

The Creak of the Willow

Some say it's just the sound of the wind hitting the rusty window panes. Some say it's the pitter-patter of a rat running across the rotting floor boards. Some even say it's the sound of old man Willow's moaning bed springs as he lies down in his ancient, four-poster bed. But I...I know! I know what it is! I know that it is the sound of a poor soul crying its last cry, breathing its last breath. When you walk by the Willow farm, you will hear a moan, a creak if you will. Perhaps, you will then pause and stare up at that house. That house with its peeling paint and rotting wood; that house that seems to stare at you as you walk by. You might guess that it is simply the old wood or simply an animal off in the dense forest. You might even guess that the house is haunted, but you have no idea. Some call me crazy, some call me insane, some people even call me mad, but they have not seen the things that I have seen. Perhaps, if you are one of them, this story will enlighten you.

I have never been the adventurous sort. I am usually the one who sits in the pub on Bleaker Street and reads a novel, not the one who runs by the church on Sundays, shouting out words that make the elderly grandmothers faint. I leave all of that nonsense to my cousin and complete opposite, Luke Oakley. Though Luke and I are nothing alike, we have been close friends ever since birth. It was Luke who taught me how to swim. It was Luke who protected me from all of the dangers of school. It was Luke who gave me the courage to apply to Oxford, and now it was Luke who burst through the door of my shop. I owned a small bookstore just outside of Westminster Abbey. I had slaved for two long years after Oxford to afford it, and now I spent

every possible moment there. “Tom!” Luke exclaimed, bursting through the door and knocking the tiny bell attached to the doorframe onto the floor.

Luke’s dark brown hair stuck to his forehead and his golden eyes sparkled with excitement. His mouth was turned up into a full smile and his chest rose and fell rapidly, a sure indication that he had been running. His tattered coat was soaked in the never-ending London rain and his fine leather boots were caked with mud which he now tracked onto my polished wood floor. All in all, he looked sixteen again.

“What is it?” I demanded, exasperated. I really did not have time for this.

“Tom! David...David, he...” Luke was breathing heavily.

“Oh, do spit it out! I’m quite busy today!” I looked around at my empty store and neatly stacked shelves and nearly laughed. “What about David?”

David Fletcher was a boy of twenty-one, two years younger than Luke and me, whom we frequently saw around town. “David went missing!” Luke exclaimed, his eyes gleaming. He loved adventures and I had a feeling that I was about to be dragged into one of them.

I remembered that the previous day, David had come into my shop and said that he was going to look around the Willow farm. I had laughed and told him to grow up. Now, I was concerned. “What happened?” I inquired.

Luke grinned, happy to have my full attention. “He went over to the Willow farm and he has not been seen since! Is this not fascinating?”

“Indeed, one of our friends has gone missing and cannot be found and you believe it is fascinating!”

“Oh, do calm down! I am going there tonight to look for him. No doubt he is trying to pull another trick on us!”

The Willow farm was a farm just outside of London. The children all said that it was haunted and when Luke and I were younger, we would dare each other to spend the evening there. Supposedly, when you walked by there at night, you would hear a creak. I, personally, believed that it was that age old house groaning. The only person ever seen there was old man Willow, the owner of the farm. He usually kept to himself.

“David does not have the gumption to go there!” I concluded once I had considered the house’s appearance and overall aura.

“Well, I am going to go check tonight!” Luke exclaimed with a firm nod.

“Good luck with that.” I turned and began to sort books again. After a few moments, having not heard the door open and close again, I glanced over my shoulder to see Luke still standing there. “Yes?” I asked.

“Well, you see Tom, I was hoping that you would come with me. You know, as company?”

I attempted to stop that smug smile that spread across my face, but it was in vain. “Lucas Oakley!? Are you frightened?”

Luke turned red from the tips of his ears to the tip of his chin. “No!” he exclaimed defensively. “I just desired some company! But I suppose you do not care to come!” With that, Luke turned on his heels and stalked out of the shop, slamming the door behind him.

I sighed and pulled on my coat. *Why do I have to be such a caring person?* I wondered as I grabbed my wool cap and darted out the door after him.

I caught up with Luke when he was in front of the Curton's Clothing store down the street. The icy rain hammered the glass windows and the looming buildings cast eerie shadows down upon us. "Luke," I called out, short of breath. "Luke!"

He refused to turn and kept on trudging through the sloshing earth. I ran even faster and caught his arm. "Alright!" I said with a sigh. "Alright, I will go with you!"

Luke's smile was oh so smug and victorious. "Well then," he began, "we have much to do, much to plan!" He took my arm and we began to walk back to the shop. "We will need supplies for an overnight stay. Some food definitely. Perhaps a lantern...no, absolutely a lantern! A blanket or two in case the weather should be formidable, and..."

"Luke!" I exclaimed, gasping for breath. He had begun to talk faster and the faster he talked, the faster he walked. Now, we were nearly running. "Please, slow down! Now, what comes after the lantern?"

"Sorry, Tom. Next were the blankets. Oh, and we should also bring a knife, just in case we need to make a fire or fight off some danger!"

"Fine. I will bring mine."

"Anything else?" Luke asked, stroking his chin as if he were some kind of philosopher pondering a life-changing decision.

"Well, I would not dare bring any of my books. The mold and infestation over there at the farms must be catastrophic!"

Luke laughed at me. “Well, now that we have education out of the way, what time shall we meet?”

“Outside that shop at, say, nine?” I suggested.

By then we had reached the shop. “Sounds perfect,” Luke replied. “Here at nine o’clock.”

“Sharp!” I added.

“I’m always on time!”

I stared at Luke in disbelief and shook my head. “I’ll bring the supplies since you cannot be trusted with anything.”

Six long hours later, my shop bell, now attached back onto the door after Luke’s escapade earlier that day, rang. “Well, Tom? Are you ready?”

Luke was dressed in a thin cotton shirt and trousers. He had no coat. “Do you not think that you will get a little cold?”

Luke puffed out his chest. “I never get cold! I am a man of iron!”

I shook my head and heaved the sack containing our supplies over my shoulder. “Well then, oh man of iron, lead on!”

Luke turned and rushed out the store door, leaving me and my load behind. After a good mile and a half, I called out to Luke. “Slow down!” When I caught up with him, I shoved the sack into his arms. “Your turn!”

Luke frowned but did not protest as we continued. A few minutes later, we stood in front of the gate to the Willow farm. “Alright,” Luke grinned with excitement in his eyes, “here we go!”

I grabbed his arm before he could run through the gate. “Slow down! Let us go around, behind the willow tree. We will not be spotted that way.”

Luke agreed and we hurried around the side of the long, rusty fence until we reached the weeping willow tree. Its ancient roots and twisted trunk made it seem sinister and wretched. It was too dark to see anything, and Luke and I stumbled through the darkness towards the house. Silently, we crept through the oak door and into the mud room. “Tom,” Luke whispered, “listen!”

We were both silent, and then we heard faint laughter coming from upstairs. We went as stealthily as we could, but there was not a single floorboard that did not creak beneath our weight. We climbed the ancient staircase and followed the laughter to the door of old man Willow’s bedchamber. I glanced at Luke and asked with my eyes if I should knock. He nodded slowly. Then, I raised my knuckles and rapped twice on the wooden door. “Yes?” called a raspy voice from inside.

Slowly, I pushed open the door and stepped into the chamber. To my surprise, I saw old man Willow sitting in his armchair alone, reading. Had he not just been laughing and talking? “Why, young mister Beech! And who is that with you? Ah, mister Oakley! What a pleasure! Please, do come in and sit.”

“Mr. Willow,” Luke piped up, “thank you, but we are here on business.”

Old man Willow frowned. “Well, business certainly can ruin a conversation.” He closed his book and stood up, with great difficulty I might add. “What can I do for you lads?”

Now I spoke. “We are looking for our friend David Fletcher. He was said to have come here yesterday and now we cannot find him. Have you seen him?”

Old man Willow’s eyes glowed for a moment, but then he smiled. “Why yes, yes I have! He came by yesterday afternoon, all muddy and tired. I cooked him up a fine meal and got him some clean clothes. We visited for a good long while, I dare say.”

Luke was growing restless. “And where is he now?”

Old man Willow smiled again, but it was not a joyful smile. “Oh, I can show you, but before I do, would you lads care for a cup of tea? Or perhaps a piece of toast?”

That was when Luke’s stomach got the best of him. “Why yes, thank you! That would be divine!”

While old man Willow headed downstairs to prepare the food, Luke and I remained upstairs. “Always letting your stomach speak for you?!” I cried. “We have to find David! What if the old man killed him?”

Luke laughed at my absurd suggestion. “You have seen David and you have seen old man Willow. Honestly Tom, do you think that the old man could overpower David?”

I sighed. “I suppose not, but still, we have to look for him!”

“We will,” Luke replied, and as old man Willow entered with the food, added, “right after we eat!”

The food was truly atrocious. It was a wonder that Luke did not spit the tea out, for he was known for being incredibly picky. He simply thanked old man Willow and commented on the weather and such. After the food was forced down our throats, I got down to business. “Sir,” I said, wiping my mouth, “thank you for the meal. Now, would you kindly tell us where David is? We are quite anxious.”

“Of course.” Old man Willow rose. “Follow me.”

We followed him down the stairs and out the back down through which we had previously entered the house. By then, the dark clouds had vanished and the moon illuminated the night sky. We could now see. “He is right over there,” said old man Willow, pointing to the base of the weeping willow tree.

“What?” Luke exclaimed. “Where?”

Old man Willow pointed again. “There!”

Luke and I walked closer, expecting to see David lying under the long branches, asleep. Perhaps we had missed him when we stumbled through the darkness on our way inside. But when we reached the base of the tree, we saw no one. I turned to ask old man Willow what in the world he was talking about and, in doing so, my foot caught on a large stone and I went sprawling headfirst into the dirt. I glanced back at the stone and my heart stopped. Luke saw my face and looked as well. Jutting up from the earth were several small tombstones, each with an inscription. Even in the darkness of night, I could read them. *David Fletcher. 1876-1897. He was too curious.*

“I told you that your friend was out here,” old man Willow laughed.

“You...you...you *wretch!*” Luke cried. “You miserable excuse for a human being! You mad dog!”

Luke threw himself at old man Willow, no doubt intent on killing the man himself, but something green grabbed his ankle and threw him back onto the ground at my side. I, meanwhile, had not taken my eyes off the tombstone. David, my friend David! He was gone! Taken from us by this mad man! “Tom!” Luke cried, breaking me from my trance. “We have to get out of here!”

“Oh no you do not!” exclaimed old man Willow. He snapped his fingers.

Suddenly, the branches of the willow tree came alive and grabbed us around the waist, squeezing us until we could not breathe. “Now, gentlemen,” said old man Willow calmly and menacingly, “I will show you how your little friend David spent his last few moments on this earth. Or, should I say, my dear pet will show you.” With that, he snapped his fingers again.

The tree’s grip around my waist loosened ever so slightly, but I saw that Luke was not so fortunate. I could see the tiny branches sinking into his waist like thin wires, squeezing years of life out of him. His cries of agony echoed through the air, but the sleepy town of London, miles away, could not hear him. I could do nothing but watch as my best friend died before my eyes. Suddenly, the tree gave a loud groan, or creak as it has been described, in unison with a sharp crack as Luke’s ribs snapped. His eyes met mine for a fraction of a second as he mouthed the word, “*Knife!*”

Suddenly, I remembered. We had agreed that I bring my small pocket knife in case we needed to make a fire! Carefully, before the tree could focus in on me, I reached into my trouser pocket and pulled out the knife. Moments later, the tree turned on me. I felt the thin branch

tighten around me and pain seared through my chest. Quickly, I brought down the sharp blade through the branch and it snapped. I dropped to the ground and ran with all my might, old man Willow's laughter echoing behind me. I glanced back once, only once, to see the limp body of my best friend, never to move again.

Now you see that I am not mad, simply terrified and vengeful. Of course, hardly anyone believes me and those who do, they go to that farm and never come back again. I have never returned there, but I shall someday. I shall go back and kill that evil man and burn his "pet" to the ground. It shall never harm another soul again. I shall get revenge for those two, who lie now beneath the branches of that wretched creaking willow tree.