

Thicket

short story

640 words

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Thicket

by Sonia Overall

You didn't go in the thicket. We all knew that.

Dan Layton was the eldest of us, and when he turned thirteen he, of course, knew better. We'd heard the stories and we'd seen our mothers out at midsummer, tying ribbons to the spiked branches. We'd looked out of high windows at midwinter when the berries was red-raw and glossy and the ribbons was just drab scraps of rag. We knew the men fed the thicket then, when the ground was stone-frosted and it was hungriest. The winter before I'd crept out of bed to sneak a look at them throwing strips of meat and fat out into the dark mob of bushes. It only happened at night. They held their torches high and they didn't make a sound.

The thicket was always silent.

"You're all cowards and fools to believe those fairy stories," Layton said.

We was out walking along the ditch on the west side of the village. We kicked a ball along the road there when it was quiet. It was April and the sparrows was making a din and nesting in the ivy. Layton stuck out his chest as he walked and tried to swagger. He was only just past his birthday but he was the eldest in his family and the one boy, and he thought he was something. He was just a long string of a lad who fancied himself our leader, but we liked him well enough and mostly played along.

Teddy Wilson shrugged. "Look at them sparrows," he said. "How comes they don't nest in the thicket? How comes nothing goes in and out there?"

"How d'you know they don't nest there?" said Layton. "Have y'ever looked in to see?"

He had us there. None of us had, of course, and none of us planned to. The thicket was so quiet though, never a bird in it. Teddy Wilson said about the worst of the stories and Layton kept on about how nothing had ever happened to anyone we knew, or anyone we knew could remember, and so it was all nonsense. I said about how his grandfather and mine were among the lads who'd tried to burn it down but how it would never take, whatever they put on the flames. Layton laughed. He said he would go where he pleased and it pleased him to go into the thicket, and if we was cowards he couldn't help us, and that was that.

And he went.

We called after him, of course. Teddy's little brother Pete was there and he started to cry. Teddy told him to stop blubbering or we'd all be in for it when we got home. I said that Layton was just bluffing and he'd pretend to go in, and then go home, and make up all about it in the morning. Teddy tried to look like he believed me. Pete picked up the ball and we walked back into the village and swore we'd say nothing, and then went our ways home.

It was a couple of days before Layton was returned. The alarm went up and everyone was so busy with it they didn't stop some of us kids running out until it was too late.

The mass of holly pushed up at the sky like a great, toothed hand. What was left of Layton was strung up and spread out at the top of it, sleeves to either side like a scarecrow. My mother caught me standing there and dragged me home. I was sick and put straight to bed.

How they got Layton down I never knew, but I was awake when my father came in that night, and I heard him say, in a low voice that shook, how the prickles of the thicket could run a body through like lace.