



CHAPTER EIGHT

Leavings and Partings

SOMETIMES HE COULD NO longer see the dead. It had begun a month or two previously, in April or in May. At first it had only happened occasionally, but now it seemed to be happening more and more.

The world was changing.

Bod wandered over to the northwestern part of the graveyard, to the tangle of ivy that hung from a yew tree and half-blocked the far exit from the Egyptian Walk. He saw a red fox and a large black cat, with a white collar and paws, who sat conversing together in the middle of the path. At Bod's approach they looked up, startled, then fled into the undergrowth, as if they had been caught conspiring.

Odd, he thought. He had known that fox since it had been a cub, and the cat had prowled through the graveyard for as long as Bod could remember. They knew him. If they were feeling friendly they even let him pet them.

Bod started to slip through the ivy but he found his way blocked. He bent down, pushed the ivy out of the way and

squeezed through. He walked down the path carefully, avoiding the ruts and holes until he reached the impressive stone that marked the final resting place of Alonso Tomás García Jones (1837–1905, *Traveler Lay Down Thy Staff*).

Bod had been coming down here every few days for several months: Alonso Jones had been all over the world, and he took great pleasure in telling Bod stories of his travels. He would begin by saying, "Nothing interesting has ever happened to me," then would add, gloomily, "and I have told you all my tales," and then his eyes would flash, and he would remark, "Except . . . did I ever tell you about . . . ?" And whatever the next words were: "The time I had to escape from Moscow?" or "The time I lost an Alaskan gold mine, worth a fortune?" or "The cattle stampede on the pampas?" Bod would always shake his head and look expectant and soon enough his head would be swimming with tales of derring-do and high adventure, tales of beautiful maidens kissed, of evildoers shot with pistols or fought with swords, of bags of gold, of diamonds as big as the tip of your thumb, of lost cities and of vast mountains, of steam-trains and clipper ships, of pampas, oceans, deserts, tundra.

Bod walked over to the pointed stone—tall, carved with upside-down torches, and he waited, but saw no one. He called to Alonso Jones, even knocked on the side of the stone, but there was no response. Bod leaned down, to push his head into the grave and call his friend, but instead of his head slipping through the solid matter like a shadow passing through a deeper shadow, his head met the ground

with a hard and painful thump. He called again, but saw nothing and no one, and, carefully, he made his way out of the tangle of greenery and of grey stones and back to the path. Three magpies perched in a hawthorn tree took wing as he passed them.

He did not see another soul until he reached the graveyard's southwestern slope, where the familiar shape of Mother Slaughter, tiny in her high bonnet and her cloak, could be seen, walking between the gravestones, head bent, looking at wildflowers.

"Here, boy!" she called. "There's nasturshalums growing wild over here. Why don't you pick some for me, and put them over by my stone."

So Bod picked the red and yellow nasturtiums, and he carried them over to Mother Slaughter's headstone, so cracked and worn and weathered that all it said now was,

LAUGH

which had puzzled the local historians for over a hundred years. He put down the flowers in front of the stone, respectfully.

Mother Slaughter smiled at him. "You're a good lad. I don't know what we'll do without you."

"Thank you," said Bod. Then, "Where is everyone? You're the first person I've seen tonight."

Mother Slaughter peered at him sharply. "What did you do to your forehead?" she asked.

"I bumped it, on Mr. Jones's grave. It was solid. I . . ."

But Mother Slaughter was pursing her lips and tilting

her head. Bright old eyes scrutinized Bod from beneath her bonnet. "I called you *boy*, didn't I? But time passes in the blink of an eye, and it's a young man you are now, isn't it? How old are you?"

"About fifteen, I think. Though I still feel the same as I always did," Bod said, but Mother Slaughter interrupted, "And I still feels like I done when I was a tiny slip of a thing, making daisy chains in the old pasture. You're always you, and that don't change, and you're always changing, and there's nothing you can do about it."

She sat down on her broken stone, and said, "I remember you the night you came here, boy. I says, 'We can't let the little fellow leave,' and your mother agrees, and all of them starts argufying and what-not until the Lady on the Grey rides up. 'People of the Graveyard,' she says, 'Listen to Mother Slaughter. Have you not got any charity in your bones?' and then all of them agreed with me." She trailed off, shook her little head, "There's not much happens here to make one day unlike the next. The seasons change. The ivy grows. Stones fall over. But you coming here . . . well, I'm glad you did, that's all."

She stood up and pulled a grubby piece of linen from her sleeve, spat on it, and reached up as high as she could and scrubbed the blood from Bod's forehead. "There, that ought to make you look presentable," she said, severely. "Seeing as I don't know when next I'll see you, anyway. Keep safe."

Feeling discomfited in a way he could not remember

having felt before, Bod made his way back to the Owensens' tomb, and was pleased to see both of his parents waiting for him beside it. As he got closer, his pleasure turned into concern: why did Mr. and Mrs. Owens stand like that, arranged on each side of the tomb like characters from a stained-glass window? He could not read their faces.

His father took a step forward and said, "Evening, Bod. I trust you are keeping well."

"Tolerably well," said Bod, which was what Mr. Owens always said to his friends when they asked him the same question.

Mr. Owens said, "Mistress Owens and I spent our lives wishing that we had a child. I do not believe that we could have ever had a better young man than you, Bod." He looked up at his son with pride.

Bod said, "Well, yes, thank you, but . . ." He turned to his mother, certain he could get her to tell him what was happening, but she was no longer there. "Where did she go?"

"Oh. Yes." Mr. Owens seemed ill at ease. "Ah, you know Betsy. There's things, times. When, well, you don't know what to say. You know?"

"No," said Bod.

"I expect Silas is waiting for you," said his father, and then he was gone.

It was past midnight. Bod began to walk toward the old chapel. The tree that grew out of the gutter on the spire had fallen in the last storm, taking a handful of the slate-black roof tiles with it.

Bod waited on the grey wooden bench, but there was no sign of Silas.

The wind gusted. It was late on a summer's night, when the twilight lasts forever, and it was warm, but still, Bod felt goose-pimples rising on his arms.

A voice by his ear said, "Say you'll miss me, you lumpkin."

"Liza?" said Bod. He had not seen or heard from the witch-girl for over a year—not since the night of the Jacks of All Trades. "Where have you been?"

"Watching," she said. "Does a lady have to tell everything she does?"

"Watching *me*?" asked Bod

Liza's voice, close to his ear, said, "Truly, life is wasted on the living, Nobody Owens. For one of us is too foolish to live, and it is not I. Say you will miss me."

"Where are you going?" asked Bod. Then, "Of course I will miss you, wherever you go . . ."

"Too stupid," whispered Liza Hempstock's voice, and he could feel the touch of her hand on his hand. "Too stupid to live." The touch of her lips against his cheek, against the corner of his lips. She kissed him gently and he was too perplexed, too utterly wrong-footed, to know what to do.

Her voice said, "I will miss you too. Always." A breath of wind ruffled his hair, if it was not the touch of her hand, and then he was, he knew, alone on the bench.

He got up.

Bod walked over to the chapel door, lifted the stone

beside the porch and pulled out the spare key, left there by a long-dead sexton. He unlocked the big wooden door without even testing to see if he could slip through it. It creaked open, protesting.

The inside of the chapel was dark, and Bod found himself squinting as he tried to see.

"Come in, Bod." It was Silas's voice.

"I can't see anything," said Bod. "It's too dark."

"Already?" said Silas. He sighed. Bod heard a velvet rustle, then a match was struck, and it flamed, and was used to light two huge candles that sat on great carved wooden candlesticks at the back of the room. In the candlelight, Bod could see his guardian standing beside a large leather chest, of the kind they call a steamer trunk—big enough that a tall man could have curled up and slept inside it. Beside it was Silas's black leather bag, which Bod had seen before, on a handful of occasions, but which he still found impressive.

The steamer trunk was lined with whiteness. Bod put a hand into the empty trunk, touched the silk lining, touched dried earth.

"Is this where you sleep?" he asked.

"When I am far from my house, yes," said Silas.

Bod was taken aback: Silas had been here as long as he could remember and before. "Isn't *this* your home?"

Silas shook his head. "My house is a long, long way from here," said Silas. "That is, if it is still habitable. There have been problems in my native land, and I am far from certain

what I will find on my return."

"You're going back?" asked Bod. Things that had been immutable were changing. "You're really leaving? But. You're my guardian."

"I *was* your guardian. But you are old enough to guard yourself. I have other things to protect."

Silas closed the lid of the brown leather trunk, and began to do up the straps and the buckles.

"Can't I stay here? In the graveyard?"

"You must not," said Silas, more gently than Bod could remember him ever saying anything. "All the people here have had their lives, Bod, even if they were short ones. Now it's your turn. You need to live."

"Can I come with you?"

Silas shook his head.

"Will I see you again?"

"Perhaps." There was kindness in Silas's voice, and something more. "And whether you see me or not, I have no doubt that I will see you." He put the leather trunk against the wall, walked over to the door in the far corner. "Follow me." Bod walked behind Silas, followed him down the small spiral staircase to the crypt. "I took the liberty of packing a case for you," Silas explained, as they reached the bottom.

On top of the box of mildewed hymn books was a small leather suitcase, a miniature twin to Silas's own. "Your possessions are all in there," said Silas.

Bod said, "Tell me about the Honour Guard, Silas. You're

in it. Miss Lupescu was. Who else? Are there a lot of you? What do you do?"

"We don't do enough," said Silas. "And mostly, we guard the borderlands. We protect the borders of things."

"What kind of borders?"

Silas said nothing.

"You mean like stopping the man Jack and his people?"

Silas said, "We do what we have to." He sounded weary.

"But you did the right thing. I mean, stopping the Jacks. They were terrible. They were monsters."

Silas took a step closer to Bod, which made the youth tilt back his head to look up at the tall man's pale face. Silas said, "I have not always done the right thing. When I was younger . . . I did worse things than Jack. Worse than any of them. I was the monster, then, Bod, and worse than any monster."

It did not even cross Bod's mind to wonder if his guardian was lying or joking. He knew that he was being told the truth. He said, "But you aren't that any longer, are you?"

Silas said, "People can change," and then fell silent. Bod wondered if his guardian—if Silas—was remembering. Then, "It was an honor to be your guardian, young man." His hand vanished inside his cloak, reappeared holding a battered old wallet. "This is for you. Take it."

Bod took the wallet, but did not open it.

"It contains money. Enough to give you a start in the world, but nothing more."

Bod said, "I went to see Alonso Jones today but he wasn't there, or if he was I couldn't see him. I wanted him to tell me about distant places he'd visited. Islands and porpoises and glaciers and mountains. Places where people dress and eat in the strangest ways." Bod hesitated. Then, "Those places. They're still there. I mean, there's a whole world out there. Can I see it? Can I go there?"

Silas nodded. "There is a whole world out there, yes. You have a passport in the inner pocket of your suitcase. It's made out in the name of Nobody Owens. And was not easy to obtain."

Bod said, "If I change my mind can I come back here?" And then he answered his own question. "If I come back, it will be a place, but it won't be home any longer."

Silas said, "Would you like me to walk you to the front gate?"

Bod shook his head. "Best if I do it on my own. Um. Silas. If you're ever in trouble, call me. I'll come and help."

"I," said Silas, "do not get into trouble."

"No. I don't suppose you do. But still."

It was dark in the crypt, and it smelled of mildew and damp and old stones, and it seemed, for the first time, very small.

Bod said, "I want to see life. I want to hold it in my hands. I want to leave a footprint on the sand of a desert island. I want to play football with people. I want," he said, and then he paused and he thought. "I want *everything*."

"Good," said Silas. Then he put up his hand as if he were

brushing away the hair from his eyes—a most uncharacteristic gesture. He said, "If ever it transpires that I am in trouble, I shall indeed send for you."

"Even though you don't get into trouble?"

"As you say."

There was something at the edge of Silas's lips that might have been a smile, and might have been regret, and might just have been a trick of the shadows.

"Good-bye, then, Silas." Bod held out his hand, as he had when he was a small boy, and Silas took it, in a cold hand the color of old ivory, and shook it gravely.

"Good-bye, Nobody Owens."

Bod picked up the little suitcase. He opened the door to let himself out of the crypt, walked back up the gentle slope to the path without looking back.

It was well after the gates were locked. He wondered as he reached them if the gates would still let him walk through them, or if he would have to go back into the chapel to get a key, but when he got to the entrance he found the small pedestrian gate was unlocked and wide open, as if it was waiting for him, as if the graveyard itself was bidding him good-bye.

One pale, plump figure waited in front of the open gate, and she smiled up at him as he came towards her, and there were tears in her eyes in the moonlight.

"Hullo, Mother," said Bod.

Mistress Owens rubbed her eyes with a knuckle, then dabbed at them with her apron, and she shook her head.

"Do you know what you're going to do now?" she asked.

"See the world," said Bod. "Get into trouble. Get out of trouble again. Visit jungles and volcanoes and deserts and islands. And people. I want to meet an awful lot of people."

Mistress Owens made no immediate reply. She stared up at him, and then she began to sing a song that Bod remembered, a song she used to sing him when he was a tiny thing, a song that she had used to lull him to sleep when he was small.

*"Sleep my little babby-oh
Sleep until you waken
When you wake you'll see the world
If I'm not mistaken . . ."*

"You're not," whispered Bod. "And I shall."

*"Kiss a lover
Dance a measure,
Find your name
And buried treasure . . ."*

Then the last lines of the song came back to Mistress Owens, and she sang them to her son.

*"Face your life
Its pain, its pleasure,
Leave no path untaken"*

"Leave no path untaken," repeated Bod. "A difficult challenge, but I can try my best."

He tried to put his arms around his mother then, as he had when he was a child, although he might as well have been trying to hold mist, for he was alone on the path.

He took a step forward, through the gate that took him out of the graveyard. He thought a voice said, "I am so proud of you, my son," but he might, perhaps, have imagined it.

The midsummer sky was already beginning to lighten in the east, and that was the way that Bod began to walk: down the hill, towards the living people, and the city, and the dawn.

There was a passport in his bag, money in his pocket. There was a smile dancing on his lips, although it was a wary smile, for the world is a bigger place than a little graveyard on a hill; and there would be dangers in it and mysteries, new friends to make, old friends to rediscover, mistakes to be made and many paths to be walked before he would, finally, return to the graveyard or ride with the Lady on the broad back of her great grey stallion.

But between now and then, there was Life; and Bod walked into it with his eyes and his heart wide open.

