

The Woman in Black

As I neared the ruins, I could see clearly that they were indeed of some ancient chapel, perhaps monastic in origin, and all broken-down and crumbling, with some of the stones and rubble fallen, probably in recent gales, and lying about in the grass. The ground sloped a little down to the estuary shore and, as I passed under one of the old arches, I startled a bird, which rose up and away over my head with loudly beating wings and a harsh croaking cry that echoed all around the old walls and was taken up by another, some distance away. It was an ugly, satanic-looking thing, like some species of sea-vulture – if such a thing existed – and I could not suppress a shudder as its shadow passed over me, and I watched its ungainly flight away towards the sea with relief. Then I saw that the ground at my feet and the fallen stones between were a foul mess of droppings, and guessed that these birds must nest and roost in the walls above.

Otherwise, I rather liked this lonely spot, and thought how it would be on a warm evening at midsummer, when the breezes blew balmily from off the sea, across the tall grasses, and wild flowers of white and yellow and pink climbed and bloomed among the broken stones, the shadows lengthened gently, and June birds poured out their finest songs, with the faint lap and wash of water in the distance.

So musing, I emerged into a small burial ground. It was enclosed by the remains of a wall, and I stopped in astonishment at the sight. There were perhaps fifty old gravestones, most of them leaning over or completely fallen, covered in patches of greenish-yellow lichen and moss, scoured pale by the salt wind, and stained by years of driven rain. The mounds were grassy, and weed-covered, or else they had disappeared altogether, sunken and slipped down. No names or dates were now decipherable, and the whole place had a decayed and abandoned air.

Ahead, where the wall ended in a heap of dust and rubble, lay the grey water of the estuary. As I stood, wondering, the last light went from the sun, and the wind rose in a gust, and rustled through the grass. Above my head, that unpleasant, snake-necked bird came gliding back towards the ruins, and I saw that its beak was hooked around a fish that writhed and struggled helplessly. I watched the creature alight and, as it did so, it disturbed some of the stones, which toppled and fell out of sight somewhere.

Suddenly conscious of the cold and the extreme bleakness and eeriness of the spot and of the gathering dusk of the November afternoon, and not wanting my spirits to become so depressed that I might begin to be affected by all sorts of morbid fancies, I was about to leave, and walk briskly back to the house, where I intended to switch on a good many lights and even light a small fire if it were possible, before beginning my preliminary work on Mrs Drablow's papers. But, as I turned away, I glanced once again round the burial ground and then I saw again the woman with the wasted face, who had been at Mrs Drablow's funeral. She was at the far end of the plot, close to one of the few upright headstones, and she wore the same black clothing and bonnet, but it seemed to have slipped back so that I could make out her face a little more clearly.

In the greyness of the fading light, it had the sheen and pallor not of flesh so much as of bone itself.

Extract from *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill

The Woman in the Graveyard

An icy breeze snaked around my ankles as I pushed open the splintered, wooden gate. It wasn't long ago that I had been curled up in front of the fire, watching TV, and I longed to be back there.

I looked across the damp, grey graveyard towards the church. The only time I had ever had to come here before was for our Sam's christening, and I must have been about five. The church looked tired somehow. There hadn't been a vicar here for ages now, about four years I thought, and the lifelessness of the congregation seemed to have taken its toll.

Rain trickled down the cracked tiles on the roof, seeping into the guttering and smearing across the old stained glass that looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in a long time. The colours had all faded to a brownish-grey, with only a hint of red bursting through every now and again. Weeds stretched and clambered up the side of the porch and I could see evidence of nocturnal visitors everywhere I looked; rabbit droppings, molehills, the footprints of foxes and cobwebs. The local wildlife must know that nobody ever comes up here, and make it their human-free hangout! I smiled to myself, happy at the thought of the rabbits partying with the spiders, but then felt a sudden shiver through my bones, which made me shake and pull my old coat tighter around my body; the snug fabric felt comforting around my skin. I looked to the church door, heavy, wooden and dark. The planks were studded with black, iron rivets, which looked medieval and strong.

As I stepped down into the cool stone porch, the smell of damp and rotting foliage hit the back of my nostrils, making me gasp, and again I felt that chill. I turned, suddenly aware of something changing in the air behind me, something cooling, making me nervous.

'Just get on with it,' I muttered to myself, and it was a shock to hear my voice after the near silence of the graveyard. I stepped towards the door and lifted the black, iron door handle, the weight of which reminded me of the stories I had heard of shackles and chains in Mrs Brown's history classes – like a torture chamber.

A mist had gathered, curling around the graveyard like a fleet of ghosts. I looked back over my shoulder and saw a shadow by one of the gravestones. Suddenly nervous, my heart beating a little faster, I turned to look.

The shadow became a shape, which became a figure, crouching behind a gravestone, hunched over like someone praying. My nervousness turned to fear; my heart stopped, I couldn't breathe, my eyes fixated on the figure dressed in black behind the stones. Suddenly I saw a movement, a flicker of a skirt, a silent swish on the grass; the figure began to stand, and turn. I stood frozen to the spot, standing under the arch of the church porch, not sure whether to look away or stay watching – half enthralled, half terrified, hairs standing up on my arms and the back of my neck. As the woman stood up I saw that she was dressed entirely in black, her skirt was to the floor and she had on a jacket, tightly buttoned around her skeletal frame. Her head was still bowed as she turned to me, holding up the single white flower she had in her hand; she lifted her head, slowly, determinedly, and as her white face and dark eyes raised towards me, I felt my blood run cold.

Anna Mackenzie

