

Under the Owl Tree by Jeffery E Doherty

The day Ruby Tuesday sees the glint of silver in the hollow of the Owl Tree her life changes forever.



The bench by the pond gives Ruby the shivers.

The pond in the middle of The Manor's tangled grounds is her secret garden. It's just like in the book except there's no crippled boy hiding in an upstairs room for her to play with. There is the ghost, but no one believes her, of course.

"Ruby Glencross!" Granddad bellows.

Sometimes escaping Thatcher Manor's creaky floorboards, her Granddad's temper and the other faded tenants is worth the creeping chill up the back of her neck. She races out through the kitchen door almost bowling Old Freddie over.

“Woah there, Ruby Tuesday.” Old Freddie adjusts his sunglasses and brushes down the sleeves of the faded leather jacket he wears.

“What’s got the grumpy old sod so worked up today?”

“Sorry,” Ruby calls back over her shoulder as she runs into the grounds, ignoring Freddie question.

Safe in her garden sanctuary, Ruby trails her fingers over the rose carved into the dark weathered wood of the bench. This is the only place she knows she is sure to feel the ghost.

“I wish you could talk to me,” she says, looking around the clearing.

The ghost doesn’t answer.

A glint of light, up in the dark hollow of the Owl Tree catches Ruby’s eye. She squirrels up through the branches.

“Don’t look down,” Ruby whispers to herself as she reaches into the small dark hole. Her fingers close around the small metal object and the back of her hand brushes against something soft.

Screech ...

Ruby snatches her hand back. Her foot slips and rough bark bites into her shin. She lands with a heavy thud. Her eyes blur with tears but she still has the prize clutched in her hand.

A thin trail of blood trickles down into her white sock as she limps back to the bench. Hairs tickle-up on her arms and neck as she plonks down on the seat. A cold so deep it sucks the air from her lungs makes Ruby's eyes widen in panic. A white shape slides past as the tarnished silver owl charm slips from limp fingers. Darkness folds around her.

It is late afternoon when Ruby wakes stiff and tangled on the cold ground. She groans at the chill clinging to her and the thought of the trouble she'll get from Granddad. Her worries vanish when she sees the owl charm on the ground. Under the dirt, the bird's chest is shaped like a tiny rose. The charm is the most beautiful thing Ruby has ever seen.

She slips it into her pocket and limps back toward the house.

"Look at the state of you," Granddad shouts. "You've torn your blouse and you're dirty as an urchin."

Ruby looks down at her feet. "Sorry Granddad."

“Do you think I have the money to keep buying you new clothes?”

Hot tears well up in her eyes.

“Don’t you go starting that,” Granddad warns. “Run a bath and clean yourself up.”

The hot water stings Ruby’s scraped shin as she dabs the dirt away. When she is clean and the bathwater cloudy, she fishes the owl charm from the pocket of her crumpled clothes. She starts cleaning away the crusty old mud and dry water weed. It truly is beautiful.

The broken link still dangles from one end of the silver chain. Ruby threads the ends together and squeezes the link back into shape with her teeth. She loops the necklace over the head. The charm rests cool on her skin.

Anxious to see how it looks, Ruby scrubs the steamy mirror with a towel. The face looking over her shoulder is pale as glass. Ruby’s heart skips as she spins about.

No one is in the room.

She hurries into her pyjamas without looking back into the mirror.

Safe in her room, Ruby fingers the charm and feels her racing heart start to slow. She closes her eyes and the image of the face in the mirror clears in her mind. It was a girl with glistening black hair and large pleading eyes.

A deep sadness fills Ruby. "Was she the ghost?"

Yes, a hollow voice replies.

Ruby leaps back, nearly tumbling over the bed.

There is no one there.

"I'm going mad." Ruby's breath starts to quicken.

You're not, the voice reassures. *You did wish I could talk to you.*

Ruby edges back on the bed until her back touches the wall. Her eyes dart to every corner of the room.

You can only see me in the mirror, the voice says. *I'm not strong enough to appear.*

Ruby takes timid steps to the dressing table and peeks at the mirror. She doesn't panic this time when she sees the sad girl standing at her shoulder. She is older than Ruby, maybe thirteen and her eyes are large and blue as forget-me-nots.

"How?"

It's the charm.

Ruby looks at the owl charm again, the rose inside the breast of an owl.

It is part of us both. The girls head tilts quizzically to the side. *I don't know if it would work for anyone else. Not even for Spencer, your grandfather.*

"Granddad?"

He made it for me with his own hands, her voice turns wistful. *We were going to run away together. It was hard working at the manor. The Thatcher's were...* The girl shivers, her voice fading away.

"What is your name?" Ruby asks.

Look at the charm and guess. The ghost girl's eyes brighten, and her lips quirk up. The hint of a smile lights her face with beauty.

Ruby is at a loss. "Hoot," she guesses.

No. The ghost's laugh is like tiny bells. *Your grandfather was the hoot. He has the keenest sense of humour.*

Ruby can't believe that. "I've never even seen him laugh."

I'm Rose, the girl says. *Rosie Wise.*

At least now, the charm makes sense to her, a rose at the heart of the wise owl.

He hasn't laughed since I... went away. Rose says, lowering her ghostly eyes. *He thinks I ran off without him, but I didn't.*

Ruby wants to turn and hug the girl, but you can't hug a ghost. "Oh, Rose," is all she can say.

We were supposed to meet by the pond, but Gordon Thatcher found me waiting there. Rose's face twisted in revulsion as she said the name. *He knew and wasn't going to let me leave.*

Ruby's hand went to her mouth in horror. "No!"

He hit me and I fell into the water, Rose adds. *I'm buried under the Owl Tree.*

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Ruby shuffles into Granddad's room holding the charm out so he can see it. "She didn't run away without you."

Tears spill down Granddad's cheeks as he hugs Ruby tightly to his chest.