

Thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley awakens from the same nightmare he has been experiencing for the past few months, "the one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming".

At seven minutes after midnight ("12:07"), a voice calls to him from outside his bedroom window, which overlooks an old church and its graveyard sheltered by a yew tree. Walking to the window, Conor meets the monster who called, a towering mass of branches and leaves formed in a human shape from the yew tree. The monster is intrigued that Conor is not afraid of it and insists that Conor summoned it. The monster wants the truth from Conor. The monster claims to be a version of the green man and warns that it will tell Conor three true stories, after which Conor must tell a story of his own, which is the truth (the events that happened in the real nightmare).

Between its tales, which aim to demonstrate the complications inherent in humans, it is revealed that Conor's mother is undergoing chemotherapy and has been afflicted with terminal cancer for the past year. Conor is isolated and alone. His flaky father uses his new family in the United States as an excuse to be detached and unsupportive. His distant relationship with his pushy and cold grandmother provides no comfort either. Conor is a victim of bullying at school and he has distanced himself from all social contact other than that of the monster. As the story progresses, his mother's condition worsens and Conor's encounters with the monster have escalating consequences. The story also mentions an alleged "Pit Monster" and "Sky Monster".

At the end of the book the reader finds out why the monster has been coming and about the nightmare Conor fears: Conor holds onto his mother's arms, gripping her tightly as she is about to fall off a cliff. Conor loosens his grip, lets his mother fall purposely, though he could have held on to her longer. The monster came for Conor to confess the truth to his mother about how he wanted her to die so she did not have to suffer, he would not feel so isolated, and to end the pain for both of them. By doing so, Conor could finally let his mother go. At 12:07, the time the monster usually arrived, Conor's mother passed, and so did all their pain. Conor's tale was told.

#### The Four Stories

##### The first story

An old king who has lost his entire family, except a young grandson, remarries a beautiful young woman many claim to be a witch. He dies before the young prince has come of age, leaving the step-grandmother as regent. She rules well and fairly, but—not wanting to hand over the kingdom—plots to marry the prince and remain queen.

The prince, who has a lover, runs away with his chosen bride, planning to flee to the neighboring kingdom. There they will marry and wait out the time until he's of age to claim the throne. They stop and sleep under the yew tree (the monster), but in the morning, the young woman is dead, having been murdered, and the shocked young prince is covered in blood. He reasons to the villagers that the queen must have killed his bride out of jealousy in order to keep her throne. Enraged, the commoners rally around the prince to storm the castle, and the monster follows. They capture the queen and condemn her to burn at the stake.

The monster arrives to snatch her from the fire and carry her away to a far-off land where she lives out the rest of her life. While disagreeable and a witch, she was not the one who had killed the girl. The prince had murdered her under the yew tree in order to inspire his people to back him into overthrowing the queen.

This story also discusses the need for humans to lie to themselves, such as the prince who wholeheartedly believes that the queen is responsible for his fiancé's death despite her being murdered by his hand, and their willingness to believe those lies for their own comfort and happiness.

##### The second story

A greedy, ill-tempered apothecary who follows the old traditions and beliefs constantly pesters a parson to allow him to cut down the yew tree in the churchyard and use it for medicinal ingredients. The apothecary becomes less and less popular and is nearly ruined, aided by the apothecary's own foul nature and the parson's active condemnation of him from the pulpit.

When a sickness sweeps the land and many die, the parson goes to the apothecary and asks him to save the lives of his two ill daughters after all other resources are exhausted. When the apothecary asks why he should help a man who has turned people away from his skills and denied him the yew tree, his best source of healing ingredients, the parson begs. The parson promises to give him the yew tree and deliver the parishioners to him as patients. In

response to the parson's promise to revoke his beliefs and give up everything if only his daughters are healed, the apothecary says that he cannot help the parson and the girls die.

The monster awakens from the yew tree to destroy the parson's house and raze it to the ground as punishment. While the apothecary was a nasty, greedy man, he was a healer and would have saved many, including the girls, if the parson had given him the yew tree when first asked. The parson, however, was a man who lived off of belief, but had none of his own and changed beliefs as it suited him and convenience. His disbelief of the apothecary's skill caused many to die, even his children. The healing traditions followed by the apothecary require belief in order to work; without the parson's, the apothecary was unable to treat the two girls.

At the end of the story, Conor participates as the monster destroys the parson's house, to waken and discover that he has vandalized his grandmother's sitting room, shattering many valuable and beloved items beyond repair.

#### The third story

There was a man who was invisible because no one ever saw him. Tired of this, he summoned the monster to ensure no one forgot to see him again. The monster made them see, but there are harder things than being invisible. As this story is told, Conor is briefly possessed by the monster and physically and violently assaults Harry, the school bully, throwing him across the dining hall, putting the boy in the hospital.

#### The fourth story

Conor must confront his nightmare to tell the fourth story or face being engulfed by smoke and flames.

The church around the yew tree is destroyed and the land underneath Conor's mother's feet collapses, and she almost falls into the dark abyss. Conor holds onto his mother desperately but she eventually falls into the hole. The monster tells Conor to speak the truth but he refuses. The monster yells at Conor, calling for the truth until Conor finally yells that he wishes it was all over.

Although Conor loved his mother, he knew from the very beginning that she was going to die. He couldn't bear to not know when she would be gone and part of him, a selfish, very human part, simply wanted all the suffering to end. After Conor faces his truth his grandmother finds him and takes him to his dying mother's bedside at the hospital.

The fourth story ends with a young boy clinging tightly to his mother.