* The monster smiled again, looking even more wicked. *And he gets punished very, very badly indeed.*

Conor stood breathing for a second, thinking about the broken clock, about the scratches on the hardwood, about the poisonous berries dropping from the monster onto his grandma’s clean floor.

He thought about his father.

“I’m listening,” Conor said.

THE SECOND TALE

One hundred and fifty years ago, the monster began, this country had become a place of industry. Factories grew on the landscape like weeds. Trees fell, fields were up-ended, rivers blackened. The sky choked on smoke and ash, and the people did, too, spending their days coughing and itching, their eyes turned forever toward the ground. Villages grew into towns, towns into cities. And people began to live on the earth rather than within it.

But there was still green, if you knew where to look.

(The monster opened its hands again, and a mist rolled through his grandma's sitting room. When it cleared, Conor and the monster stood on a field of green, overlooking a valley of metal and brick.)

("So I *am* asleep," Conor said.)

(*Quiet*, said the monster. *Here he comes*. And Conor saw a sour-looking man with heavy black clothes and a deep, deep frown climbing the hill toward them.)

Along the edge of this green lived a man. His name is not important, as no one ever used it. The villagers only ever called him the Apothecary.

("The what?" Conor asked.)

(*The Apothecary*, said the monster.)

("The what?")

Apothecary was an old-fashioned name, even then, for a chemist.

("Oh," Conor said. "Why didn't you just say?")

But the name was well-earned, because apothecaries were ancient, dealing in the old ways of medicine, too. Of herbs and barks, of concoctions brewed from berries and leaves.

("Dad's new wife does that," Conor said as they watched the man dig up a root. "She owns a shop that sells crystals.")

(The monster frowned. *It is not remotely the same.*)

Many a day the Apothecary went walking to collect

the herbs and leaves of the surrounding green. But as the years passed, his walks became longer and longer as the factories and roads sprawled out of town like one of the rashes he was so effective in treating. Where he used to be able to collect paxsfoil and bella rosa before morning tea, it began to take him the entire day.

The world was changing, and the Apothecary grew bitter. Or rather, more bitter, for he had always been an unpleasant man. He was greedy and charged too much for his cures, often taking more than the patient could afford to pay. Nevertheless, he was surprised at how unloved he was by the villagers, thinking they should treat him with far more respect. And because his attitude was poor, their attitude toward him was also poor, until, as time went on, his patients began seeking other, more modern remedies from other, more modern healers. Which only, of course, made the Apothecary even more bitter.

(The mist surrounded them again, and the scene changed. They were now standing on a lawn atop a small hillock. A parsonage sat to one side and a great yew tree stood in the middle of a few new headstones.)

In the Apothecary's village there also lived a parson—
("This is the hill behind my house," Conor interrupted. He looked around, but there was no railway line yet, no rows of houses, just a few footpaths and a mucky riverbed.)

The parson had two daughters, the monster went on, who were the light of his life.

(Two young girls came screaming out of the parsonage, giggling and laughing and trying to hit each other with handfuls of grass. They ran around the trunk of the yew tree, hiding from each other.)

("That's you," Conor said, pointing at the tree, which for the moment was just a tree.)

Yes, fine, on the parsonage grounds, there also grew a yew tree.

(And a very handsome yew tree it was, said the monster.)

("If you say so yourself," Conor said.)

Now, the Apothecary wanted the yew tree very badly.

("He did?" Conor asked. "Why?")

(The monster looked surprised. *The yew tree is the most important of all the healing trees, it said. It lives*

for thousands of years. Its berries, its bark, its leaves, its sap, its pulp, its wood, they all thrum and burn and twist with life. It can cure almost any ailment man suffers from, mixed and treated by the right apothecary.)

(Conor furrowed his forehead. "You're making that up.")

(The monster's face went stormy. *You dare to question me, boy?*)

("No," Conor said, stepping back at the monster's anger. "I've just never heard that before.")

(The monster frowned angrily for a moment longer, then got on with the story.)

In order to harvest these things from the tree, the Apothecary would have had to cut it down. And this the parson would not allow. The yew had stood on this ground long before it was set aside for the church. A graveyard was already starting to be used and a new church building was in the planning stages. The yew would protect the church from the heavy rains and the harshest weather, and the parson—no matter how often the Apothecary asked, for he did ask very often—would not allow the Apothecary anywhere near the tree.

Now, the parson was an enlightened man, and a kind one. He wanted the very best for his congregation, to take them out of the dark ages of superstition and witchery. He preached against the Apothecary's use of the old ways, and the Apothecary's foul temper and greed made certain these sermons fell on eager ears. His business shrank even further.

But then one day, the parson's daughters fell sick. First the one, and then the other, with an infection that swept the countryside.

(The sky darkened, and Conor could hear the coughing of the daughters within the parsonage, could also hear the loud praying of the parson and the tears of the parson's wife.)

Nothing the parson did helped. No prayer, no cure from the modern doctor two towns over, no remedies of the field offered shyly and secretly by his parishioners. Nothing. The daughters wasted away and approached death. Finally, there was no other option but to approach the Apothecary. The parson swallowed his pride and went to beg the Apothecary's forgiveness.

"Won't you help my daughters?" the parson asked, down on his knees at the Apothecary's front door. "If not for me, then for my two innocent girls."

"Why should I?" the Apothecary asked. "You have driven away my business with your preachings. You have refused me the yew tree, my best source of healing. You have turned this village against me."

"You may have the yew tree," the parson said. "I will preach sermons in your favor. I will send my parishioners to you for their every ailment. You may have anything you like, if you would only save my daughters."

The Apothecary was surprised. "You would give up everything you believed in?"

"If it would save my daughters," the parson said. "I'd give up everything."

"Then," the Apothecary said, shutting his door on the parson, "there is nothing I can do to help you."

("What?" Conor said.)

That very night, both of the parson's daughters died.

("What?" Conor said again, the nightmare feeling taking hold of his guts.)

And that very night, I came walking.

“Good!” Conor shouted. “That stupid git deserves all the punishment he gets.”)

(I thought so, too, said the monster.)

It was shortly after midnight that I tore the parson's home from its very foundations.

THE REST OF THE SECOND TALE

Conor whirled round. "The *parson?*"

Yes, said the monster. I flung his roof into the dell below and knocked down every wall of his house with my fists.

The parson's house was still before them, and Conor saw the yew tree next to it awaken into the monster and set ferociously on the parsonage. With the first blow to the roof, the front door flew open, and the parson and his wife fled in terror. The monster in the scene threw their roof after them, barely missing them as they ran.

"What are you *doing?*" Conor said. "The Apotho-whatever is the bad guy!"

Is he? asked the real monster behind him.

There was a crash as the second monster knocked down the parsonage's front wall.

"Of course he is!" Conor shouted. "He refused to help heal the parson's daughters! And they *died!*"

The parson refused to believe the Apothecary could help, said the monster. When times were easy, the parson nearly destroyed the Apothecary, but when the going grew tough, he was willing to throw aside his every belief if it would save his daughters.

"So?" Conor said. "So would anyone! So would everyone! What did you *expect* him to do?"

I expected him to give the Apothecary the yew tree when the Apothecary first asked.

This stopped Conor. There were further crashes from the parsonage as another wall fell. "You'd have let yourself be killed?"

I am far more than just one tree, the monster said. But yes, I would have let the yew tree be chopped down. It would have saved the parson's daughters. And many, many others besides.

"But it would have killed the tree and made him rich!" Conor yelled. "He was evil!"

He was greedy and rude and bitter, but he was still a healer. The parson, though, what was he? He was nothing. Belief is half of all healing. Belief in the cure, belief in the future that awaits. And here was a man who lived on belief, but who sacrificed it at the first challenge, right when he needed it most. He believed selfishly and fearfully. And it took the lives of his daughters.

Conor grew angrier. "You said this was a story without tricks."

I said this was the story of a man punished for his selfishness. And so it is.

Seething, Conor looked again at the second monster destroying the parsonage. A giant monstrous leg knocked over a staircase with one kick. A giant monstrous arm swung back and demolished the walls to the parson's bedrooms.

Tell me, Conor O'Malley, the monster behind him asked. Would you like to join in?

"Join in?" Conor said, surprised.

It is most satisfying, I assure you.

The monster stepped forward, joining its second self, and put a giant foot through a settee not unlike Conor's grandma's. The monster looked back at Conor, waiting.

What shall I destroy next? it asked, stepping over to the second monster, and in a terrible blurring of the eyes, they merged together, making a single monster who was even bigger.

I await your command, boy, it said.

Conor could feel his breathing growing heavy again. His heart was racing and that feverish feeling had come over him once more. He waited a long moment.

Then he said, "Knock over the fireplace."

The monster's fist immediately lashed out and struck the stone hearth from its foundations, the brick chimney tumbling down on top of it in a loud clatter.

Conor's breath got heavier still, like he was the one doing the destroying.

"Throw away their beds," he said.

The monster picked up the beds from the two

roofless bedrooms and flung them into the air, so hard they seemed to sail nearly to the horizon before crashing to the ground.

"Smash their furniture!" Conor shouted. "Smash everything!"

The monster stomped around the interior of the house, crushing every piece of furniture it could find with satisfying crashes and crunches.

"TEAR THE WHOLE THING DOWN!" Conor roared, and the monster roared in return and pounded at the remaining walls, knocking them to the ground. Conor rushed in to help, picking up a fallen branch and smashing through the windows that hadn't already been broken.

He was yelling as he did it, so loud he couldn't hear himself think, disappearing into the frenzy of destruction, just mindlessly smashing and smashing and smashing.

The monster was right. It was *very* satisfying.

Conor screamed until he was hoarse, smashed until his arms were sore, roared until he was nearly falling down with exhaustion. When he finally

stopped, he found the monster watching him quietly from outside the wreckage. Conor panted and leaned on the branch to keep himself balanced.

Now that, said the monster, is how destruction is properly done.

And suddenly they were back in Conor's grandma's sitting room.

Conor saw that he had destroyed almost every inch of it.

DESTRUCTION

The settee was shattered into pieces beyond counting. Every wooden leg was broken, the upholstery ripped to shreds, hunks of stuffing strewn across the floor, along with the remains of the clock, flung from the wall and broken to almost unrecognizable bits. So too were the lamps and both small tables that had sat at the ends of the settee, as well as the bookcase under the front window, every book of which was torn from cover to cover. Even the wallpaper had been ripped back in dirty, uneven strips. The only thing left standing was the display cabinet, though its glass doors were smashed and everything inside hurled to the floor.

Conor stood there in shock. He looked down at his hands, which were covered in scratches and blood,

his fingernails torn and ragged, aching from the labor.

“Oh, my God,” he whispered.

He turned around to face the monster.

Which was no longer there.

“What did you *do*?” he shouted into the suddenly too quiet emptiness. He could barely move his feet from all the destroyed rubbish on the floor.

There was no *way* he could have done all this himself.

No way.

(. . . was there?)

“Oh, my God,” he said again. “Oh, my God.”

Destruction is very satisfying, he heard, but it was like a voice on the breeze, almost not there at all.

And then he heard his grandma’s car pull into the driveway.

There was nowhere to run. No time to even get out of the back door and go off on his own somehow, somewhere she’d never find him.

But, he thought, not even his father would take him now when he found out what he had done. They'd never allow a boy who could do all this to go and live in a house with a baby—

“Oh, my God,” Conor said again, his heart beating nearly out of his chest.

His grandma put her key in the lock and opened the front door.

In the split second after she came around the corner to the sitting room, still fiddling with her handbag, before she registered where Conor was or what had happened, he saw her face, how tired it was, no news on it, good or bad, just the same old night at the hospital with Conor's mum, the same old night that was wearing them both so thin.

Then she looked up.

“What the—?” she said, stopping herself by reflex from saying *hell* in front of Conor. She froze, still holding her handbag in midair. Only her eyes moved, taking in the destruction of the sitting room in

disbelief, almost refusing to see what was really there. Conor couldn't even hear her breathing.

And then she looked at him, her mouth open, her eyes open wide, too. She saw him standing there in the middle of it, his hands bloodied with his work.

Her mouth closed, but it didn't close into its usual hard shape. It trembled and shook, as if she was fighting back tears, as if she could barely hold the rest of her face together.

And then she groaned, deep in her chest, her mouth still closed.

It was a sound so painful, Conor could barely keep himself from putting his hands over his ears.

She made it again. And again. And then again until it became a single sound, a single ongoing horrible groan. Her handbag fell to the floor. She put her palms over her mouth as if that was all that would hold back the horrible, groaning, moaning, *keening* sound flooding out of her.

"Grandma?" Conor said, his voice high and tight with terror.

And then she screamed.

She took away her hands, balling them into fists, opened her mouth wide and screamed. Screamed so loudly that Conor *did* put his hands up to his ears. She wasn't looking at him, she wasn't looking at *anything*, just screaming into the air.

Conor had never been so frightened in all his life. It was like standing at the end of the world, almost like being alive and awake in his nightmare, the screaming, the *emptiness*—

Then she stepped into the room.

She kicked forward through the rubbish almost as if she didn't even see it. Conor backed away from her quickly, stumbling over the ruins of the settee. He kept a hand up to protect himself, expecting blows to land any moment—

But she wasn't coming for him.

She walked right past him, her face twisted in tears, the moaning spilling out of her again. She went to the display cabinet, the only thing remaining upright in the room.

And she grabbed it by one side—

And pulled on it hard once—

Twice—

And a third time.

Sending it crashing to the floor with a final-sounding *crunch*.

She gave a last moan and leaned forward to put her hands on her knees, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

She didn't look at Conor, didn't look at him once as she stood back up and left the room, leaving her handbag where she'd dropped it, going straight up to her bedroom and quietly shutting the door.

Conor stood there for a while, not knowing whether he should move or not.

After what seemed like forever, he went into his grandma's kitchen to get some empty trash bags. He worked on the mess late into the night, but there was just too much of it. Dawn was breaking by the time he finally gave up.

A MONSTER CALLS

He climbed the stairs, not even bothering to wash off the dirt and dried blood. As he passed his grandma's room, he saw from the light under her door that she was still awake.

He could hear her in there, weeping.

INVISIBLE

Conor stood waiting in the schoolyard.

He'd seen Lily earlier. She was with a group of girls who he knew didn't really like her and who she didn't really like either, but there she was, standing silently with them while they chatted away. He found himself trying to catch her eye but she never looked over at him.

Almost as if she could no longer see him.

And so he waited by himself, leaning against a stone wall away from the other kids as they squealed and laughed and looked at their phones as if nothing in the world was wrong, as if nothing in the whole entire universe could ever happen to them.

Then he saw them. Harry and Sully and Anton, walking toward him diagonally across the yard, Harry's eyes on him, unsmiling but alert, his cronies looking happy in anticipation.

Here they came.

Conor felt weak with relief.

He'd only slept long enough that morning to have the nightmare, as if things hadn't been bad enough. There he'd been again, with the horror and the falling, with the terrible, terrible thing that happened at the end. He'd woken up screaming. To a day that hardly seemed any better.

When he'd finally worked up the courage to go downstairs, his father was there in his grandma's kitchen, making breakfast.

His grandma was nowhere to be seen.

"Scrambled?" his father asked, holding up the pan where the eggs were cooking.

Conor nodded, even though he wasn't remotely hungry, and sat in a chair at the table. His father

finished the eggs and put them on some buttered toast he'd also made, setting down two plates, one for Conor, one for himself. They sat and they ate.

The silence grew so heavy, Conor started to have difficulty breathing.

"That's quite a mess you made," his father finally said.

Conor continued to eat, taking the smallest bites of egg possible.

"She called me this morning. Very, very early."

Conor took another microscopic bite.

"Your mum's taken a turn, Con," his father said. Conor looked up quickly. "Your grandma's gone to the hospital now to talk to the doctors," his father continued. "I'm going to drop you off at school—"

"*School?*" Conor said. "I want to see Mum!"

But his father was already shaking his head. "It's no place for a kid right now. I'll drop you off at school and go to the hospital, but I'll pick you up right after and take you to her." His father looked down at his plate. "I'll pick you up sooner if . . . if I need to."

Conor set down his knife and fork. He didn't feel like eating anymore. Or maybe ever again.

"Hey," his father said. "Remember what I said about needing you to be brave? Well, now's the time you're going to have to do it, son." He nodded toward the sitting room. "I can see how much this is upsetting you." He gave a sad smile, which quickly disappeared. "So can your grandma."

"I didn't mean to," Conor said, his heart starting to thump. "I don't know what happened."

"It's okay," his father said.

Conor frowned. "It's *okay*?"

"Don't worry about it," his father said, going back to his breakfast. "Worse things happen at sea."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we're going to pretend like it never happened," his father said, firmly, "because other things are going on right now."

"Other things like Mum?"

His father sighed. "Finish your breakfast."

"You're not even going to punish me?"

“What would be the point, Con?” his father said, shaking his head. “What could possibly be the point?”

Conor hadn't heard a word of his lessons in school, but the teachers hadn't told him off for his inattentiveness, skipping over him when they asked questions to the class. Mrs. Marl didn't even make him hand in his Life Writing homework, even though it was due that day. Conor hadn't written a single sentence.

Not that it seemed to matter.

His classmates kept their distance from him, too, like he was giving off a bad smell. He tried to remember if he'd talked to any of them since he'd arrived this morning. He didn't think he had. Which meant he hadn't actually spoken to *anyone* since his father that morning.

How could something like that happen?

But, finally, here was Harry. And that, at least, felt normal.

“Conor O'Malley,” Harry said, stopping a pace

away from him. Sully and Anton hung back, sniggering.

Conor stood up from the wall, dropping his hands to his sides, preparing himself for wherever the punch might fall.

Except it didn't.

Harry just stood there. Sully and Anton stood there, too, their smiles slowly shrinking.

"What are you waiting for?" Conor asked.

"Yeah," Sully said to Harry, "what are you waiting for?"

"Hit him," Anton said.

Harry didn't move, his eyes still firmly locked on Conor. Conor could only look back until it felt like there was nothing in the world except him and Harry. His palms were sweating. His heart was racing.

Just do it, he thought, and then realized he was saying it out loud. "Just do it!"

"Do what?" Harry said, calmly. "What on earth could you possibly want me to do, O'Malley?"

"He wants you to beat him into the ground," Sully said.

"He wants you to kick his arse," Anton said.

"Is that right?" Harry asked, seeming genuinely curious. "Is that really what you want?"

Conor said nothing, just stood there, fists clenched. Waiting.

And then the bell went, ringing loudly, and Miss Kwan began to cross the yard at that moment, too, talking to another teacher, but eyeing the pupils around her, keeping a close watch in particular on Conor and Harry.

"I guess we'll never find out," Harry said, "what it is O'Malley wants."

Anton and Sully laughed, though it was clear they didn't get the joke, and all three started to make their way back inside.

But Harry watched Conor as they left, never looking away from him.

As he left Conor standing there alone.

Like he was completely invisible to the rest of the world.

YEW TREES

“Hey there, darling,” his mum said, pushing herself up a bit in her bed as Conor came through the door.

He could see how much she struggled to do it.

“I’ll just be out here,” his grandma said, getting up from her seat and walking past without looking at him.

“I’m going to grab something from the vending machine, sport,” his father said from the doorway.

“Do you want anything?”

“I want you to stop calling me *sport*,” Conor said, not taking his eyes off his mother.

Who laughed.

“Back in a bit,” his father said, and left him alone with her.

"Come here," she said, patting the bed beside her. He went over and sat down next to her, taking care not to disturb either the tube they had stuck in her arm or the tube sending air down her nostrils or the tube he knew occasionally got taped to her chest, when the bright orange chemicals were pumped into her at her treatments.

"How's my Conor then?" she asked, reaching up a thin hand to brush his hair. He could see a yellow stain on her arm around where the tube went in and little purple bruises all the way along the inside of her elbow.

But she was smiling. It was tired, it was exhausted, but it was a smile.

"I know I must look a fright," she said.

"No, you don't," Conor said.

She brushed his hair again with her fingers. "I think I can forgive a kind lie."

"Are you okay?" Conor asked, and even though the question was in one sense completely ridiculous, she knew what he meant.

"Well, sweetheart," she said, "a couple of different

things they've tried haven't worked like they wanted them to. And they've *not* worked a lot sooner than they were hoping they wouldn't. If that makes any sense."

Conor shook his head.

"No, not to me either, really," she said. He saw her smile get tighter, harder for her to hold. She took in a deep breath, and it ratcheted slightly as it went in, like there was something heavy in her chest.

"Things are going a little faster than I'd hoped, sweetheart," she said, and her voice was thick, thick in a way that made Conor's stomach twist even harder. He was suddenly glad he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"*But,*" his mum said, voice still thick but smiling again. "There's one more thing they're going to try, a medicine that's had some good results."

"Why didn't they try it before?" Conor asked.

"Remember all my treatments?" she said. "Losing my hair and all that throwing up?"

"Of course."

"Well, this is something you take when that hasn't worked how they wanted it to," she said. "It was

always a possibility, but they were hoping not to have to use it at all." She looked down. "And they were hoping not to have to use it this soon."

"Does that mean it's too late?" Conor asked, setting the words free before he even knew what he was saying.

"No, Conor," she answered him, quickly. "Don't think that. It's not too late. It's never too late."

"Are you sure?"

She smiled again. "I believe every word I say," she said, her voice a little stronger.

Conor remembered what the monster had said. *Belief is half of healing.*

He still felt like he wasn't breathing, but the tension started to ebb a little, letting go of his stomach. His mum saw him relax a bit, and she started rubbing the skin on his arm.

"And here's something really interesting," she said, her voice sounding a bit more chipper. "You remember that tree on the hill behind our house?"

Conor's eyes went wide.

"Well, if you can believe it," his mum continued,

not noticing, "this drug is actually *made* from yew trees."

"Yew trees?" Conor asked, his voice quiet.

"Yeah," his mum said. "I read about it way back, when this all started." She coughed into her hand, then coughed again. "I mean, I hoped it would never get this far, but it just seemed incredible that all that time we could see a yew tree from our own house. And that very tree could be the thing that healed me."

Conor's mind was whirling so fast it almost made him dizzy.

"The green things of this world are just wondrous, aren't they?" his mother went on. "We work so hard to get rid of them when sometimes they're the very thing that saves us."

"Is it going to save *you*?" Conor asked, barely able to even say it.

His mum smiled again. "I hope so," she said. "I believe so."

COULD IT BE?

Conor went out into the hospital corridor, his thoughts racing. Medicine made from yew trees. Medicine that could properly heal. Medicine just like the Apothecary refused to make for the parson. Though, to be honest, Conor was still a little unclear about why it was the parson's house that got knocked down.

Unless.

Unless the monster *was* here for a reason. Unless it had come walking to heal Conor's mother.

He hardly dared hope. He hardly dared *think* it.

No.