

AN EXTRACT FROM THE WITCH'S HEADSTONE

By Neil Gaiman

There was a witch buried at the edge of the graveyard; it was common knowledge. Bod had been told to keep away from that corner of the world by Mrs. Owens as far back as he could remember.

“Why?” he asked.

“’Tain’t healthy for a living body,” said Mrs. Owens. “There’s damp down that end of things. It’s practically a marsh. You’ll catch your death.”

Mr. Owens himself was more evasive and less imaginative. “It’s not a good place” was all he said.

The graveyard proper ended at the bottom of the hill, beneath the old apple tree, with a fence of rustbrown iron railings, each topped with a small, rusting spearhead, but there was a wasteland beyond that, a mass of nettles and weeds, of brambles and autumnal rubbish, and Bod, who was a good boy, on the whole, and obedient, did not push between the railings, but he went down there and looked through. He knew he wasn’t being told the whole story, and it irritated him.

Bod went back up the hill, to the abandoned church in the middle of the graveyard, and he waited until it got dark. As twilight edged from gray to purple there was a noise in the spire, like a fluttering of heavy velvet, and Silas left his resting place in the belfry and clambered headfirst down the spire.

“What’s in the far corner of the graveyard,” asked Bod. “Past Harrison Westwood, Baker of this Parish, and his wives, Marion and Joan?”

“Why do you ask?” said his guardian, brushing the dust from his black suit with ivory fingers.

Bod shrugged. “Just wondered.”

“It’s unconsecrated ground,” said Silas. “Do you know what that means?”

“Not really,” said Bod.

Silas walked across the path without disturbing a fallen leaf, and sat down on the stone bench, beside Bod. “There are those,” he said in his silken voice, “who believe that all land is sacred. That it is sacred before we come to it, and sacred after. But here, in your land, they bless the churches and the ground

they set aside to bury people in, to make it holy. But they leave land unconsecrated beside the sacred ground, potter’s fields to bury the criminals and the suicides or those who were not of the faith.”

“So the people buried in the ground on the other side of the fence are bad people?”

Silas raised one perfect eyebrow. “Mm? Oh, not at all. Let’s see, it’s been a while since I’ve been down that way. But I don’t remember anyone particularly evil. Remember, in days gone by you could be hanged for stealing a shilling. And there are always people who find their lives have become so unsupportable they believe the best thing they could do would be to hasten their transition to another plane of existence.”

“They kill themselves, you mean?” said Bod. He was about eight years old, wide-eyed and inquisitive, and he was not stupid.

“Indeed.”

“Does it work? Are they happier dead?”

Silas grinned so wide and sudden that he showed his fangs. “Sometimes. Mostly, no. It’s like the people who believe they’ll be happy if they go and live somewhere else, but who learn it doesn’t work that way. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you. If you see what I mean.”

“Sort of,” said Bod.

Silas reached down and ruffled the boy’s hair.

Bod said, “What about the witch?”

“Yes. Exactly,” said Silas. “Suicides, criminals, and witches. Those who died unshriven.” He stood up, a midnight shadow in the twilight. “All this talking,” he said, “and I have not even had my breakfast.

While you will be late for lessons.” In the twilight of the graveyard there was a silent implosion, a flutter of velvet darkness, and Silas was gone.