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Taken from *Oscar and the Mystery of the Glowing Orbs* by Don Everts

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)

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## OSCAR CLIMBS THE STEEPEST STEPS

Oscar Owens stood in the morning sun staring down at his Bilbo Baggins T-shirt.

He had washed it and carefully laid it out the night before because it was, by far, his favorite shirt. But in the light of day, Oscar was suddenly having second thoughts. *Is this something a high schooler would wear?*

“Hijo!” Amá called from downstairs, “It’s time to go!”

Oscar checked the time and started rooting frantically through his dresser. His heart beat double time as he pulled out shirt after shirt with images of dragons or elves or wizards or enchanted forests. *Do I own even a single normal shirt?*

While searching, Oscar couldn’t help but relive the argument he’d had with his dad and stepmom during dinner the night before. It turned out their new house was too close to the high school for Oscar to take a bus, so Dad and Amá calmly suggested Oscar just walk.

Usually Oscar tried not to make a huge deal about his legs around his parents, knowing how guilty they still felt about the accident. But this crossed a line. Do the Oscar Shuffle all the way through downtown while kids in buses and cars stare at the new freak in town? No way! Oscar’s voice had cracked in that embarrassing new way as he tried to get them to see how unfair they were being.

Eventually Amá agreed to drop Oscar off on the first day. But after that? She was unbending, “Oscar, you’re a high schooler now. It’s time to act like it.”

Oscar couldn't believe her words, or Dad's firm agreement. So. Unfair.

And now his stepmom was yelling from downstairs because he was going to be late. Since the accident four years ago, Oscar had found that nothing was worse than shuffling into a classroom with everyone already seated, all eyes watching you make your way to your desk. So he quickly threw on trusty Bilbo, ran a comb through his stubborn brown hair, and took a last look at himself in the mirror.

Oscar felt average in size and looks. Nothing too special about him, he thought.

Oscar glanced down at the reflection of Bilbo in the mirror and the backward reflection of the quote that had made him smile when he first saw the shirt: *"I think I'm quite ready for another adventure."*

Oscar wasn't sure he felt the same.

"Vamos!" Amá's voice had a ring of urgency to it.

"Ya voy!" Oscar said to the open door and then looked back into his own eyes in the mirror. *Okay then, Oscar.* And with that he grabbed the faded gray JanSport he'd been using since sixth grade and shuffled downstairs.

In the end, the drive only took two minutes.

The short trip made Oscar feel silly for insisting on the ride and made his stomach start to churn like an off-balance washing machine.

Amá pulled up to the curb and put the white station wagon into park. Oscar just sat there staring at the front steps while a group of loud kids streamed around their car toward the imposing redbrick building.

Eventually Amá spoke softly. "Te amo, Hijo."

Oscar didn't dare turn to respond. Finally he opened the door and shot a gruff "See ya tonight" over his shoulder. It came out rougher than he intended, but he couldn't worry about Amá's feelings right now.

He shut the door and slowly shuffled away from the car toward the unfamiliar redbrick steps. He stopped and glared up at the imposing front door he'd been dreading. "Centerville High School" it read above the door. Sounded innocent enough. But for some reason Oscar was reminded of the door he'd read about in *Coraline*, a seemingly ordinary door that wound up leading to a dangerous place.

Oscar shook away the thought and started up.

The steps felt annoyingly steep to Oscar, almost *unnaturally* steep. As he climbed up each step, slower than all the strangers around him, Oscar grumped his way, for the hundredth time, through a set of well-worn questions.

Why did Dad and Amá have to get new jobs?

Why did they drag Oscar away from everything he'd ever known?

And why in the world did they move into an old house that was possibly haunted?

Oscar paused on the top step, considering the open door in front of him, a scary threshold he wasn't sure he was ready to cross.



## **OSCAR GETS DRAGGED ACROSS THE STATE**

When Oscar's parents first told him they were moving to Centerville, he assumed they must be kidding. It was just too cliché.

Being forced to move right before his freshman year of high school? That's the kind of thing they make movies about, right? And whether it's a comedy or a scary movie, there's always a whole lot of drama for the unlucky teenager whose parents drag them to a new town. So Oscar figured it must be some sort of joke.

But it turned out that he, Oscar Owens, was that unlucky teenager. And they were indeed moving.

Dad and Amá had gently explained everything to Oscar: how Amá got a job offer to teach Spanish at State College, how Dad was "seizing the day" and "becoming the proprietor of a literary dispensary," as he explained in typical nerdy Dad-speak.

But Oscar barely registered anything after "we're moving." He just sat there petting his orange cat, Gollum. He tried to distract himself from this horrible new reality by debating internally whether his situation was more like the start of a scary movie (unlucky teenager and lots of drama) or a fantasy novel (unsuspecting hobbit and a new adventure).

"Oscar!" Amá broke into Oscar's thoughts, talking with the glee of someone who had just won the lottery. "You'll never believe it! There's this beautiful Victorian house that's walking distance to the college, to Dad's new bookstore, *and* to your new high school. We saw it when we were on our tour. It's beautiful and has a huge wraparound porch and looks like an old mansion!"

She looked over at Dad, and they both couldn't help but grin. "It needs some work, but . . . we bought it!" She took Dad's white hand into her brown one, and they were both beaming.

*Definitely the start of a scary movie*, Oscar thought.

Over the coming weeks, Oscar had to admit the idea of living in an old mansion did get his attention. He'd always dreamed

of filming a movie with his friends from the neighborhood, but the suburbs of River City never presented any interesting locations. So that part of the move was actually intriguing to Oscar. But he couldn't let his parents know that.

And frankly, when it came right down to it, Oscar didn't really care how exciting it sounded. It wouldn't have mattered if they were going to live in a castle with its own moat and dragon and fluttering silver flags with an Owens coat of arms on them. If it was all the way across the state from the only neighborhood and only friends he'd ever known, Oscar wasn't interested.

And he did *not* hide that fact from his parents.



When the dark day of their departure finally came, all the kids from the neighborhood showed up to say goodbye—including Regan.

Regan was probably Oscar's best friend, though he never would have told her that. She and that small gaggle of neighborhood friends who came to see him off meant everything to Oscar.

The truth was, Oscar wasn't the most popular kid in school. And he knew it. Oscar figured most kids just couldn't get over the fact that he walked a little different because of his shorter left leg. The doctors called his condition "anisomelia." But, *whatever*, Oscar had always thought. He had his friends and they had him. And they were about to venture side by side into the jungle of high school.

Except now they weren't.

Now Oscar was going to be dragged across the state, away from everything that meant anything to him.

When the time came, Oscar climbed into the cab of the large moving truck and looked out the passenger window as Dad started the loud engine. Oscar waved meekly at his friends and then, without warning, the large truck lurched forward and left Oscar's house and friends behind.

Oscar looked in the side mirror and watched his friends grow smaller as the truck drove away. *That would make a cool shot in a movie*, Oscar thought, as he watched his friends shrink and then get wiped from his view altogether when Dad turned the corner.

Oscar could barely talk for the first half hour of the drive.

Amá drove the small white station wagon with Abuela and the pets—Oscar's Gollum and Abuela's tan chihuahua, ChiChi. Dad and Oscar were crossing the state in a huge orange moving truck that Dad was obviously proud to be driving. He sat up real straight and told Oscar all about the features of the twenty-six-foot moving truck that held all their belongings.

Oscar couldn't have cared less.

As they made the long drive across the state, Oscar just stared out the window and thought about his friends from the neighborhood who had come to the house to say goodbye. And he thought about Regan.

After a while, Oscar watched Dad operate the surprisingly large steering wheel and thought about how hard Dad had worked the last three months—getting the house ready to sell, getting everything packed, putting up with Oscar's constant complaining.

Oscar couldn't help but feel a little bad about all the complaining, so as an olive branch, he asked Dad about the used bookstore he'd bought.

Dad's eyes went wide, and he talked about the Benevolent Booklover Bookstore for the rest of the long drive.



Eventually, Dad steered the large moving truck off the freeway and onto the streets of Centerville, navigating through the small downtown and pulling up to the curb in front of their new home.

Oscar had seen pictures of the house online, of course, but it's something else to be standing on the sidewalk right in front of a three-story, 135-year-old Victorian home.

The house was set back from Main Street, a few old trees shading the front yard. The same two faded pastel colors were on all the railings and columns and stairs and trim of the house: light pink and light blue. It gave off a real haunted doll-house vibe. It didn't help that the stone sidewalk leading up to the front steps was uneven or that the wide front porch was completely overgrown with dark green vines.

Dad stood on the sidewalk next to Oscar, beaming. "There she is, Oscar."

"Yeah. It's something." Oscar knew Dad wanted him to like the place, but it's hard to be excited about anything when you've just put five hours between you and everything you've ever cared about.

When Amá and Abuela pulled up in the white station wagon, Oscar could tell Gollum and ChiChi hadn't enjoyed the long ride either. The two pets were freaking out as Amá and Abuela got out of the car, speaking Spanish with volume and passion. Normally they tried not to speak Spanish when Dad was around, so it must have been some ride.

Dad put his arm around Amá and they gazed together at their new home. "Well, Amor? Remember this beauty?" They were both smiling.

Abuela was off inspecting the nearest tree in the yard, *tsk-ing* about a thick tan vine that had been allowed to grow up and spread all throughout the tree. She pointed out to Oscar how it branched everywhere, clinging to every limb and twig as it spread out. “Nieto, este vine is killing este arbol.”

Abuela made her way to the porch, but Oscar stayed, staring up at the tree. Had Abuela not pointed the vine out, he never would have even seen it. It just blended right into the tree.

Maybe it was Oscar’s proximity to the spooky-looking old house, but the camouflaged vine that was silently strangling the tree felt sort of ominous to Oscar. A hidden killer in plain sight for years, and no one had eyes to see it until Abuela stepped out of the station wagon? It gave Oscar the creeps.

A loud *SCREECH* made Oscar flinch . . . but it was only Gollum wanting to get out of the car.

Oscar pulled her out and stood there petting her, trying to calm her. “It’s okay, Gollum. Everything’s gonna be okay.”

Gollum did not look convinced.



Dad struggled with the ancient lock on the dark front door, trying to get the old iron key to work. *Good work by the props department*, thought Oscar, eyeing the heavy key and the unbelievably dark wood of the front door. That dark wood really stood out against all the weathered and peeling pastels. Oscar imagined the door must have been stained and restained over the years with oil or sap. Or blood even.

When Dad finally got the door unlocked and pushed it open, his “Ta-da!” was upstaged by a loud *CREAK* as the door swung open.

Stepping across the threshold, Oscar genuinely wondered if he would see a ghost.

He wondered the same thing every time the family walked into another room on their tour of the house. Back in River City they lived in a boring rectangle of a house. Very predictable. Very carpeted. Very drywalled. Oscar never expected to see anything supernatural back in River City. But inside this old house? A ghost just seemed like the most natural thing to see in a place like this.

As the tour continued, Oscar noticed that everything about the old house, from the cold stone basement to the stuffy dark attic, was unique and different and, he had to admit, sort of cool. Glass doorknobs. Stained-glass lights. Intricate leaded windows. Dark wooden spindles holding up the curved railing of the staircase.

Oscar felt like he had walked onto a movie set. A movie set *with uneven floors*, he noticed as he shuffled from room to room in his corrective shoes.

But as cool as the place seemed, Oscar just couldn't escape the ugly fact that it was so far away from Regan and his friends back in River City. He kept texting them pictures of the house as Dad led the family around, even adding some pretty funny comments about where you could film different scenes of a scary movie here and there. But none of them replied.

Oscar figured they must have been doing something important.

The tour got cut short when the sun began to set and Dad made an unfortunate discovery. "Well, family. Seems the electric company hasn't been made aware of our presence yet. Pretty funny, right?"

Oscar didn't think it was funny at all. Spend the night in this old house with no lights? Not creepy at all!



As the sun was setting, they started carrying in the mattresses and bedding. Oscar helped Abuela get set up in her little apartment toward the back of the house first. She carried ChiChi around in her thin brown arms, talking to him in Spanish, while Oscar brought in what he could to make her comfortable for the night. Abuela refused the flashlight Dad offered her, preferring to use some candles and matches she'd found in one of the kitchen cabinets. *A nice touch for the movie*, Oscar thought, watching the way her candle cast long, moving shadows wherever she went.

After helping Abuela get settled, Oscar slowly dragged his twin mattress up the curving wooden stairs and down the hall to his big new bedroom.

He plopped the mattress down in the middle of his quickly darkening room and sat down on it.

"Gollum!" Oscar called to no avail. She was probably off exploring the endless nooks and crannies of the house.

The room seemed very large with just Oscar in it.

Oscar lay back on his mattress, allowing his legs to recuperate from all the exertion.

After a few moments, he heard a strange *GROAN* coming from the nearest wall and sat up.

*That was just old pipes, right?*

It must have been, Oscar reasoned, as the last light of the setting sun seemed to get snuffed out and the light grays of dusk were replaced by the dark grays of night.

Oscar quickly retrieved his backpack and suitcase from the truck and carried them up to his room. As the nature sounds from outside quieted down, the odd sounds within the house seemed to get dialed up.

Floorboards *CREAKED*.

Pipes *MOANED*.

Oscar thought he heard a muted sort of *THUD* from the attic above.

As he sat listening, wide-eyed, to the 135-year-old house around him, images of every bad guy and evil force and malevolent spirit from the many fantasy books he'd read over the years came, unbidden, to Oscar's mind.

Eventually Oscar turned on his phone's flashlight and got ready for bed. But sleep felt like an impossibility.

Oscar's heart beat faster with every strange noise he heard. He felt a strange chill. Oscar pulled a gray felt blanket out of his suitcase and wrapped it around himself like a cape where he sat in the middle of the room. He'd gotten the blanket for Christmas when he was eight years old, and it had always brought him comfort.

He wasn't sure the blanket worked in Centerville. Oscar kept scanning the corners of the room, listening to the unfamiliar sounds all around him.

He texted Regan and his friends again.

He even tried to pray as he pulled his felt blanket tighter around him. *Our Father who art in heaven . . .* The familiar words of the Lord's Prayer spilled, rote and rapid, into the dark room around him. Oscar had prayed those words hundreds of times in church over the years, but this time the part about "delivering us from evil" seemed especially fitting. He repeated that phrase several times, like an incantation to ward off evil spirits or floating ghosts. *Deliver us from evil. Deliver us from evil . . .*

Eventually, Oscar turned off the flashlight on his phone.

As he lay in the dark, Oscar's thoughts gradually shifted to something far scarier than the possibly haunted house around him: he only had two weeks until the school year started.

Only fourteen days until he would have to walk into Center-ville High School and make his way along its unfamiliar halls.

Because of his legs being two different lengths, Oscar dreaded the idea of walking in front of a bunch of strangers. And dealing with the inevitable looks. And trying to make new friends.

Wiping tears away with a corner of his gray felt blanket, Oscar felt like he was eight years old again.

He waited in the dark for sleep to come.



## **OSCAR GOES TO HIGH SCHOOL**

The next two weeks flew by far too fast.

Oscar's days were mostly filled up with helping his family. He helped Dad carry furniture. He helped Amá unpack boxes. He helped Abuela straighten up the chicken coop in the backyard. As he cleaned out the chickens' nesting boxes, he could hear Abuela talking in Spanish to the six hens that had come with the house: "Estás bonita, gallina. Soy tu abuela ahora."

When he wasn't helping his family, Oscar spent a lot of time alone in his new room, waiting for the inevitable. He kept calling for his cat, Gollum, but she had become a ruthless hunter since moving into the house—leaving small gray mice for the family to find at the bottom of the stairs each morning. It seemed she couldn't be bothered to come around and be petted by Oscar anymore.

So Oscar was alone in his room a fair amount of the time. He zombie scrolled on his phone. He tried different ways to

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