Convert

The sunlit, multi-colored rose window remains a daily spotlight on him, no matter how many clutches he gives his prayer beads or how little his form looks under the vaulted ceiling. Wackford Squeers would argue that no man has made more of an effort to be inconspicuous than himself since the death of Dotheboys Hall as he knew it. When his cane crosses the cobblestones outside the abbey, he passes worshippers without trying to draw attention. Their heads turn anyway to the one-eyed monster of Westminster, where every mother holds their child's hand in his wake.

He's now crippled in the most unappealing places. They beat him repeatedly in prison. Won't that suffice, sweet parents? Will you not show a bit of sympathy? Let your beloved Timothy read his psalms peacefully in the wooden stalls, the red lampshades coloring his untouched cheeks crimson. Wackford grows flustered without the use of props. Let your joyful Benjamin walk among the kingly tombs that Beaumont spoke of in an era before Wackford was born. For dear Mr. Squeers remembers the darker hours of another building where skin above bone hit stone and brickwork. The injuries that left him limping are constant reminders of that time but so are their haunting screams in his sleep.

Good day, Mr. Squeers, offers his co-worker Tom Snawley on his way to the closet, but they're seldom good.

"Somebody's mutilated the garden again," adds Snawley.

Snawley exaggerated everything. Of course, this is why he was selected to write the visitor's guide and greet patrons, the people pleaser.

"It was that tenacious pug," says Wackford. "A nuisance with a snub nose to all."

"Yes, a nuisance," says Snawley, smirking as he hands the custodial closet key to Wackford.

The pug had been dead near two months but there were probably puppies to contend with, supposes Wackford. The circle of life goes on even in a cloistered church. Perhaps this is why he took the janitorial position at the abbey. Life and death mingle here like forbidden, school-age lovers. Budding couples kiss in a nave above the coffin of a lonely unknown warrior. Wails from infants echo throughout the eaves made by silent, departed architects. Wackford concentrated on making the setting less grim for the past five years. He swabbed down the slabs honoring the literary greats, gave the memorial busts a careful bath complete with commendable attentiveness to the ears, and saluted the monuments if the poet was a particular favorite of his. Words do live forever if they're taken care of, don't they?

Wackford decides to take care of the matter of the garden at the outset. Yesterday, he tended to the rosemary and fennel while breezes curved the few plane trees. He enjoyed being alone, the aromas sweeping by him. Discussion often accompanied Wackford everywhere else. They followed the trial, read the newspapers. He could not wipe their minds clean.

The garden lay in shambles upon his arrival. Whatever beast had wrought its wrath left his mark in the College Garden: uprooted angelica, crooked lavender, winter savoury that didn't deserve its name. The present appearance of the former medicinal garden was causing Wackford

a headache. If he manages to repair this today, by some miracle, he expects the group of monks who created the space to bestow a ghostly blessing on him.

An oak door opens behind Wackford, revealing Ralph Knag in the process of eating a large orange. He had a habit of inhaling every bit of it, including the seeds which he sucked and swallowed for sport.

“Is this your handiwork, Squeers?” asks Ralph.

“No, sir,” says Wackford promptly. “This area could’ve been photographed for posterity not but twenty-four hours ago.”

Ralph appears uninterested while supervising his juice-filled nails. Wackford’s declarations never went anywhere with Ralph. The Groundskeeping Department President called him Cyclops a disheartening amount of times. In fact, he bragged about coining the term despite Wackford hearing it while in university.

“I’ve long had doubts about you being physically capable of these tasks,” remarks Ralph, wiping his lip.

“I am able, sir,” says Wackford. “Able as God allows.”

Assessing Wackford’s grey work shirt and trousers, Ralph sighs, pulp trickling out.

“If your son hadn’t married my niece,” says Ralph, then shrugging. “Very well. If this happens again, I’m certain I can find a custodian who can avoid such troubles.”

Following Ralph to the door, Wackford watches his boss stop in front of William Blake's bust and adjust his combover in the poet's bronze brow. He walks away once he throws the orange peel into the trash with a definitive thud.

The harm Wackford has done to his fickle family tree is less distinct. His infamy pushed Junior and his brood elsewhere, an Irish address Wackford never acquired. But Junior made sure to secure a livelihood for his poor, widower father. It was the least he could do after refusing to let Wackford see any of the grandchildren. Fanny, on the other hand, wrote constantly from Massachusetts and sent a plethora of pictures. The latest showed her at an army benefit. Wackford was admittedly disappointed when he saw the stars and stripes waving behind her instead of the Union Jack. Sometimes distance hits a man in subtle ways.

Not but a few yards away, Wackford spies the altar boys retreating from their duties. Their long white gowns ruffling in succession resemble the snowcaps that seemed to shift on his ordered ship voyage to Perth. Wackford is old here, was old there. He is consistently old. Only in Perth, he felt his age. He eschewed back-breaking work due to the severe beating from that young upstart Nicholas Nickelby. Who knew that hands so gentle with chalk could wreak such havoc? Still, Nicholas' lingering lesson caused Wackford to search for a safer occupation. He found just that as a cook in the kitchen's jail upon receiving his Ticket of Leave. Within those restrictive walls, he wasn't the lowest of criminals.

Nor was Wackford the lowest of Perth's citizens. He observed this volunteering at an ice cream social the local nuns held for the area orphanage. Their event took place on a lawn much smaller than Westminster's garden grounds which resulted in crowding and sugar-induced hysterics. Wackford did his best to distribute cherry vanilla, mint, strawberry, and peach cones

liberally in a calm manner while being watched by the Mother Superior. Warm tongues melted the cold clumps speedily. Multiple cries for more covered sprightly music from an undeterred orchestra. Yet every iota of sound went silent when a band of four girls entered the party. The aborigines stood on the outskirts of the merriment. Wackford had never seen blonde hair atop dark faces before. They parted the crowd without uttering a word, the rest of the children staring as they neared Wackford's table. Mother Superior suggested strawberry and the four heads nodded in agreement. As Wackford scooped, he heard the beginning of giggles, saw the pointing of fingers aimed at the aborigines' tattered clothes. He guessed that even in orphanages, there were set classes outside the classroom.

Wackford was unsure of what to do once the cones were delivered so he sat in a chair and fanned himself. Also uncertain of where to go, the aborigines sat on the grass near his seat. A single girl rested her head against his pants leg. She looked up to him, with searching hazel eyes and a rapturous smile, as Fanny used to do two decades ago. Wackford later learned that they'd walked clear across town simply for the chance of getting one cone.

He thought of them that night. At Dotheboys, he denied the boys their letters, presents, encouragements, money. Nothing could shake his conscience if his coffers were full. He threw Cullers' toy ship onto the hearth and watched the wood curl into a shape similar to an ashtray. McCoy's funds bought the Squeers family a new four-post bed. To intimidate them further, he'd go to their sleeping quarters and glare at their wiry backsides, taking in the effect of their hunger and toil. He thought they somehow merited this. They were the cast-offs, the fatherless, the piglets that would suck society dry if they weren't stamped down repeatedly. Who was their most influential teacher? Why, the upstanding Squeers, protector of the status quo, collector of the hand-me-down children and privileged brats. Or so he believed. He didn't know the

background of the aborigines who cozied up to his criminal body like devoted daughters near their father's armchair. Did that make all the difference? Is that why care crept into his soul like a persistent mouse he formerly whisked away with a broom but now let stay in his heart? Why he dare not lift a cruel hand towards them? Whatever the reason, Wackford let the girls stay close to him until Mother Superior announced that they had to leave.

Most of the altar boys depart, two carrying the thurible towards the rear of the cathedral. Wackford didn't bother to remember their names since their relatives wouldn't like it if he did. A sole boy jumps up and down the marble sanctuary steps. Though Wackford caught schoolgirls playing hopscotch on the squares lionizing Lewis Carroll, this is by far the most disrespectful play he's encountered within Westminster since then.

"Stop that!" cries Wackford, hobbling over to him.

The boy, auburn-haired, agile, regards Wackford briefly and continues jumping. Wackford notices the boy's mud-encrusted shoes dotted with bits of rosemary leaves. It seems to be the fault of a pugnacious youth rather than a pug.

"Desist at once!" orders Wackford.

The boy pauses mid-leap, the altar gown meeting his knees before his shoes touch the floor.

"You beat up boys?" says the boy, more of a statement than a question.

Wackford sneers and sniffles into his shirt cuff. The boy grins brazenly, not a trace of fear, so unlike the others.

"Not lately," says Wackford after awhile.

“Stay on that side,” remarks the boy with crossed arms.

Momentarily moving to put his cane against the scarlet carpet leading to the altar, Wackford pauses. If he reacted hastily, or became too upset, he would be the subject of new, sour anecdotes.

“How did you come to be an altar boy?” asks Wackford.

“Are you being friendly to trick me?” replies the boy.

“No,” replies Wackford.

Wackford holds up both his hands, until he’s forced to grasp for the cane. The boy finds himself on the carpet. He slowly advances to Wackford. Inches away, Wackford notices a forest of freckles covering the boy’s countenance and amber eyes that grow colder under Wackford’s steady gaze. Somehow the boy looked very familiar.

“You don’t look so tough,” proclaims the boy.

“I dare say I don’t,” says Wackford. “Not anymore.”

“I’m bored,” sighs the boy.

“Your first day?” guesses Wackford.

“My last day,” says the boy. “I’m going to quit since my father won’t let me work in the garden.”

“I would let you if I could,” says Wackford. “If you wouldn’t ruin it.”

The boy’s face scrunches into a pout that surely had twelve years of practice.

“You’re the person who ruins things,” says the boy. “That should be obvious.”

He retreats, bumping into Wackford as he disappears amid the stoic monuments many visitors are intrigued by. Wackford rubs his chin, pondering a mystery of his own.

Many a Sunday afternoon is dull around Westminster Abbey. The building was shut off to the public, the perfect time for Wackford to put the finishing touches on the restored garden. He parts the custodial closet a hair, maneuvering his cane so that he can flip on a lantern. A row of rakes stand opposite him and bags of seeds sit in his most reliable wheelbarrow. It appeared as though the boy was less reliable, making good on his promise that last Saturday was his last day on the job. Wackford hasn’t spotted him since.

He manages to hook his crane inside the handle of the wheelbarrow, ushering it out until the door closes behind him. He steers towards the garden only to have his trail obstructed.

“Might I know who’s blocking my path?” says Wackford pointedly.

“Jonathan,” says the boy. “Give me that wheelbarrow.”

He wears a navy sweater and brown trousers instead of the gown. The street clothes suit him better, not only due to the fact that the pants matched his freckles. Regardless, Wackford would be in trouble if Mr. Knag caught sight of the child with him.

“This is how I make my bread and butter, young man,” remarks Wackford. “Go about your business.”

“What if I knock off Shakespeare’s statue’s nose?” says Jonathan.

“Go and crack Dickens’ grave inscription for all I care,” says Wackford, pushing ahead.

In truth, he did care very much about the celebrated author’s inscription, especially seeing as it was newly crafted. That would undoubtedly get him dismissed.

“Fine!” remarks Wackford after further consideration. “I’m hauling the seeds to the garden. Mind the tombs.”

Jonathan angles the wheelbarrow due north of Dryden and past a point perpendicular to Kipling’s resting place. He’s a hardy worker much to Wackford’s surprise. They reach the garden where Wackford opens the bag of lavender seeds.

“This is a good plot of land,” says Jonathan.

“Oh, so why’d you destroy it?” asks Wackford, glancing at him while starting to spread the seeds.

Jonathan averts his eyes. “I was mad.”

“Watch that temper,” advises Wackford. “It can mess up more than you think it will.”

Looking at Jonathan twist his mouth into a tight grimace, Wackford waits for the coming jabs about his fists meeting adolescent faces or how destructive he was at Dotheboys. Of course Dotheboys became different after his reign. The subsequent administrators were dreamers, novel educators. When he visited the school a year ago, he let in a sharp intake of breath as he witnessed a pigtail going round the corner. Dotheboys had gone co-ed sixteen months after his imprisonment. Sure, the girls weren’t residents, but they shared in the newly bought textbooks, the warm tutelage of intelligent professors, the delicious dinners they served daily. Wackford

was but a miserable memory in their collective minds if they wasted a thought on him at all. So he steels himself for Jonathan's verbal punches.

"How about you watch the way you toss seeds?" says Jonathan. "Be tender with them. They're not salt flakes, you know."

"You're an expert?" says Wackford.

"My mother was," replies Jonathan. "Before she died."

"Then, I will do it slowly," says Wackford.

He dispenses the seeds gingerly, and grabs for the rosemary. Jonathan drops a few alongside him. Wackford oversees his progress. The boy handles errands well.

"Come to think of it, lugging that wheelbarrow is quite a chore," speaks up Wackford as Jonathan reaches the last row. "My boss might be glad to have a younger hand on days I'm not here."

Jonathan beams, his head hanging to his soil-soaked shoes. It's not often that Wackford is the catalyst of childish smiles except for being the butt of their jokes.

"What's the meaning of this?"

The two laborers turn to view Ralph Knag striding across the garden, red-faced, nearly breathless. Wackford hunches his shoulders while Jonathan shrinks into the shadow of a plane tree.

"How many times do I have to tell you …," begins Ralph.

“My apologies, sir,” interjects Wackford.

“To stay out of this garden, Jonathan?” finishes Ralph, ignoring Wackford completely.

Ralph grips Jonathan’s collar tightly, exposing the soft contours of his neck. The shadows of the branches conceal his freckles but not the large bruise previously hidden under the sweater. Wackford’s tongue catches in his throat. Should he ask, particularly when that single bruise drudges up so many memories?

“I was helping, Father,” says Jonathan, starting to weep.

“You know my reputation,” says Ralph. “*His* reputation.”

Jonathan glances at Wackford seeing as he’s become part of the conversation. Ralph won’t grant Wackford the same courtesy.

“If I may,” speaks up Wackford. “I did nothing wrong.”

“Squeers, there are things that won’t do!” exclaims Ralph. “What will people think if he’s out here with you?”

“I’ve not touched a child since coming home,” insists Wackford. “No matter what’s been said. Please trust me.”

“That’s the burden on your back, not mine,” says Ralph, flashing a finger in Wackford’s face. “You made your bed so lie in it. Get back to work.”

“I’ll be quite tender with what will grow, sir,” says Wackford, meeting Jonathan’s gaze.

Taking Jonathan roughly by the arm, Ralph drags the boy into the abbey. Jonathan doesn't break eye contact with Wackford, his sight refusing to fall, unlike his seeds which collapse into a solitary heap before the door slams shut.

****

After long days at the abbey, the light of dusk streams in like a weary wanderer, peeping past the stained glass, meandering to the sanctuary. One would be heartened by the types of friends twilight brings. There are the homeless, lighting candle nubs they've nicked from some nook so they can do a proper prayer. They dress modestly and ask for alms if they recognize kindness. Do not judge them harshly if they think well of you. Then, there are the grandmothers who've recited the rosary most of their years. Do not put them down for waiting until the final golden hours of the day, because by then they must've meant them thoroughly.

If anybody manages this compassion, perhaps they will notice a certain bag of rosemary seeds left by the custodial door, marked for reinstated altar boy Jonathan Knag. The handwriting belongs to a man Jonathan scarcely knows. Yet when Jonathan locates them, he might think, *you never hit me, not once.* He may feel free to spread that around to the other altar boys, or not. But merely imagining that he will is satisfactory for Wackford Squeers. It's what's on his mind as he stands straight and stares into the rose window, several mellow hues filling his features.