

WYCHETTS

by William Holley

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To the old place and the Magic.

Prologue

The last block was hammered into place, sparks flashing in the darkness as metal clanged against stone. The ring of shadowy figures retreated, heads bowed as their leader raised his hands.

“It is done,” said a voice, deep and whispery. “The power of the Wise Ones is sealed.”

“And what now?” asked another, in a hoarse croak.

“Now we wait,” purred a woman. “We wait until the appointed time, when the Full Moon of Magister is in adjunction with the Seventh Sign of the House of Mordoran; for then it is foretold that the unsuspecting children will arrive to re-awaken the ancient force that resides within this place.”

“And then we make our move,” said the whispery voice. “The power of the Wise Ones will be ours, and the world will suffer in the grip of the Shadow Clan.”

A discordant gabble of cheers, hoots and whistles filled the blackness. Outside, the twisted branches of a dead tree reached into the night sky, grasping at the ashen orb of the moon.

The wait had begun; and the wait would last five hundred years...

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Our New Home

Bryony's mum (her real mum, that is) said that one should always judge a house by its garden. Following that advice, Bryony could only conclude that her new home was going to be something between a rubbish dump and a hovel.

There was no lawn, no flowerbeds, nothing but a wall of overgrown weeds and briars that towered high above Bryony's head and hid the house itself from view.

Looming from the tangled vegetation was a dead looking tree, with branches like claws and a trunk that bore a spooky resemblance to an old man's ugly face. Bryony wasn't the nervous type, but there was something about the tree that gave her the creeps.

But it wasn't just the tree, or the awful state of the garden. There was something else that made Bryony feel uneasy: a weird sort of feeling, like she was being watched.

But Bryony knew that was unlikely. She was miles out of town, right in the middle of nowhere. There were just fields all around her, not a person or building in sight. No people, no traffic, no houses or shops.

She decided it was the remote location that put her on edge. No people or houses was bad enough, but Bryony wasn't sure if she could cope without shops.

“Are we really going to live here?” Bryony's dark eyes rolled to fix her father with a fearful stare.

Bill Platt smiled and nodded. “So what do you think, darling?”

The question was not aimed at Bryony, but the slim, auburn haired woman who stood beside her.

Her name was Jane, and she was a teacher. She wore cardigans (which she knitted herself), flowery skirts and sandals. She smiled a lot and said everything was ‘lovely’. All of which was annoying enough, but she also insisted that Bryony call her ‘Mum’.

No way.

“Well what do you think?” asked Bill again, this time with a nervous edge to his voice.

Jane smiled that familiar sickly smile, and wrapped her skinny fingers around Bill's arm. “The location is lovely. But I'd like to see the house before I give my full opinion.”

“Of course, darling. I'll lead the way.” Bill pushed the rickety wooden gate. It wouldn't budge, so he pushed harder, but still it refused to co-operate.

“Gate’s a bit swollen,” he grunted, leaning his full weight on the puny looking structure. “But don’t worry, I’ll have it open in a...”

There was a loud crack, and the gate disintegrated into a pile of rotten scrap wood.

“It’s no problem,” said Bill, kicking shards of splintered gate from the overgrown pathway. “Just needs a few nails. I’ll sort it first thing tomorrow.” He turned and beckoned to Jane and Bryony. “This way, ladies.”

Jane laid a hand on Bryony’s shoulder. “You go first, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart.” Bryony twisted out of Jane’s grasp and marched off down the lane. “And the only place I’m going is home.”

“Wait,” called Bill, running after Bryony and seizing her arm. “We are home.”

Bryony shook her head. “I mean our proper home. In Mossy Glade Close.”

“But we’ve moved,” explained Bill, as though that fact could have somehow escaped his daughter’s attention. “This is our home now.”

It was the word ‘our’ that made Bryony’s stomach churn. If it wasn’t bad enough having to leave her lovely house in Mossy Glade Close for some overgrown tip in the middle of

nowhere, the prospect of having to live there with Jane made matters even more unbearable.

And of course there was the boy.

Bryony's stepbrother Edwin was the spitting image of his mother, with ginger hair, pale freckly skin and a body that would make a weight-conscious pipe cleaner jealous. And then there was his voice: a shrill, whining mewl that put Bryony's teeth on edge whenever she heard it. Which she now realised hadn't been for quite a while.

She glanced round to see where the annoying little brat had got to. As much as she hated to look at Edwin, Bryony hated it even more when she couldn't see him. It normally meant he was up to something; something that involved doing nasty things to her. Like last week, when the four of them went for a walk, he'd slipped a slug into the hood of her jacket. She hadn't found out until it started raining. And the week before, at the cinema, he'd sneaked a snail into her butter-toffee popcorn. And before that, at the Italian restaurant...

Bryony preferred not to dwell on that one; it had put her off meat balls for life.

Bryony looked all around, but her hated enemy was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Edwin?" she asked.

“I don’t know.” Jane’s sickly smile vanished. “He was with me a moment ago. Oh, don’t say he’s run off again!”

Jane scurried off down the lane, shrieking her son’s name. Bryony couldn’t help but smile, hoping Edwin had run off

That would put an end to her problems.

Well half of them, anyhow.

If Only Mice Could Talk

Edwin sat in the parked car, chewing on a squashed ham sandwich and plotting revenge.

He had always hated girls, but until he'd met Bryony Platt (or Brownie Splat, as he preferred to call her) Edwin hadn't realised how much he could hate them. She had to be the most horrible, unbearable, and downright evil member of the female species ever to blight the face of the earth.

You might not have thought it to look at her, though. Some (but Edwin definitely wasn't one of them) might even have called her pretty. But her heart shaped face, large dark eyes, and long black hair belied the monster that lurked beneath.

And she was a monster. Edwin had sensed this from the moment they'd met six months ago.

"This is Bryony," Mum had announced. "She's going to be your sister."

Sister? Edwin didn't want a sister, anymore than he wanted a new dad or a new home. He wanted things to be just like they were, in the old days. Before...

Edwin felt a sob coming on. He took a deep breath and almost choked on a lump of soggy sandwich. He coughed the offending morsel into his hand, and was about to throw it out of the window when he remembered Stubby.

The poor mite must be starving by now. Edwin dipped a hand into his jacket pocket and scooped up the bundle of brown fluff and whiskers that was his only true friend in the entire world.

He'd found the mouse in a dustbin three weeks ago. It looked like the poor creature had been attacked by a cat, because half his tail was missing (hence Edwin's choice of name). Edwin had nursed the mouse back to health, and grown so attached that he couldn't bear to let him go. Now Stubby lived in Edwin's pocket, and he went everywhere Edwin went. When Edwin felt down he talked to Stubby; which meant he talked to Stubby quite a lot these days.

"Here you are," he crooned, offering Stubby a lump of half chewed bread. Stubby sniffed, but seemed reluctant to sample the offering.

Edwin couldn't blame him. "She sat on them," he hissed. "On purpose. All the way here. But I'll get her back, don't you worry."

Stubby stared at him with those shiny black button eyes. If only mice could talk, thought Edwin. Lately he'd been

working on a method of communication based on squeaks and nose twitches (mice seemed to do this a lot), but so far his experiments with Stubby had yielded little in the way of results, except a few odd looks from people on the bus.

Edwin gazed out of the window, and sighed. The car was parked in a layby next to an open field, allowing an uninterrupted view of the landscape. On a fine day it probably would have been quite scenic; Edwin imagined the rolling hills draped in a patchwork of green fields shimmering in the sunshine. But today the sky was a sullen grey, and mist clung to the horizon like a drab, suffocating shroud.

He'd always liked the idea of living in the country, but right now Edwin would give anything to be back in their flat in the middle of town. It wasn't very big (at least not as big as Bryony's house), but it was home.

Or rather, it had been home. Because, as Mum kept telling him, they had a new home now. All of them.

Edwin's thoughts turned once again to Bryony, and he pondered on ways to get even with her. He'd tried slugs and snails, and then there had been the Italian restaurant incident, which still made him chuckle (even though they'd all been banned from the restaurant for life, and had to pay to have the ceiling cleaned).

But Bryony was made of stern stuff. Creepy crawlies didn't seem to freak her (not like they did Mum, anyhow), and Edwin knew he had to change tactics.

It might be time to play his trump card.

Grinning at the thought, Edwin stuffed another sliver of compressed sandwich into his mouth, only to cough it up again as a loud rapping noise sounded in his ear. He turned to see his mother banging on the car window.

"Edwin, what are you doing in there? Don't you want to see our new home?"

Edwin told her he didn't.

Jane tried to open the door, but luckily Edwin had locked it.

"But you must come," she pleaded. "Unless you'd prefer to spend the rest of your life in the car?"

As it happened, the thought of spending the rest of his life in the car had already occurred to Edwin. It might be a bit cramped, and there were some basic sanitation issues to work around, but at least Bryony wouldn't be there.

"What are you holding?" Jane's frowning face came closer to the glass. "Have you still got that mouse? I told you to let him go. He's recovered now and should be released back to the wild. He'll be much better off in his natural environment."

“So would I,” said Edwin, stuffing Stubby back into his pocket. “And that’s back in our flat, not living out here in some horrible new house with them.”

“You don’t know if the house is horrible,” said Jane. “You haven’t seen it yet.”

“Neither have you,” pointed out Edwin.

Jane pursed her lips, and Edwin saw an uneasy look in her eyes.

Edwin was right. Bill had arranged the purchase all by himself, and he wouldn’t let anyone see the house until today, the very day they moved in together. He said he wanted it to be ‘a surprise’.

But Edwin knew his mother didn’t like surprises; surprises made her jump and make screechy noises. Today she seemed quite nervous (even more than usual) and he wondered whether Bill might regret keeping their new home a secret.

That thought gave Edwin hope. Perhaps Mum might not like the house after all. Perhaps she might not want to move in with Bryony and Bill...

“Please darling.” Jane pressed her palms on the car window. “Come see the house with me.”

“All right,” sighed Edwin, licking the last remnants of sandwich from his fingers before prising the door open. “But I’m not talking to her.”

Jane took Edwin's arm and helped him out of the car. "Bryony is a very nice girl," she whispered, leading Edwin up the lane. "You'll find out once you get to know her."

"She hates you," said Edwin.

"No she doesn't."

"Then how do you explain the fact that she wrote 'I hate Jane' in permanent red felt-tip all over your brand new handbag?"

Jane smiled a forced looking smile. "It was just a joke. Her way of bonding with me. You really should try and get to know Bill, too."

"He's a berk," muttered Edwin, but when he saw Jane glaring at him he added, "You deserve a lot better."

"You say that about every man who even looks at me."

"I didn't say Alan was a berk."

"No. If I remember correctly you said he was a criminal."

"No I didn't. Tony was the criminal. Alan was an enemy spy."

"Of course he wasn't a spy."

"Anyone could see it. Who wears dark glasses indoors, and carries a black suitcase wherever they go?"

"Alan had sensitive retina. And he used his briefcase for work. He was an accountant."

"Aha! That's even worse than a spy."

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