

## THE WITCH – Shirley Jackson

The coach was so nearly empty that the little boy had a seat all to himself, and his mother sat across the aisle on the seat next to the little boy's sister, a baby with a piece of toast in one hand and a rattle in the other. She was strapped securely to the seat so she could sit up and look around, and whenever she began to slip slowly sideways the strap caught her and held her halfway until her mother turned around and straightened her again. The little boy was looking out the window and eating a cookie, and the mother was reading quietly, answering the little boy's questions without looking up.

"We're on a river," the little boy said. "This is a river and we're on it."

"Fine," his mother said.

"We're on a bridge over a river," the little boy said to himself.

The few other people in the coach were sitting at the other end of the car, if any of them had occasion to come down the aisle the little boy would look around and say, "Hi," and the stranger would usually say, "Hi," back and sometimes ask the little boy if he were enjoying the train ride, or even tell him he was a fine big fellow. These comments annoyed the little boy and he would turn irritably back to the window.

"There's a cow," he would say, or, sighing, "How far do we have to go?"

"Not much longer now," his mother said, each time.

Once the baby, who was very quiet and busy with her rattle and toast, which the mother would renew constantly, fell over too far sideways and banged her head. She began to cry, and for a minute there was noise and movement around the mother's seat. The little boy slid down from his own seat and ran across the aisle to pet his sister's feet and beg her not to cry, and finally the baby laughed and went back to her toast, and the little boy received a lollipop from his mother and went back to the window.

"I saw a witch," he said to his mother after a minute. "There was a big old ugly old bad old witch outside."

"Fine," his mother said.

"A big old ugly witch and I told her to go away and she went away," the little boy went on, in a quiet narrative to himself, "she came and said, 'I'm going to eat you up,' and I said, 'no, you're not,' and I chased her away, the bad old mean witch."

He stopped talking and looked up as the outside door of the coach opened and a man came in. He was an elderly man, with a pleasant face under white hair; his blue suit was only faintly touched by the disarray that comes from a long train trip. He was carrying a cigar, and when the little boy said, "Hi," the man gestured at him with the cigar and said, "Hello yourself, son." He stopped just beside the little boy's seat, and leaned against the back, looking down at the little boy, who craned his neck to look upward. "What you looking for out that window?" the man asked.

"Witches," the little boy said promptly. "Bad old mean witches."

"I see," the man said. "Find many?"

"My father smokes cigars," the little boy said.

"All men smoke cigars," the man said. "Someday you'll smoke a cigar, too."

"I'm a man already," the little boy said.

"How old are you?" the man asked.

The little boy at the eternal question, looked at the man suspiciously for a minute and then said, "Twenty-six. Eight hundred and forty eighty."

His mother lifted her head from the book. "Four," she said, smiling fondly at the little boy.

"Is that so?" the man said politely to the little boy. "Twenty-six." He nodded his head at the mother across the aisle. "Is that your mother?"

The little boy leaned forward to look and then said, "Yes, that's her."

"What's your name?" the man asked.

The little boy looked suspicious again. "MR. Jesus," he said.

"Johnny," the little boy's mother said. She caught the little boy's eye and frowned deeply.

"That's my sister other there," the little boy said to the man. "She's twelve-and-a-half."

"Do you love your sister?" the man asked. The little boy stared, and the man came around the side of the seat and sat down next to the little boy. "Listen," the man said, "shall I tell you about my little sister?"

The mother, who had looked up anxiously when the man sat down next to her little boy, went peacefully back to her book.

"Tell me about your sister," the little boy said. "Was she a witch?"

"Maybe," the man said.

The little boy laughed excitedly, and the man leaned back and puffed at his cigar. "Once upon a time," he began, "I had a little sister, just like

yours.” The little boy looked up at the man, nodding at every word. “My little sister,” the man went on, “was so pretty and so nice that I loved her more than anything else in the world. So shall I tell you what I did?”

The little boy nodded more vehemently, and the mother lifted her eyes from her book and smiled, listening.

“I bough her a rocking-horse and a doll and a million lollipops,” the man said, “and then I took her and put my hands around her neck and I pinched her and I pinched her until she was dead.”

The little boy gasped and the mother turned around, her smile fading. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again as the man went on, “And then I took and I cut her head off and I took her head—“

“Did you cut her all in pieces?” the little boy asked breathlessly.

“I cut off her head and her hands and her feet and her hair and her nose,” the man said, “and I hit her with a stick and I killed her.”

“Wait a minute,” the mother said, but the baby fell over sideways just at that minute and by the time the mother had set her up again the man was going on.

“And I took her head and I pulled out her hair and---“

“Your little *sister*?” the little boy prompted eagerly.

“My little sister,” the man said firmly. “And I put her head in a cage with a bear and the bear ate it all up.”

“Ate her *head* all up?” the little boy asked.

The mother put her book down, and came across the aisle. She stood next to the man and said, “Just what do you think you’re doing?” The man looked up courteously and she said, “Get out of here.”

“Did I frighten you?” the man said. He looked down at the little boy and nudged him with an elbow and he and the little boy laughed.

“This man cut up hi little sister,” the little boy said to his mother.

“I can very easily call the conductor,” the mother said to the man.

“The conductor will *eat* my mommy,” the little boy said. “We’ll chop her head off.”

“And little sister’s head, too,” the man said. He stood up, and the mother stood back to let him get out of the seat. “Don’t ever come back in this car,” she said.

“My mommy will eat *you*,” the little boy said to the man.

The man laughed, and the little boy laughed, and then the man said, “Excuse me,” to the mother and went past her out of the car. When the door had closed behind him the little boy said, “How much longer do we have to stay on this old train?”

“Not much longer,” the mother said. She stood looking at the little boy, wanting to say something, and finally she said, “You sit still and be a good boy. You may have another lollipop.”

The little boy climbed down eagerly and followed his mother back to her seat. She took a lollipop from a bag in her pocketbook and gave it to him. “What do you say?” she asked.

“Thank you,” the little boy said. “Did that man really cut his little sister up in pieces?”

“He was just teasing,” the mother said, and added urgently, “Just *teasing*.”

“Prob’ly,” the little boy said. With his lollipop he went back to his own seat, and settled himself to look out the window again. “Prob’ly he was a witch.”