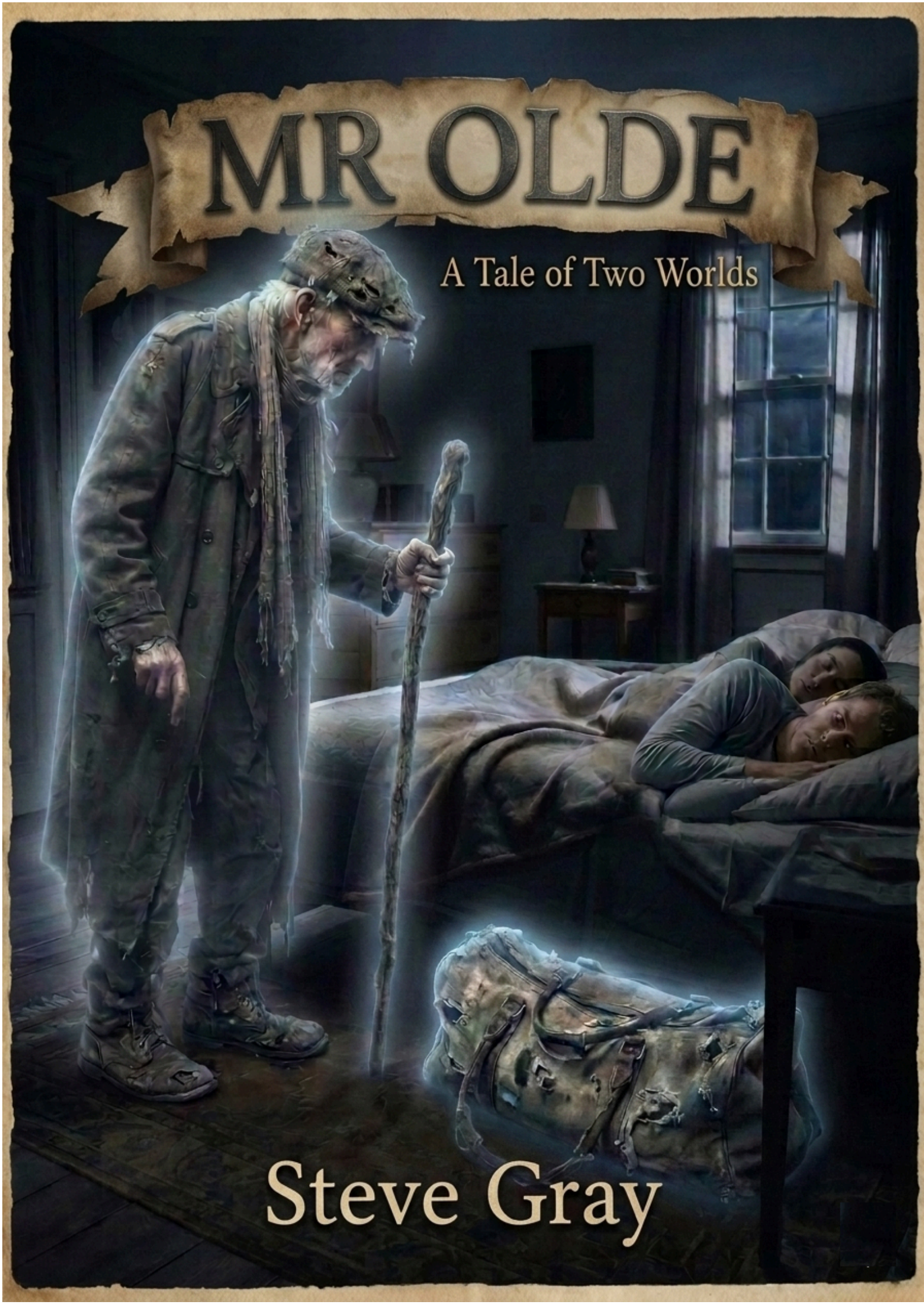

MR OLDE
A Tale of Two Worlds
Steve Gray

- Mr Olde -

Wisdom is born of struggle, knowledge can be born of necessity.

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Chapter One

‘What's for dinner Mel?’

‘Chicken surprise.’ Thomas knew that this meant if there was any chicken in the meal, she would be surprised. It was also code for, I don’t really know just yet. Thomas heard her rummaging in the kitchen and thought, ‘Oh well whatever it is, it won’t be long.’

‘Thomas, dinner’s ready.’ Thomas was in the front room, watching TV. Early evening news, not much happening. He was soon on his feet and headed to the dining room, where Mel had heated up some leftovers. He sat and pondered the offering, looked up and with a wry smile said, ‘What do you call this darl!’ Mel rolls her eyes and says, ‘Chicken.’ he laughed, Mel just shook her head.

The pair chatted about work over the meal, Mel worked part time at Fletchley and Green’s a big business consulting firm in the city, she starts late and leaves early on a special projects team, creating a range of documents for the projects and overseeing some aspects of the quality control.

Thomas was part of a team for a rail company, assisting in the control room to coordinate rail operations, he worked full time, 9-5. At times he worked longer hours if there was an issue with a derailment or some other technical situation. Then it was a case of ‘all hands on deck,’ To clear the problem and keep things safe. The job wasn’t at all physical, but mentally straining at times, he would come home from a long challenging day and easily fall in a heap. He certainly didn’t have problems with getting to sleep, that’s for sure.

Dishes sorted after dinner, then some TV and finally to bed. It was late Winter heading into spring, the temperature was slowly picking up. The winter had been a solidly cold affair with strong driving rain and winds for what seemed like weeks on end. Thomas and Mel both commented on the weather on the walk to the morning bus, rugged up and ready to face the elements each morning and night on their return. Thankfully the bus stop was only a block away and around one corner.

Thomas had developed a sleep routine, he heard about it on a podcast, some sleep ‘expert’ had a couple of sure fire methods for getting to sleep. ‘Tap your feet gently and slowly together ten times, then take three really gentle but deep breaths and then visualise

being in a safe and warm environment. Breathe easy and relax from your feet to your head. Mostly that worked really well, and Thomas would be off to sleep in no time.

He had noticed that over the past few years his dreams were a lot less, however when they did occur they were generally quite long. Tonight, things would be quite different, firstly he and Mel chatted for quite a while, bits and pieces about an article from the news, then things at work and so on. Then the pair started to run out of things to say, and so Thomas' sleep routine began.

Mel on the other hand rarely, if ever, had trouble getting to sleep and was hard to wake, often having a deeply gratifying, full night's rest. Her smart phone alarm was set to a loud ring, and if Thomas was still in bed, he would be easily woken by its ring tone within moments of the first two rings, Mel took a while longer.

The wind outside this night was rattling a few windows in their house with occasional rain drifts percussing rhythmically against the window panes. It was the sort of night you relished a warm bed and decent soft covers. They had a clock with a red digital set of numbers that sat on a dresser at the foot of the bed. It was set so as not to be bright but just enough luminance to be read when required, if Thomas awoke, for whatever reason, he would instinctively look at the clock first. Tonight the pair were soon off to a deep relaxing slumber.

Thomas tossed and turned a few times but mainly maintained a good sleep pattern. The noises of the weather beating against the house were generally consistent and well known to the pair. Tonight there was something a bit different, but with the weather sounds it was hard to tell what about the sounds was different.

The bedroom door was always half or three quarters open, their dressing robes hooked on the back of it. The door didn't have a squeak and barely if ever moved, unless one of them went to the bathroom during the night.

It was very late when something tempted Thomas to awaken slightly, he couldn't lift his head fully to see what time, but he sensed it would have been about three am or there abouts. Something meant that he couldn't see the clock as it turned out, something blocked his ability to see it, it caused some confusion as he rolled onto his side, his brain not yet able to figure out if this was something to be alarmed about or not. He finally looked up and saw an apparition, not quite a ghost but not quite a solid figure either, Thomas was dreaming, well

that's what he thought, but there at the end of the bed was a figure of an old man, with a walking staff and a long old duffle bag, badly worn, like his trench coat, filled by a scarf and cloth cap.

Something about the figure then caused him to try and make sense of what he was experiencing, he awoke to see the door to their bedroom move slightly. Thomas was now more awake and pondered the details of what he had seen. Not long after he heard a faint click, Thomas wasn't sure but he thought it sounded like a door clicking shut.

He figured the sound was part of the 'other' sounds he had heard earlier, that were more to do with the strong weather conditions than anything else. He rolled onto his back and drifted off to sleep again.

In the morning while having breakfast, his mind wandered about, he then recalled the apparition of an old man appearing in their bedroom. The image reminded him of a Led Zeppelin album cover from their fourth album, a hunched over old man carrying a big bunch of twigs, apparently he was a roof thatcher.

On the computer at work later that morning he looked it up, there were similarities for sure, the hat was different and the staff was longer, the guy he saw had a scarf and a long trench coat. He was now rather curious about what he was experiencing. He thought that perhaps the stress at work, which had recently been a bit more 'full on', was a contributing factor but he wasn't sure. One of the guys at work had mentioned a while back that his dreams went nuts when he was under stress.

It was three nights later, with Thomas, deep in sleep, the apparition appeared again, Thomas felt he was dreaming, the 'apparition' was a little clearer, he noted a scruffy beard and the cap in a little more detail, the bag he had was half opened he could see it held what looked like hay. The figure leaned forward on his staff and started to talk, but words or sounds at least, were not forthcoming. Thomas rolled onto his back, then turned back a little later as his awareness became more lucid. He looked again, now back onto his left side. The figure was still there, he had come about half a step closer.

Thomas was sure it was a dream, he certainly felt as if he was in a dream state of some kind, the figure then spoke, in a low soft voice, barely perceptible with an accent that was hard for Thomas to place at first. 'I'm Robert, Robert Olde, friend o' yer kin.' Thomas looked at his long rough bag and murmured, 'What's the bag for?' Robert looked down and said

‘Eee, that’s me heep, I have tay git rid of it, sooner rather than later.’ Thomas replied in a quizzical manner. ‘Heep?’ Robert said, ‘Eee it’s a burden, ‘me heep’ as we would say, I want it gone.’

Almost as if the mystery had been solved, Thomas went back to sleep and slept right through until the morning. At breakfast he recalled some details and decided to write down what he had heard. ‘Heep, Robert Olde, friend o’ yer kin.’ Mel looked over his shoulder and said it looked like it was words from a Scottish person or similar. It was then that Thomas became clearer about the accent, it certainly had a strong sense of Scottish accent. He then told Mel some of the details about what he had experienced. Her mind was on other things to do with work and didn’t pay much attention to the details.

Two nights later, Robert Olde appeared again. Thomas looked towards the clock, his view was obscured by the ghostly image of Robert. Tonight's bag had a bunch of dirty old clothes in it and Robert was busy pushing the contents into the bag. Thomas said, ‘What are you doing?’ Robert slowly looked up from his chore and mouthed some words but Thomas couldn’t make out what he said, if anything.

Robert cleared his throat and then softly said, ‘Aye,yer aweake then.’ Thomas didn’t answer, he was busy watching what happened with the bag, and besides, he thought it was a dream and the suggestion that he was awake didn’t seem to be how things were, not to him. He then wondered if Robert smelled, his clothes were very dishevelled.

Thomas’ brow furrowed, he then asked, ‘So, what are you doing here? Robert wasn’t it?’ His reply came shortly after ‘Aye, Robert, Robbie, Rhob, Robert Octavious Olde tay be formal like. And I’m here tay git rid o’ me heep and pass on some wisdom. Thet’s part o’ me lot as I see it.’

Thomas started to lay back and then said, ‘Okay then hand out some wisdom…’ Rhob reached down, his bag now closed up and he picked up his staff that was lying on the floor. He then stood tall and arched his back a little, then said, ‘Ya’ll need some whesdom tay make et through life like. Eff ya nah git tha whesdom, yall be in a sorry steet.’

Thomas smiled and said, ‘Yeah that’s great wisdom that is, you need wisdom… yeah right of course you do. Try again, old man.’ Rhob grabbed his bag with his free hand, then looked up, and then mentions, ‘Respect yourself as you would have others respect you. Now you be remembering thart boyo, remember thart… respect starts wee yhou.’

Thomas went back to sleep, his mind content that he got some decent wisdom out of ‘Rhob’ he gently awoke about half an hour later to find that the ‘apparition’ was not there. At breakfast he made more notes and was starting to make some sense of the heavy accent.

Thomas knew that his family originated from the Newcastle area in the UK, his brother Mark had done some family tree research. He sent him an email asking about the surname ‘Olde'. did it show up somewhere? Mark replied by the next day, no the name did not show up, but some research for the Durham region showed that the surname Olde was well known in the area, landowners and such.

A few nights later, old ‘Rhob’was back, his heep was closed, but it didn’t look as packed tight as it had been in the past. It took some time for Thomas to recognise that, the old man stood silently holding on to his ‘gibby stick.’ He could see Thomas was half awake, and kept his stance. Thomas looked up, rolled onto his left side so his head would be supported on his pillow while he looked at Rhob. He noted that Rhob never smiled, he always seemed to have a dark scowl. But he was mostly viewing the old man sideways.

‘Ah Rhob, you again, what wisdom do you have for me this time…’ Thomas said in a dismissive humorous tone. Rhob stood a little taller on being addressed by Thomas, and moved a step closer. Then muttered, ‘The river flows, but the breedge stands still. Oh and Keep yer wheets about ye.’ He shuffled a bit closer and in a strong whisper he added, pointing to Mel. ‘Barck in my day we diddneh know about wimmin and loov and all that, you are looky, noow. But ye need ta make sure you do the reet thang we ya weef, be loving her an all. Tis good fer yah booth, she be a fine woman an all.’

Thomas said in a sleepy way, ‘Yep she's a fine lass fer shure, and yep this loovin’ thing is a thing to watch, good one day, not so good the other.’ Thomas blinks and looks to the foot of the bed, old Rhob had gone. He then slowly got up and went to the toilet and noticed a slight musty aroma as he went out of the room, and across the hallway to the toilet in a slow sleepy shuffle. He then heard the quiet ‘click’ he thought he heard the other night, and thought that it was strange

He then wandered down to the other end of the house, the musty smell was now much less than a few minutes ago. He stood in the kitchen for a short while and looked about, all was silent except for the vague hum of the refrigerator. Thomas was now wondering about how real, ‘Rhob’ was, or is? He then pondered how he was almost used to ‘Rhob’s’ presence,

and was more ‘jovial’ with him tonight. Then he wondered about the bag, it wasn’t as full tonight, and what was in it this time? And why was it his burden and what did that mean?

Work was busy for Thomas, there was maintenance work being done on two of the rail lines so a range of trains were re-routed. The bus trip to work saw Thomas looking up some details online about stress, dreams and visions, there were various thoughts expressed, but nothing really definitive. Maybe you will have dreams, and then again, maybe you won’t. He then looked up, ‘burdens’ and getting rid of them. His thinking was, why does Rhob have a burden? Why is it carried about in his old bag? And what’s the story with that? Why does he need to be free of his ‘heep’? He figured he had more questions than answers at this stage.

One suggestion was, a person may find they are stuck in some form of a ‘loop,’ mental or otherwise. And what of the contents in the bag? So far, some twigs, old clothes, and hay. What next? The bus arrived at Thomas’ destination. His phone went back into his pocket, he then got off the bus and headed to work. He thought to himself, ‘ah, another day, another dollar.’

Chapter Two

The workload finally dropped for Thomas, he was now free of the usual stressors of a busy work schedule, at least for a while yet.

He then figured that this was probably the reason he hadn’t seen Rhob for a few days, he thought it would be nice to have some rhyme and or reason for Rhob showing up, stress related dreams would make things so simple to comprehend.

On the way home, the bus rattled along its usual path then deviated on to a new route, roadworks were being done in a section of the usual route. Thomas was a bit distracted, he had just finished looking at garbage on his smartphone, looked up and saw something he was not sure of, between vans, parked cars and people wandering about he spotted an old decrepit man, worn cap, long coat and a bag slung across one arm. The bus stopped at the lights, Thomas looked back to where the man was, waiting for him to appear in the gaps of everything moving. He then spotted the man had a stick, a ‘gibby stick’. The bus then moved off and Thomas was not sure about what he had seen, was this a person who looked like Rhob?

Thomas' brain then reconciled things, there are stereotypical homeless men who would readily fit the description of Rhob. He settled back into his seat. But soon thought it was strange to see someone looking so much like Rhob, he noted the location, St Georges Road and Oakover Road. The next day coming past the same location, Thomas was feeling 'fully wired'; part of him wanted to see the person again, and clarify what he had seen. Another part of him didn't seem to care much, 'just another homeless person.' There was no Rhob lookalike out there today, or tomorrow for that matter.

Four days later, heading to work, off in the distance across the busy main road, two lanes this side, a tram line in between and two lanes on the other side of that. There he was. Coat, stick, bag, scarf, cap and all of it dishevelled. Thomas pivoted in his seat, watching the distant figure heading in the other direction to the bus. He thought it was too much of a coincidence. Again he noted the location. St Georges road.

A few nights later Rhob appeared. The locations came to mind quickly as Thomas lay in the bed, initially startled, Rhob stood there watching. Thomas blinked and cleared his head a little. 'Okay, Rhob, before you say anything, were you near the intersection of St Georges Road and Oakover Road and then a few days later on St Georges Road?' Rhob nodded and murmured 'Whell, their might be some truth to thart. I'm no sure about the neems of streets roun' ere. Mind you I been ere long enough, I should take more notice. Oh an ere's some whesdom fer ya, 'A day without sunshine is like night.' A wry smile appeared on the old man's face for a moment followed by a brief chuckle.

Thomas didn't know if he heard that right, not the 'wisdom', that was lame, but the part about Rhob being at the locations. 'But Rob, am I the only one who can see you or do others know you're here somehow?'

'Oh plenty be knowin' eem aboot lad.'

'But wait, are you real or a ghost? '

'Wheel some say a bit o' booth.'

Thomas then enquired, 'Well for instance, do you eat?' - 'Eem nay hungry, eye grabbed sum food outta yer kitchen afore, thanks for the mheahl.'

Thomas lay back flat in the bed, wrestling with what Rhob had said. Half ghost, half real? Been around for a long while? Food out of the kitchen? He opened his eyes again and

looked, Rhob was gone. His gibby stick was still on the floor. Rhob came back straight after, grabbed the stick, pulled himself up with it and then gave a brief gesture with it raising it up, giving a slight nod and then moving back out of the door. A short whale later Thomas heard the slight click again. He was then off into a deep sleep.

The next morning at breakfast, Mel went to the fridge to retrieve some leftovers for her work lunch. ‘Hey, have you seen the leftovers that were right here? Where are they?’ Thomas took a moment to think and then realised that it was the ‘mheahl’ Rhob was talking about last night. ‘Oh that, yeah Rob ate it last night apparently, he must have been hungry…’ Mel, stood with the fridge door open and a look of astonishment, then let the door close, walked over to Thomas and uttered, ‘And who is Rhob?’ Hands now on hips wanting answers. ‘Oh he's the old guy in my dreams I’ve been telling you about, he said thanked for the mheahl.’ A rather torrid discussion ensued as you might imagine. ‘You’re saying this ghost in your dreams is real! And he ate my leftovers!’ - ‘Yeah something like that.’

Rhob turned up a number of times, each time Thomas noted the click at the end, the fact that he was never fully awake when Rob was there and each time the ‘heep’ bag would be less full. The ‘wisdom.’ he mentioned was sometimes mere’fluff and bubble’. While other times it was more astute and of value. Thomas jotted down the details as best he could remember in the morning.

Wisdom, ‘Now there be a thing… be careful lad, ‘Cause Eee be having a lend o’ ya.’

- Ye doesneh need too many Gibby sticks, I got too many, you might need just two.’
- ‘Ootside of a dawg, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dawg, it's too dark to read.’
- 'Dinneh get yis-sel in a stew.' – Do not stress or worry over the small things.
- 'It is what it is, until it isn't.' - Thomas never really figured out the symbolism of that one.
- 'Work ard, play ard, and mind yeh manners.' – The golden rules for a good life.
- 'Keep ya feet on the groound.' – Stay humble, no matter how successful you get.
- 'Keep ya wheets aboout ye.' – Be mindful of what’s going on around you, there may be trouble.
- 'If ya dinneh look, you will-ne see.'
- 'Wey fyece the wind, marra.' – Face your problems head-on, friend.

Other things, Rhob had a range of things to tell Thomas. Thomas also mentioned to Rhob, ‘Not to go eatin’ their food…’ Rhob said, ‘I’ll be eatin, if en eem hungry lad, nowt you can do about thart. Mind eew eem no hungry mostly.’

Rhob mentioned. ‘Aye git ta carry these thengs in me heep, nay cause I wanted, more because aye hafta, eets me lot in life. Sad story, eel, nay be botherin ya we thart. All Eye Knoow is thart the looad, gits less each teeme. Aye think it’s aboot movin’ on I’ve been about ere fer too long. Followed yer kin out here all those years back, on the Derry it was, a long teem on a booat.’ Thomas looked that up online, and with the help of his brother, he found the Derry was a ship that came out to Australia ferrying people looking for a fresh start in Australia. Great grandfather and others. Some on the same trip others at other times.

‘I knew’s yer dah’s famleh, they were away then, off to ere. Hot place this, hot place… on the boat, filled with a fresh spirit, a strong will an a few pennies to make do. Me Great Dar was a Thegn. - Land owner, ‘He knew yer kin an all. Back in the day. Then mines started up, go for the coal they said, many died. Then there’s that one part o’ the famleh that went to sea, great great uncle died at sea in a terrible storm.’

‘Me burden’s near gone now, I’ll be headin’ off soon enough, tis me toim. Loov that bairn now.’ Thomas smiled, then realised what was said, ‘Wait what Bairn?’ ‘Oi, ya weef well need a howdy or a Dector, fer the bairn whuts cummin’. There be no rush mind. Glad te see yer ol’ fella whurks. Oh I shoundneh have said thart one, so keep thart under ya hat boyo.’ Rhob said with a wry nod.

‘By the way, eem nay a part o’ ya traumas frum the past, eem just ere tay see ya okey… Oh and tay harve a chat like. Oh and yall be gittin a message from a great uncle on ya Ma’s side, Edmoond, be looking oot fer thart, he’ll be makin’ music an all.’ Edmund was a music teacher who played the cello. He showed up in the family tree with a bit of searching, brother Mark to the rescue, he had produced some sheet music, a search found they were mainly practice exercises for cello students, various scales and such. Mark wondered how Thomas knew, a long chat on the phone followed, discussing the details of the old man. Thomas then recalled the fisherman that died at sea, Mark was able to confirm that too.

Then there were some more revelations. ‘There be a sacred rhythmic ceremony, yall be wanton’ tay learn. Eet will gif ya some pattern tay ya life.’ Rob takes up hand drumming on a Djembe in a drumming circle, he enjoys it immensely, asks others about primitive wisdom

and drumming and gets a range of vague answers. He figures the wisdom relates to keep on keeping on with a project, rather than losing interest part way, He is told that, ‘Everything has a starting point, a middle and an end.’

There was a break every now and then, finally Rohb showed up and simply said. ‘Eye done brung yer a rock, it’s fer luck an all.’ Thomas wakes the next morning to find a small worn rounded pebble on his bedroom side table. It startles him a little, it was the one last thing that caused him to now believe the old man was real. Then he embodies its positive symbolism, thinking about it, holding it and cherishing its existence.

A few days later on the way home, Thomas spots an old man near where he saw Rohb last time. He gets out at the next bus stop and heads back to his position. He notes the old man has an empty bag and is struggling with his ‘gibby stick’. He turns at the corner before Thomas gets there, then down the small side street where some old industrial buildings are, there is an empty block with a rough mesh fence. Part of it has been pulled away, and the old man squeezes through the gap, clearly in some physical distress.

Thomas called out, ‘Rhob!’ the old man continues on, not noticing Thomas. As Thomas hurries down to the spot in the fence he looks and does not see the old man at all. Vanished somehow. Thomas pushes through to mesh to explore further, his pants get caught on a stray wire, making a small tear in the fabric. He heads down the side of the building, it’s clad in galvanised steel sheets, quite old he thought. He then finds the wall has a break in it, not visible from the street, from that view, it’s an optical illusion. In the dim light of the shed, a smallish space, was a rough bed, the sort a homeless person might put together. A few belongings to one side and two gibby sticks. A small kitchen chair, probably from the nineteen fifties. There on the side of the bed is Rhob.

Thomas nudges closer, ‘Rhob, is that you?’ - The old man looks up and squints his eyes. Then carefully says ‘Aye.’ Thomas notes his duffle bag is empty and flat on the floor beside the bed. ‘Yer heeps gone then,’ ‘Aye’. ‘How long have you been here in this shed?’ ‘Well let's see, oh nay, it’s not weurth thenkin aboout. Probably too long. I go round they corner to the mission place. They ge me food and all. Have done for years.’

Thomas notes that Rhob is somehow fading, not very cooperative and lost in some of his words. Finally as the pair sit there, Thomas with too many questions in his head says, ‘Well, do you think you are on your last legs then?’ ‘Aye…’ ‘Well then who do I contact?’ ‘Nay, there’s nobody, I’m the last of my lot, no kin left, no papers, nowt. Oh and by the way,

there's one last piece o' wisdom I need tay gee ya.' Thomas is perplexed but says, 'oh, okay, what's that then? '

'Ya should lock yer back dhor' Thomas is now watching an old man fade away and is wondering what this piece of 'whesdom' might mean? He asks, Rhob simply says, 'Oi tharts simple, eets to keep old farts oot yer hoouse!'

With that the old man lay back and drew his last breath. Thomas realising then that the click he heard was the old man closing the back door to their house. He stood and shook his head, Rhob was gone. He slipped off this mortal coil rather quickly. A look around and all that was left was the empty duffle bag and two gibby sticks. Thomas took those and headed back out to the street. He grabbed his phone and started to dial 000, then stopped, what would he tell them? What questions would they ask, his head headed off in another direction, it meant there would be too much kerfuffle and pondering. Would Thomas then be accused of killing the lonely old man?

He made a decision, a simple task, the local library was just up the street, he went, created a free email account, and then sent an anonymous message to the police, then deleted the account. A few days later he noticed a fence repair van in that side street while on the bus. The news mentioned that an old man had been found in a shen in that suburb.

Mel came in the door that afternoon with a smile from ear to ear. 'Tom, I've got great news!' 'Smiled back and said 'Aye, you'll be needin' a howdy!' She was puzzled by that, shook her head and told him she was pregnant! The pair cheered and hugged, then Mel asked, 'Oh and by the way, what's a howdy?'

Thomas just said 'Oh you can look that up… If it's a boy can we call him Rob?'