THE LAST BOY

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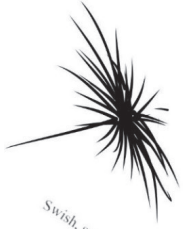
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Swish, sweep, brush. Swish, sweep, brush. To the top; to the top where I will wish and wish and I will WISH and wish and wish or swish, sweep, brush. And swish, sweep, brush.

Nought

When Brewster was six, and he thought he could fly

"Don't be daft," they'd said, time and time again. Even Mam had said it. *No boy could fly*. Brewster fought back and said it wasn't that he could *fly* – he knew how foolish that sounded – it was that he could rise up, just a bit, from beneath the soles of his feet. "Levitate?" they'd said. *No boy could levitate*. And those who thought they could? Well, they were for the Idiot Ward.

But Brewster knew he had it in him to do it. Couldn't everyone, if they'd just let themselves try? If there were no such thing as an Idiot Ward, wouldn't they all levitate then? Hell, wouldn't they all fly?

Of course, he'd never actually done it, not properly. That tingle that would come out of the blue, that trembling

force that would burst downwards from the soles of his feet – it was a power so strong it put the fear of God in him. He'd gone so far, until he was sure he'd felt cold air flow like a river through the thinnest gap between skin and stone, but that was all. Something deep inside would stop him, something beyond his control – like the thing that stopped him swallowing his own tongue, like the thing that kept him breathing in his sleep, kept his heart beating and his blood pumping, all without needing to think about it. But now, this second, he had to make it work. Four inches up would do it, maybe six – he had to make himself *taller*. Had to, because the Master Sweep was at the door.

"Where is he?" was the sweep's greeting, his voice ugly as a belch. The man, himself as wide as he was tall, wanted runts only – boys and girls small enough to squeeze up a chimney tight as a sock. Too young, and they'd need minding. He was after older small climbing boys – ones that would mind his secrets and do as they were told.

The tingle came, the soles of Brewster's feet fizzed and buzzed; water viciously bubbling at the base of a pot. Brewster gave it his all. A few inches, he pleaded, and just as he could feel it working, he fought the sudden, overwhelming urge to stop. Like the last time he got to

throw himself into Mam's warm, wide-open arms, he closed his eyes and let himself go, wholly and completely. Would he rise, inch by inch, slow as damp? Or would he shoot up? Was that air he could feel beneath his feet?

"Stuck," he mouthed, when he rose no more.

His much older brother, now both his mam and his pa, had placed his hands on Brewster's shoulders. "Don't be daft," his brother's disappointed eyes said. He was pressing down, hard, the weight of it buckling Brewster's knees. He was even smaller than before.

The Master Sweep cursed for no good reason, and poked Brewster in the stomach with his golden rod of a walking stick. "What is he, three? Is he still thick?"

"Six. And smart with it. Fierce good at his numbers—"

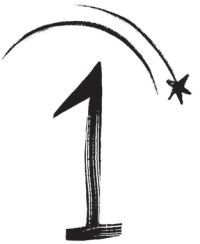
"Sold," the man cut across, and, just like that, Brewster belonged to him. His brother's thumbprint on a sheet of paper signed the deal; a sooty black smudge marking the end of before, and the beginning of after.

If he were a number, he'd be nought, zero, nil, nothing.



After





Was it time? Master wasn't looking, so Brewster leaned his sooty elbows on the mantel over the fireplace and used his fingertips to lift his swollen eyelids. That way, he could read the posh clock, mere inches from his face, and it told him it was half past midnight. If his numbers were right, the world was about to end.

Or at least that's what they'd *think*.

Brewster's fingers fought with the knots of his coat's rope belt. He should've been outside. *Out there*. Not in here, in what he supposed was the castle's music room, with its turned-up carpets and fancy piano and harps, each shrouded in layers of brown paper. Darn it. Fearing a growl still flying about his head would escape, Brewster bit his lip hard until the soot on his chin cracked like a burnt loaf's crust. He *had* tried to stall Master Wyer so they'd

be out there when it happened, if even for one quarter of an hour. He'd told his master he'd seen a giant stag ready to charge as they'd approached the castle for their night's work, then he'd fibbed about hearing a coin drop, several in fact, and he'd even ducked into a bush, thorns and all, saying nature was calling. He'd tried so hard to stall his master, it had earned him warning pokes from Master's golden rod of a walking stick, but he wanted so desperately to catch the moment he had predicted all along – the moment upon which every ounce of his hope had been waiting.

Of course, Master Wyer was having none of it. Master sweeps *never* listen to their climbing boys. As they'd both limped with bowed knees and bent ankles towards the castle's servants' entrance, the uncaring thug of a man had swung low to clamp Brewster's worst ankle in his hand. He swirled his climbing boy about his top-hat like a conker on a string before hurling his apprentice and his sweeping brush against the door. *Get on with it.*

Brewster steeled himself. Now that he was inside the castle, there was no time to waste. The faster he got this chimney swept, the sooner he'd be back out to the frosty night. He bent at the waist as he pulled off his coat, and

stuck his head into the fireplace, a good foot above the embers. Weak as it was, they still held heat.

Master Wyer considered the pink embers in the grate. "I'll fetch a pail," he said, clay pipe sticking to the skin of his bottom lip. Anyone listening might think this offer to fetch water was to save his weak and battered apprentice from the fuel's heat and noxious fumes. Brewster huffed out of his soot-lined nose – that man didn't care a hang about his boy. Master's offer was to simply to save his filthy black sack used for catching soot he would later sell. A burnt hole in that sack could lose Master Wyer cash, God forbid, for this soot was not any soot – it was soot of the best sort. Poor mans' sods of turf wouldn't do, not at Birr Castle. The house steward here knew to only burn Boora bog turf and coal in their fireplaces, of which there were "too many to count", as Lady Rosse herself would say. Farmers all over King's County happily paid a pretty penny for a bushel of Wyer's soot – said to make potatoes grow thick as turnips according to his master's trade talk. *Magic soot*, he called it. Brewster *had* found magical things hidden up chimneys, his favourite being a tiny metal sundial that fit into the palm of his hand, whatever good it was doing up there, but soot was soot.

Master Wyer turned to the scullery maid, always made

to follow them room to room, afraid Brewster's brush might scuff a harp or something. "Water."

Brewster shook his head, "No, Master." He needed to hurry. "I done climbing in worse."

Master Wyer sneered. He knew well what Brewster meant. Only a few weeks prior, in Crinkill's police barracks, the hardnosed brute had lit a knot of hay on the hearth beneath Brewster's feet to force him up a chimney flue tight as a pipe. Wasn't the first time either. On that job, when he was a few feet up, Brewster had once again foolishly let his mind drift to his favourite thing – his *numbers*. He saw numbers in *everything:* in the likelihood of rain; the chance of getting Master's heel of bread; even the many, many seconds since Mam died. But mostly, his numbers *predicted* things. And knowing what was coming, be it a beating or a knock at the door, made things far easier to swallow. The unexpected, even the good sort, could rattled him to despair, waking an army of tiny Masters inside his tummy, prodding him with red-hot pokers. That's what being faced with the unexpected felt like. Best to be prepared, to *predict*. But it was a calculation slippery as a slug that had been bothering him back on that particular day at the barracks, and it had stalled his sweeping for several minutes. Master didn't like that.

The scullery maid tutted. Much to her annoyance, Brewster had removed his shoes, sending them rolling on the fine floor of the music room. They were Master's stinking shoes. Brewster hated them; hated how they made him look one tiny bit like the man, but he was forced to wear them any time they worked the castle's chimneys. They made him look proper, Master had said, but Brewster knew it was to do with one of Master's many secrets – secrets each climbing boy was sworn to keep the day their parents sold them, signing their lives away with a simply scrawled X and a thumbprint. Brewster quickly moved his shoes onto the marble hearth where he grabbed a metal fuel shovel stored in a brass trough. He scraped the embers to one side and placed the shovel face down on the hottest chunks. It might help dampen the heat, if only for a bit, and the sack would be all right.

He knew he was taking a risk going up into a hot chimney, but like the numbers swaying like fields of wheat inside his head, the risk was calculated. He'd been at this game long enough – six whole years. He reckoned he was twelve now and he should've been dumped by Master Wyer for being too big for flues, but six years of finishing scrappy meals still hungry and working eighteen-hour days, meant he had the frame of an eight-year-old at

most. Master Wyer knew he had a good boy. And they both knew no one would ever employ a boy who limped with warped ankles and bowed knees – the trademark of a sweep. The only way out, as far as Brewster knew, was if it were "written in the stars". His mam used to say that.

As was always the routine, Master swiped the flat cap from Brewster's head and rubbed its big brass badge across his thigh before grinning at the letters etched into it – letters that proved the wearer was his property. A machine, and little more. He punched soot from the cap like he was angry, and handed it back to his boy. "To the top."

Brewster nodded and pulled his cap down over his own face, from forehead to chin. Though he wouldn't breathe through his mouth, he opened it wide so that his dropped chin could catch the cap and secure it tight against his face. Master slapped the long rod of the Turk's head brush into Brewster's palm and led his apprentice to the grate by the scruff of his neck.

The welts on Brewster's feet singed as he scaled up the sides of the fireplace and into the narrow, rectangular flue, this one only a few inches wider than his own frame. With his left hand pressed tight by his thigh, palm outward, and

his right raising the brush high above his head, he inched himself up, blind as a worm.

Brewster pressed his back against the hot flue wall and pulled his thighs up, not so far as his stomach – that would have him right stuck. Using the power of his hardened kneecaps, he pushed against the wall before him to rise himself up like a caterpillar. He could feel the warm soot fall from the brush above, patting off his matted hair. Clumps hit his shoulders and packed the narrow space between his chest and the wall, before filtering down as he twisted his body so that his hips filled the widest space – from one corner of the flue to the other.

Up, he rose, and so did his hope. Was the world ending out there? Had it started? Anticipation snaked around his stomach, putting shot to any rumbles of fear. Numbers and memorised calculations dribbled from his cap-covered mouth in a passionate whisper as he climbed higher and higher. "To the top! To the top!" he cried between numbers as he rose in his caterpillar way, inches at a time, scrubbing as he went.

That's when he felt it – the brush above his head kinked sharply to one side.

This was not as he had predicted. Red-hot pokers clanged inside his stomach. He had forgotten this

chimney's flue was in the newer part of the old castle. Experience told him workmen got creative when Lady Rosse hired them twenty-odd years ago, offering paid work when crops failed so bad. They took their time, these workmen, stretching the work out by adding turns and corners into their flues – some angled like a bent elbow. Heat rose, his chest burned. Despite his cap, his eyes streamed. Two things hit him:

This would take longer than he'd thought.

He should've taken off his trousers.

In complete darkness, he upped his pace. The scabbed skin on his elbows stung as he used them like whiskers to follow his brush into the sharp turn of the flue. He put aside the numbers rattling about his mind and replaced them with a flat S shape – the path he imagined was set before him. The stone was hottest here, having caught heat from the straight and wider flue below. It burned through his shirt, drying his sweat before it had even sprung from his pores.

He took a second.

What if he just *pretended* he'd gone to the top? He hadn't tried that in years.

"To the top," he was sure he heard his master answer from below, and it forced Brewster to sweep some more.

It wasn't that Master could read his mind with some kind of magic – he possessed about as much magic as his magic soot. It was a trick. His master would remove his glove and place a clean palm on the wall over the hearth. He could feel the brush's vibrations. Or maybe he could feel the gasping breaths and trembles of fear of his climbing boys. Brewster wouldn't put that past him.

Body straight and cramped, Brewster squirmed like a worm he'd once piddled on, and pushed himself into the bend of the flue. It was tight.

He felt his trousers' waistband catch.

He wriggled a bit and used both elbows and his feet to inch up. It worked – he shot forward until his head, at least, was free of the bends. But he cursed and he cursed and he cursed. He'd made a big mistake. His trousers had rolled down, just a few inches – enough to stop his caterpillar bend at the knee.

He was stuck.