

Nothing was going right for almost thirteen-year-old Theo Raymond. But all his problems seemed trivial compared to an old secret in Theo's Irish family that was about to turn his life upside down, after an unexpected death in the family.

Darkness Has A Name

By Robert Tucker

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ROBERT TUCKER

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Part 1

*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,
But wind comes up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

From the Black Tower by W.B. Yates

Chapter 1

Two very different worlds hurtled toward each other, destined to collide in a frightening confrontation.

Dark, mysterious female creatures called Banshees inhabit the first world. Their piercing screams herald the approach of death and a journey to the Otherworld. Deep inside the hills of the Boyne River Valley in Ireland, where no light can find entry, lies a vast chamber perpetually bathed in an unnatural pale glow. A mountain of silent, screaming skulls with never-seeing, empty eye sockets rises from the center. Perched on top, like some fearsome bird of prey, sits their Queen goddess, Morrigan, a darkly dangerous but beautiful creature with long jet-black hair and sharp, piercing eyes. She wears long-flowing pieces of steely gray burial linen. Her malevolent presence can also assume other forms, such as a crow or an old crone.

Her enemies know her as a fierce warrior who can paralyze them with heart-stopping fear at a single glance. Morrigan reigns supreme in her underground lair over her black-robed minions, who race to every corner of the earth announcing imminent death.

###

In the fall of 1960, a vastly different world existed, an ocean away from the lair of the Banshee Queen. Here, teenagers worried about fitting in with their peers, looked for ways to avoid doing homework, and tried to deal with the tidal-like pull of their raging hormones. Meanwhile, their parents struggled with a never-ending stream of bills, putting enough food on the table to feed their family and wondering how their children could be so different from when they were teenagers.

Theodore Raymond, an almost thirteen-year-old, struggled with his own problems. He was small for his age, young for his grade, and not particularly good at anything, though he did like to read comic books about superheroes. He sat on the bus clutching his bookbag full of chewed pencils and little-used notebooks from the previous school year, never suspecting that his difficult life would soon become much more complicated and dangerous.

Abby Gatulis sat with two friends directly across from him. She was everything Theo wasn't: intelligent, popular, and athletic. He tried to avoid staring at her, knowing how embarrassing it would be if she noticed him. Her older brother Danny had started dating Theo's older sister, Karen. This should have given Theo an advantage in getting to know her better, but he found it difficult to say anything more than a timid "Hi", when she was around.

After he got off the bus, Theo crossed the street and hurried past three older boys who were not at all worried about being late for school. He turned the corner and stopped short, looking up open-mouthed at Davis Junior High School. Its imposing

yellow brick fortress looked more like a high-security prison, and he would soon find that every piece of furniture was securely bolted to the floor inside its forbidding walls. This was his first day of seventh grade, which held a special kind of terror. He surveyed the scrum of students pushing and shoving to get to homeroom before the first bell.

Some of the eighth-grade predators from my old school look a lot bigger, stronger, and, if possible, even meaner. One scowled at him like a wolf sizing up its next meal. *I'll just pretend I didn't see him.* His stomach lurched uncomfortably, remembering what that look usually meant.

At lunchtime, he searched for a friendly face in the basement cafeteria and spied Donald Quinn and Barry Murphy sitting together. Donald was skinny, like Theo, but even shorter and wore clothes that always looked a little too big. He had a sixth sense of how to avoid bullies on the playground at recess. Barry was hard to miss. He was overweight and wore a perpetually nervous smile on his round face.

Theo dropped his paper bag lunch on the dented and worn table with a dull thud. "Hey guys."

Barry raised his half-eaten pizza in greeting and managed to speak despite still having cheeks packed and threatening to explode. "Hey Theo, we were just talking about the crappy food here at Davis."

Theo frowned as he looked down at his lunch. "Yeah, but at least here you have a choice of what crappy food you want to buy."

Donald pointed a sagging French fry at him. "Hey, how are your classes?"

Theo shrugged. “Well, so far, most of them are boring, and I still have Science after lunch.” He opened his bag and pulled out an apple that had squished his sandwich flat in the middle. “Damn.”

He didn’t quite finish his lunch before the bell rang and he threw the last piece of bread crust into the bag. They had an open study period in place of recess at Davis Junior High. This meant students could go either to the library or the gym, which doubled as an auditorium. Most of them picked the gym. The older students moved like a pack of wild hyenas, searching for a chance to cull out and torture weaker prey. Theo hadn’t yet learned the best place to hang out, so he mindlessly followed a stream of students into the gym. The problem was, once you arrived, you couldn’t leave until the bell rang. Too late, he realized that the gym was a terrible choice. Two eighth graders gave him a narrow-eyed smile when they saw him enter.

Theo recognized the shorter of the two from his last school. *Jeff Doyle. Oh, crap. Why does it have to be him?*

“Hey, Raymond. Jake and I wanted to welcome you to your new school.”

Jake sneered at him and chuckled. He put his arm around Theo’s shoulder and steered him away from a nearby teacher and towards the back of the gym. “Yeah, we missed having you around, old buddy.”

Jake’s stale cheese pizza breath rolled over him, making his stomach lurch. Theo pressed his lips together to stop a nasty taste rising in his throat. He looked around for help.

Why isn’t there ever a teacher nearby when you really need one?

Jake's friends were waiting, looking a little too eager to welcome Theo back. One of them grabbed his arm and pulled. Jake reached out and crushed the other one in a death grip. They walked him over and pushed him against one of the concrete supports along the far side of the gym.

Theo pulled and twisted, desperate to get away. His voice came out sounding thin, high, and frightened. "Come on, guys. Let me go."

Jeff stuck his face close. "We just wanted to give you a special Davis welcome."

Laughter erupted all around as Theo continued to struggle, fighting to delay the dreaded wedgie.

Jeff punched his arm. "Hold still, you squirmy little turd."

He could feel Jeff's grubby fingers trying to grab the top of his underwear. He pleaded, "No. Stop. Don't. Leave me alone."

A teacher's voice boomed out, low and menacing. "What in the world are you boys up to?"

Theo's arms were suddenly free, and he fell to the ground. The tip of his nose scraped the concrete column.

Jeff turned and blocked Theo so the teacher couldn't see him. His voice sounded innocent, almost hurt by the accusation. "We're not doing anything. We're just fooling around."

It was the gym teacher, Mr. Mozilla. He was short but powerfully built and appeared to have no neck. Each arm was covered in a thick mass of tangled black hair. With a beefy hand nearly the size of a baseball glove, he roughly pushed Jeff

out of his way. He planted one fist on his hip, leaned down, and growled, “What is your name?”

“Theodore Raymond.”

“What are you doing sitting on the floor?”

I could say they were giving me a wedgie, which might get them in trouble, but I'd be wicked embarrassed. Also, this teacher doesn't have to leave school every day with them and worry about something much worse happening. “I was just sitting here watching them fooling around.”

His bushy eyebrows rushed together. “And how would you do that facing that way?” He pointed at the column.

Whatever I say now will make me sound stupid. “Ahh. I thought I dropped my pencil and started looking for it.”

His mouth opened, and he shook his head, his eyes registering disbelief. “Get up off the ground. Now.” He spun around. “As for the rest of you,” he turned and gave each of them a menacing stare, “Find another place to act stupid and do it up near the front of the gym.” He pointed. “Move!”

Mr. Mozilla turned and hurried to break up a shoving match that had just erupted nearby. As they all shuffled away, one of the kids turned and hissed, “Saved by Mozilla the gorilla.” His face lit up as a new idea survived long enough to make it to his frowning mouth. “Well, at least you're not a squealer.” He turned and hurried to join the other members of Theo's welcome committee as they walked away in a flurry of grumbles about how much they hated the gym teacher. Jeff Doyle turned his head, looked at Theo, and pointed at him with an angry sneer.

###

Theo's grandmother, Nana, was making something for dessert when he got home from school. She was his mom's mother and one of his favorite people in the world. Nana glanced over at him as he came in the door. "Theodore, why don't you put down your books and help me finish making the Jell-O?"

His face broke into a big smile. "Sure." One of the things Theo loved about his grandmother was that she let him help make things in the kitchen and never got mad when he messed up.

She cocked her head and looked closely at him. "How did you scrape your nose?"

He touched it quickly, his eyes going wide with the memory. "Ah, yeah. It happened at school today."

His grandmother nodded, eyes thoughtful, and pointed at the fridge. "The Jell-O has started to thicken. It should be ready. Why don't you cut these two bananas into slices, then fold them in." She raised a finger. "That means, be gentle."

Theo sat at the table and pushed the sliced bananas down into the Jell-O, folding them in with an oversized spoon. Nana was leaning against the sink, staring outside. He stopped mid-stir. "When is Mom going to be home?"

Nana looked down at her watch and frowned. "I think she should be finished at Milton Hospital in about an hour."

His mother and Aunt Kay worked in the front office a few days a week. His mom knew shorthand, a crazy writing shortcut, and she could type very fast. His aunt Kay redirected incoming phone calls and took messages for the doctors.

Nana's voice interrupted his thoughts. "How was school today?"

If anyone else in the family asked him that question, the answer would always be the same. "Fine." But Nana had a gentle way about her that never made him feel small and stupid. He knew he could talk to her without judgment, and she understood how he felt. "It was mostly okay. I met some eighth graders from my old school who like to pick on me." He paused, trying to erase a picture of Jeff trying to grab his underwear.

She walked over and sat down next to him. He could feel her sad, searching eyes looking at him. "Theo?"

Theo looked up at her. Her eyes shone like two dark pools of water with little specks of light dancing in them. He found it hard to say the next words. "They wanted." He bit his lip. They wanted to remind me how much they missed me," he took a deep breath, "by giving me a wedgie."

She reached out and placed her hand on his, closing her eyes for a moment. A calm, peaceful warmth slowly spread from her hand to his, up his arm, and then all through him. He looked up into her sad, kindly face. *How does she do that?*

"Is that how this happened?" She tapped her nose. He nodded and looked away, a lump in his throat, unable to meet her gaze.

His grandmother spoke to him in a voice as soft and warm as a wooly sweater. "This may not make a lot of sense right now, but there will always be kids who act stupid. They'll try to show how tough they are by bullying other kids." Nana stopped and looked up, watching something he couldn't see.

“Sooner or later, they’ll meet someone they can’t bully. You need to be strong in the face of all their foolishness.” She lifted her hand from his. “Theodore, you have a good heart and a sensitive nature, so you feel things more deeply. Those can be a gift and, sometimes, a curse.” She stopped and looked at him with eyes a million miles away. “How you use those gifts will shape the person you grow up to be.”

In the silence of the kitchen, he struggled with Nana’s strange words of comfort. *What do my good heart and sensitive nature have to do with getting a wedgie? Is Nana asking me to try and think of another way to deal with their ‘foolishness’? I can only think of two ways. Turn the other cheek or stand up and fight. If those are my only two options, then I will have a tough time following her advice.*

The kitchen door banged open. His two younger brothers, Paul and Billy, came in arguing, followed by his sister, Mary. Theo could feel the cool gust of air on his wet cheeks. He turned away so they wouldn’t see him trying to wipe away the tears. Paul looked up at Nana and hollered, “I’m starving!”

His grandmother stood up and took three glasses from the cabinet. “You can have a glass of milk and some Ritz crackers, but I’m only giving you three. I don’t want to ruin your supper.”

###

Dinner took place at exactly 6:00 pm every night. The dining room was small, and the wallpaper looked like they used leftover rolls from a Chinese restaurant. It was gray and had a pattern of grapefruit-size light red pagodas across it. Meals

were always noisy affairs, with the sounds of five kids all trying to talk at the same time, competing with the clatter of food being scooped onto plates.

Karen was the oldest and a sophomore at St. Gregory's High School, a half-hour bus and ten-minute trolley ride away in Dorchester. She acted more like a grownup than a kid and had already become a no-nonsense, responsible adult. This past summer, she started dating Abby's older brother, Danny, a senior at Hyde Park High School.

Theo was three years younger than Karen and not very good at anything academic. He spent most of his free time hanging out with his friends, playing catch, shooting hoops, and avoiding neighborhood bullies.

Mary was two years younger than Theo and in fifth grade. She was much shyer than her older sister but good in school and always willing to help with chores around the house.

Theo's brother Paul was in third grade. He had a cowlick right in the middle of his dark brown hair and never stopped moving. He seemed to know every kid within six blocks and could usually be found hanging out with his buddies in the neighborhood.

Billy was the baby of the family and had just started first grade. He still had a ratty blanket and liked to suck his thumb when he thought no one was looking. He always tried to keep up with Paul, which was nearly impossible, so he tended to get frustrated and cry.

At dinnertime, their mother always asked the children how their day at school went. Tonight, Karen told them about a difficult song her choral group was learning in Music. Theo

pretended to listen while he played with his baked cod, mashed potatoes, and little carrot hockey pucks. A forkful of the orange delights was halfway to his mouth when his mother turned to him. “How did you scrape your nose today, Theo?”

I’m not about to tell her what really happened at school today. A long time ago, I learned that it would be much safer for me if my parents stayed totally in the dark about my actual school day.

“Ahh, after lunch, I was down in the gym walking around with my friends. I guess my shoelace was untied, so I tripped and fell. I must have scraped it against one of the concrete columns.” He touched his nose. “I didn’t even know I did it until I got home.” His mother nodded sympathetically.

His father shook his head. “You’re lucky you didn’t kill yourself. If I said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times. You need to be more careful.” He jabbed his fork at him. “Tell me about something you learned in school today.”

Theo tried to think up some useless information he remembered. “Well, we learned about diagramming sentences, and then I had to do one on the blackboard.”

He hadn’t planned to continue, but his father was a bottom-line guy. “So, how did you do?”

“Ahh. I did it right.”

His father nodded, his face serious. “Good, and I hope we see some good grades on your first report card.”

I don’t see any need for him to think otherwise until the first parent-teacher conference. “Sure. I guess so.”

Theo attempted to get some homework done after supper, but he could be easily distracted by little things, like the sound

of the TV in the next room or watching a spider try to swing from one side of the window to the other. After a couple of hours of pretending to do his homework, he was done for the night but still only half finished.

He hollered, "All done, Mom. I think I'll go and watch TV." Since they owned one television, everyone had to watch whatever his father watched. Tonight, it was *The Andy Griffith Show*, a comedy about a sheriff and his son Opie, living in a rural midwestern town.

When the show ended, and credits traveled up the small screen to the sound of a happy whistling tune, Theo's Dad turned and gave him the look. "It's getting late, Theo."

He slowly slid off the sofa. "Ah, right Dad."

His father nodded once. "Goodnight."

It never took Theo more than three minutes to brush his teeth, shrug off his clothes into a lifeless pile on the floor and put on pajamas. He paused a moment before hopping onto the top bunk. *I'm not tired. And I know I'm going to be awake for a while.* Theo lay on his bed, twisting and turning, trying to get comfortable. He started to count the squashed mosquito bodies on the ceiling by the faint light coming in through the window. What he was really trying to do was forget his humiliating day at school.

Chapter 2

The weather in mid-September felt almost tropical. It added to Theo's daily challenges of mostly boring classes, barely enough time to get to each one, and avoiding bullies. Theo tried to steer clear of Jeff and his friends in the hallways and during lunch as much as possible. Jeff and Theo were only in Art and Music class together, and he made a habit of sitting as far away from Jeff as possible. The good days at school were the ones he could avoid Jeff and his friends. Today was not going to be one of those days.

His last class of the day was Art, and he sat near the back of the classroom as his teacher, Ms. Stern, explained the meaning of collage and showed them examples by Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. "Today, each of you will be given a blank canvas. You will decide on a theme for your collage. Then, you will cut elements from magazines here that thematically go together. At the end of class, you will take your unfinished collage home, add more elements if you wish, and then artfully glue them onto your canvas. Bring it into class next week and be ready to share your masterpiece and how its elements contribute to the theme."

How does she expect our collage project to survive the trip home and then back again?

"I will pass out two magazines and a blank canvas to each student, and Mr. Raymond will give each student a pair of scissors."

Anytime a teacher called his name, a four-alarm fire bell rang in his head. He made a face. *Great. Why is she picking me?* He blew a resigned breath, then trudged up to the front of the room and grabbed a box filled with colorful scissors. He started to walk down between the first and second rows, handing out scissors. Jeff's desk was near the back of the second row. *Why does he always look like he's sneering at me?* He had just placed scissors on Jeff's desk when Jeff's foot shot out and tripped him, causing the entire box of scissors he held to fly out of his hands and scatter across the floor.

Ms. Stern looked around and called out, "Mr. Raymond?"

Theo slowly stood up, his face beet red. "Sorry. I guess I tripped over someone's foot."

An undercurrent of laughter rippled through the room. "Quiet down class. As long as you're alright. Please pick them up and continue more carefully."

Two students helped him pick up the scissors, and then he continued, giving Jeff a wide berth and a dirty look as he passed by his desk. The rest of the class passed uneventfully, with Theo considering collage themes related to Jeff meeting a painful demise.

###

When he got home, Nana was usually waiting for him with a snack. But not today. Instead, there was a note on the table from his mother

*Nana wasn't feeling well, so I took her
to the hospital for some tests. Please help*

*yourself to snacks, then help Mary, Paul,
and Billy when they get home. I should
be back around 5:00.*

Love,

Mom

Theo had barely finished his snack when his three siblings barged through the door, tired and hungry. Billy's face was flushed, and he pointed at Paul. "He threw my book bag on the ground. Then he jumped up and down on it."

Paul scowled back and pointed. "He wouldn't stop using baby talk the whole way home."

Theo threw up his hands in frustration. An image of his father flashed through his head. "Stop it, both of you. Another word, and there'll be no snack."

The two boys glared at each other but said nothing for fear of losing their only food before supper.

He pointed at two chairs. "Sit. Mary, get cups and some milk." Theo got the Ritz crackers and peanut butter. Slurping and chewing noises filled the kitchen for the next several minutes.

Mary looked up. "Where's Nana today?"

Theo should have anticipated the question but was not very good at thinking ahead. "Ahh. She wasn't feeling very well." He debated how much to tell her but didn't continue and put the milk away.

Mary watched him, another question rising to her face like bubbles in a glass of ginger ale. "Is it okay if I ride my bike

down and see how she's feeling?" His grandparents and Nana's sister, Aggie, lived a ten-minute bike ride away.

"Ahh. Hold that question for just a minute." He surveyed the crumbs and empty plates and pointed at his brothers. "You both can go outside and play *after* you put your dishes in the sink and change your clothes."

The two boys lost no time finishing up. They raced through the dining room, jostling to get to the stairs first, then argued to the top. They were back down and headed for the door before Theo had time to clean off the table. Mary took her time finishing, then sat quietly when she was done.

Theo looked at her with a sad face. "You can't go and see Nana today."

She tilted her head, her hair swinging to one side. "How come?"

"Mom and Kay took her to the hospital for some tests."

Her eyes flooded with alarm. "What? She's in the hospital? What kind of tests? Is she okay? Will she be home tonight?"

Theo shook his head and lifted his hands. "Sorry. I don't know anything else." He pulled the note from his pocket and held it up. "The note didn't say."

She stared at it with eyebrows turned down and her mouth moving slightly. Her face darkened, and she stared at her hands, now clenched on the table. "I think I'll go upstairs and do my homework."

That night at dinner, Theo's mother waited for the noise to settle down, then cleared her throat. "I think you should all know that they're keeping Nana in the hospital a little longer. They need to do more tests."

The table got very quiet, and then Mary asked, “Is she going to be okay, Mom?”

Her mother sighed, “God willing, honey. God willing.”

Theo thought about his mom’s words all through dinner. *Did that mean that if God wants her to be okay, she will be? But why wouldn’t he? Nana is a good person. He wouldn’t punish her for being good, would he? So, how does God decide? There are so many things about God and religion that are confusing.*

The next day, things were almost back to normal, except his Aunt Kay was waiting when he got home from school. She often filled in when Nana couldn’t be there. Theo wasted no time wolfing down a snack and heading out to play catch with Donald.

###

A couple of days of tests for Nana stretched into a week. Each night, Theo’s mother looked more and more worried. Tonight, she sat in tight-lipped silence at the dinner table. Paul and Billy still chatted and laughed, and Mary was quieter than usual. But Karen’s long face and stony silence signaled something was very wrong. Theo wanted to ask about his grandmother but was afraid of what the answer might be. The meal ended. His father got up and left to watch TV. His mother escaped to her bedroom and shut the door. The two boys disappeared upstairs in a noisy stampede of feet. It was Theo’s turn to help Karen with the dishes.

He lifted a wet plate out of the dish strainer. “Do you know how Nana is doing?”

Karen looked at him, debating how much to say. “She’s not doing well.”

He stopped mid-wipe. “What do you mean?”

Karen screwed her face up like she was trying not to cry. “I heard Mom talking to Kay.” She plunged her hands into the soapy dish water and lifted a plate.

He leaned against the sink and stared at her. Her lips were quivering. “Karen?”

She lowered the plate and blew out a breath. “Nana has cancer.”

“Well, they have medicine for making her better, don’t they?”

She shook her head and looked away. “I don’t know, but I heard Mom crying earlier today.”

He picked up another plate, walked over to the kitchen table, and sat down, suddenly feeling much older than twelve. They finished the dishes. Karen left quickly, not saying another word.

Tonight is one of those nights when I wish I could be alone, but that’s hard when you share a room with your two younger brothers. He was surprised to find Billy already asleep in his single bed. Paul was lying on his side in the bottom bunk, looking at the pictures in a book about sports. Theo climbed up into the top bunk and thought about everything he had done with Nana.

It was dark when a ringing phone shattered the silence. Theo heard the hushed voice of his mother talking, then his Dad’s voice a little louder. Everything fell silent, and then he could hear them talking to Karen. More silence. His father’s steady

footsteps echoed on the stairs. His low, gravelly voice rumbled over him from the foot of the bed. “Theo, come downstairs; we need to talk to you.” He took his time going down, trying to delay words he didn’t want to hear. He slowly moved through the dining room to the kitchen doorway and froze. His mother was sitting, shaking a little, tears running down her cheeks.

His father stood next to her, looking uncomfortable. He looked up and spoke in a low, soft voice. “Come here.”

Theo’s stomach clenched; his father’s voice never sounded like that. He stopped next to his mother, who looked up at him. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she was rolling a badly shredded Kleenex in her hand.

“Theo.” She stopped, swallowed deeply, then reached up and lightly touched his shoulder. “Nana died today.”

He stumbled back a step. “Dead. How can she be dead? She was okay before she left for those tests.” His throat tightened, and he looked away so she couldn’t see the tears welling in his eyes.

His mother stood up and wrapped her arms around him. “I’m so sorry, Theo. I know how much you loved her.”

He didn’t hear the words whispered into his hair about how she died. *It doesn’t matter. She’s gone. This pain in my chest feels unbearable.* He turned away, looking to escape to the refuge of his bedroom.

His father’s voice had returned to normal. “Just let him go, Margaret.”

Theo went to school the next day and couldn’t stop thinking about his grandmother. He couldn’t pay attention in any of his

classes and was surprised he didn't get yelled at once. *Mom must have called the school and told them about Nana.*

That evening, at dinner, Theo sat and played with his mashed potatoes, pushing them into little mountains and then gathering the peas into a sickly-colored lake at the bottom of lumpy slopes. He looked at the two boys sitting at the table. *They sure are a lot quieter tonight. I wonder what story Mom told them about Nana.*

His father looked over, heaved a sigh, then leaned toward him. He spoke in a low voice that was all business. "Theo, please stop playing with your food." He cleared his throat. "And I want you to go with us to your grandmother's wake."

Theo's fork froze halfway to his mouth. He was only half listening to his Dad when the word 'wake' jarred him out of his reflections. "Go to her wake?"

His father fixed him with a steady stare. "Yes. I think you are old enough to go with us."

His mother looked at her husband, lifting her eyebrows, but said nothing. The children would never question or challenge their Father's statements for fear of being yelled at or, worse, spanked. When his father said, "You were going to do something; you had no choice," Theo scrunched up his face in frustration. He wanted to complain, but it always ended the same way unless his mother intervened.

Mary sat up straight, eyes bright with anticipation, and asked, "Dad, can I go with you to the wake too?"

His father looked at her and smiled sadly. "No, Mary. I'm sorry. We've asked Louise Parr to come over and watch you and the boys." *Dad seems to have a soft spot for the girls,*

especially Mary. It must have something to do with them being girls.

###

For most of the car ride to the funeral home, Theo tugged at the collar of his too-tight white shirt, trying to loosen it, hoping the top button wouldn't rip off. An old hand-me-down tie of his Dad's dangled several inches below his belt. His older sister was dressed all in black like a very skinny nun.

They walked up several carpeted steps outside into the funeral home and were immediately assaulted by the cloying smell of flowers as soon as they stepped inside. Theo shuffled across the worn rug, eyeing a basket of mints, and almost bumped into his Dad, who had stopped to sign a book on a little table.

The Funeral Director, a large, bald man with heavy-lidded eyes, stepped forward, muttering something about "a good woman gone too soon." He nodded at Theo's sister, then turned and measured Theo with a long look. "You must be the oldest son, Theodore."

Theo mumbled, "Yes," and looked down at his newly polished shoes.

He felt a nudge at his back. It was his Dad's not-so-subtle signal that it was time to move. They passed through an arched entryway into a large double room.

Theo glanced at the casket. *It looks like Nana is just sleeping. How can she be dead?* His eyes started to water. *Oh no, no, no. I can't cry. Not here.*

He looked around the room. One side was filled with dozens of relatives sitting or standing and talking in hushed tones. He recognized some of the others as neighbors. *Most of them are not looking at Nana at the other end of the room except for that old, bearded man with bushy hair. He's dressed oddly for a wake, wearing a long dark cloak and leaning on that crooked cane. People seem to be avoiding him. He could be homeless and just came in to get warm. Why does he keep staring at the casket? Wait. Who is he waving at? Nana? No, that's impossible.*

Theo walked a few steps closer to the casket. *Her head is propped up on a small white pillow. Her face looks different, especially around the mouth. She has no lips, and they are all pressed together. Her face is a little puffy, and her hair looks like she just had it done at the beauty parlor. She's wearing that pale blue dress she only wears on special occasions, but I can only see half of her lying in the casket. The bottom half is closed. I wonder if they bother to have her wear shoes.* His eyes started to leak again.

Flowers from friends and family sat on short pedestals on either side of the casket. A small kneeler, maybe big enough to hold two skinny people, was placed in front so you couldn't avoid looking at the body unless your eyes were shut.

There was a family receiving line, standing like a tall row of dark, solemn sentries. First, there was Theo's grandfather, Pa. Next to him were his four children, including Theo's mother. Their heads bobbed up and down as they clasped the hands of mourners who came to pay their respects.

Theo's Dad nudged him. He walked up to the casket and knelt, riveted by the made-up dead woman who only vaguely resembled his grandmother. A pair of rosary beads were artfully draped around her bony hands. A whispered voice told him he should be saying a prayer.

Theo shut his eyes and pushed his hands together. *I remember when you read stories to me, and I could tell you about my school day. You always had a knack for making me feel better.*

He whispered, "I miss you, Nana, and wish there was something I could do so that you could just stay with us forever." Without thinking, he reached out and laid his hand on top of hers. A sudden jolt of electricity rippled through his hand, up his arm, and into his body.

Chapter 3

Theo's eyes jerked open. He gasped, pulled his hand away, then grabbed the top of the kneeler to stop the room from spinning. He stood up, trembling. Something flickered, then moved slightly, off to his right. He rubbed his eyes. *That's impossible. It looks like a fuzzy version of Nana standing between those two green plants.* He sucked in a quick breath. "Nana?"

She tilted her head, then smiled sadly and nodded.

His face felt hot, and his stomach started to rumble. He looked at her body lying in the casket and put his hand over his mouth. *No, no, no, no. Don't throw up.* Theo turned and stared at his grandmother. She was wearing two wrinkled hospital gowns. *How can I see you standing out there? This is nuts.*

He heard a familiar throat-clearing sound. His father was walking quickly towards him, looking very unhappy. He hoarsely whispered, "Theo! What in God's name are you doing? You are supposed to be praying quietly." He leaned down, eyes narrowing, and looked at him closely. "You look awful."

Theo started to speak, pointing toward the plants and looking back at Nana. The words never made it out of his mouth. *Dad's eyebrows are all pushed together, and he doesn't see her.* He quickly looked at his sister and all the people sitting and standing. *There are no shouts or pointing from anyone in the crowd. Nobody else sees her standing there,*

and that old, bearded guy is gone. He looked back at his Dad's bushy eyebrows hanging low over his troubled eyes.

His father spoke more urgently now, a note of concern creeping into his voice. "You're as white as a sheet. You look like you've just seen a ghost. Are you sick?"

I want to say, "Dad, I did see a ghost," but then he would think I've lost my mind. I need an excuse and need one fast. "Sorry, Dad. I guess I just felt light-headed and sick to my stomach. You know, seeing Nana just lying there." Theo pointed at the casket but didn't dare look at her standing in the plants.

His father motioned with his head toward the rows of seats behind him and whispered, "Go over there and sit down with the rest of the family."

Theo was all too familiar with that tone of voice, delivered with just a hint of a threat. He snuck a quick look at his Dad's troubled face, then walked, feeling a little unsteady, to one of the white folding chairs facing the casket. His Great-Aunt Aggie looked up at him with wet eyes and a painfully sad expression.

Theo snuck a look at the plants and then quickly down. *Damn. What is happening?*

Nana's ghost was still there. She was slightly bent over, nodding as she looked back and forth at the line of people who came to see her. Occasionally, she'd clasp her hands together or wave slightly when an old friend passed by.

It had been over an hour since his family arrived, and Theo started to fidget. His leg began bouncing up and down without him even thinking about it. His Dad gave him a stern look from

across the crowded room. Fear of impending bodily harm kept him quiet, at least for now.

A new arrival at the entrance caught people's attention. A priest floated in like a pale-faced black shroud, acknowledging the scattered silent greetings with a heavenly nod and papal-worthy hand wave. He stopped before the casket and dropped to one knee with practiced grace. After solemnly bowing his head and making a sign of the cross, he rose and surveyed the assembled crowd with a raptured smile. He lifted both hands toward the ceiling and announced in a deep, reverberating pulpit voice, "Let us now join together in a recitation of the holy rosary for the dearly departed soul of Catherine Donovan."

Theo looked around the room, wondering how many people would stay for the endless chain of Hail Marys, Our Fathers, and Glory Be's. Several people tried to leave inconspicuously before the droning group chant began. Nana's ghost walked through the plants, around the priest, and stood in front of him.

Theo's mind raced as he tried to look anywhere but at his grandmother. *I wonder if ghosts can talk. But none of those in my nightmares ever did.* He stared at the front of her hospital gown, watching it fade slightly and reappear. He took a breath, then looked up into her face. *It's hard to see her clearly, but it looks like Nana. She has the same kind face and little smile as if she knows a secret.* Nana's lips trembled. Her mouth opened a little. *Is she going to tell me something?* Nana shook her head and closed her eyes. She leaned toward him, half-raising her hand, slowly moving her fingers up and down, waving goodbye. Her blue-green eyes rested on him a moment as if she

had so many things to tell him, but there was no time. He was suddenly overwhelmed by a crushing sadness from somewhere deep inside.

Theo's eyes started to water, and he slumped back in the chair. Nana's eyes twinkled at him, and she nodded as if she understood his feelings. His whole body suddenly surged with an unexpected warmth. *Whoa. What was that?*

Then she turned in that cautious, hesitating way older people do and followed the stream of mourners fleeing out the door as the droning sounds of the rosary began.

###

Theo could hardly keep his eyes open when he got home that evening from the funeral home. He climbed into bed and did a faceplant on his pillow. He felt himself falling, then gently flying through the cool night air. He passed by several small villages far below with brick chimneys pouring out heavy black clouds of acrid-smelling smoke. He saw a dark cloud at the horizon's edge like a troubling storm slowly gaining strength along some distant shore. He looked away and followed a narrow dirt road flanked by fields dotted with flocks of sheep and the occasional thatched cottage. Just ahead, he could see a group of children playing a game of tag outside a small cottage beside a large plot filled with rows of green leafy plants. A man in a broad hat walked slowly behind a simple plow pulled by two horses. He stopped, pulled out a piece of cloth, and wiped his forehead. A strange warmth surged through Theo as he watched a young red-haired girl leave the

group of children, wave at the man, then run over and try to wrap her small, thin arms around him in a giant hug.

Theo woke before it was light outside, exhausted from his lack of sleep. He went to school and moved from class to class, avoiding talking to anyone, even his friends. The day dragged on, and the clock hands seemed to have forgotten how to move.

Theo didn't feel like eating supper that evening at the dinner table. The buzz of dinner noise was oddly comforting, and he could feel his mother's eyes watching him.

His father's voice cut through the chatter. "I thought the funeral home did a wonderful job handling Catherine's wake, and a good crowd showed up."

His mother nodded, casting another worried look over at Theo. Her soft voice froze his fork as it pushed peas around the plate. "Are you feeling okay?"

He looked down so she couldn't see his face. "I'm okay. I think I'm just tired from all the time at the wake."

She shot his father an "*I told you so*" look and then considered Theo with a little wrinkle in the middle of her forehead. "It *was* a long day, maybe too long." She stopped and looked at her husband again. "It's all right if you want to leave the table and go upstairs."

There was no need for her to say another word. As he left the dining room, the conversation dropped to an uncomfortable silence. He could feel everyone's eyes follow him as he left the room.

His mother raised her voice as he started up the stairs. "I hope you feel better in the morning, dear."

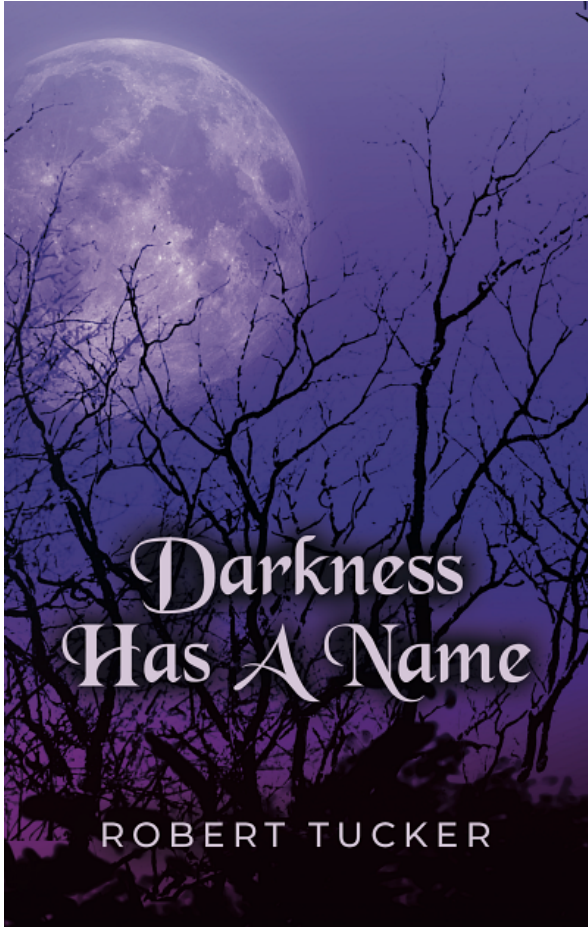
He hopped up on the top bunk, hounded by a million questions. *How was it that I could see Nana's ghost, but no one else could? What was that crazy shock I got when I was on the kneeler? What about that dream where I was flying over that village? What were those dark clouds in the distance, and who was that young girl who seemed so familiar?*

A warm, calming sensation flooded through him. *Okay. There it is again. What is that?* He blew out a frustrated breath and rolled over. *Everything feels so strange now.*

A short time later, Paul and Billy came up to bed arguing about who owned more toys. It stopped when they reached the top of the stairs. Their mother had told them to be quiet and not wake Theo up. The room fell silent after a few more angry exchanges about toys, with Billy's final reply. "I do, too, and Mom told us to be quiet and not wake Theo up."

Theo waited for the darkness and ringing silence to settle over the room before slipping out of bed and walking to the bathroom.

He stared into the medicine cabinet mirror, trying hard to see the special person Nana talked about. His short brown hair made his face look pale. He was skinny and one of the smallest kids in class. That included all the girls. The pale pink colored bathroom walls behind him always made him look slightly sick. He hung his head. *It's going to be another long night.*



Nothing was going right for almost thirteen-year-old Theo Raymond. But all his problems seemed trivial compared to an old secret in Theo's Irish family that was about to turn his life upside down, after an unexpected death in the family.

Darkness Has A Name

By Robert Tucker

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