

WITCH HOUSE

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Witch House

The following was written for the descendants of Henry Orne Ward; who was born in Salem, Massachusetts in the year 1818 and died in Morris, Illinois... 1884.

Part One: The House and the Cemetery

THE SEARCH FOR THE DISCOVERY of roots begins underground, and therefore our story begins where most end... in a graveyard. The one at the intersection of Time and Place. Its wrought iron gates screech open and the wind rushes over our faces. It's electrified by the charge of centuries of grief and loss emanating from under the ground. It was our blood that brought us to this mysterious land. We feel it simmer under our skin. It can't say where we're going, but blood knows where it's been.

Many folks have traveled to this sacred place before, but today we are alone. It's probably the weather. A constant drizzle dampens the outside of our clothes, but it is not enough to soak through. I slip my eyeglasses in my jacket pocket. They are useless to me when wet. Besides, I can see just fine without them. The spongy soil under our feet is guarded by icy leaves and grass. The earth can't decide whether to freeze or thaw.

There are still one or two leaves up above on the old oak tree, though they are far from green. Such a towering tree! It dangles above a section of plots like the wretched hand of fiendish necromancer at the far corner of the cemetery. From one sturdy trunk uncountable branches stretch beyond and just as many unseen roots below. It's for the best that we can't see them. The branches may pierce the sky, but the roots pierce the corpses. A tree in a cemetery eats the food of the dead. This tree stands on a foundation steeped in decay.

The graveyard is ancient; so much so they simply call it 'Ye Olde Burying Ground.' Grave markers appear like jagged teeth protruding in unorganized rows from the gums of withering Mother Earth. They look more like decorations than artifacts. Many visitors look upon the flat stones as if it were the set of a Halloween movie. But, oh, they are real! As real as that frigid breeze spitting moisture on our naked faces. The grey stones are rectangular and thin with rounded tops. Some are large or small, others are cracked or collapsed. If writing can be read on any of their engravings, it must be by some miracle.

We find ourselves before a particular stone under the old oak tree as if by accident, yet our legs brought us directly to it. Did they move us here on their own? As we step nearer the stone seems to grow, but like Ebenezer we keep our eyes averted. We do not fear the stone, but it is the *idea* of it that haunts us; what it recalls and the truth to which it speaks. It is the shadow of the things that have been and will be again. We can no longer keep our eyes away. The stone spells out four of the most familiar letters known to us. They were the first we wrote with childishly unsteady fingers clasped on heavy pencils. They will be the last we scribble upon on the signing of our wills. Under the green lichen growth and etched in the schist eons ago the letters read W, A, R, & D.

Our name is written here. Does it fill you with the dread that it ought, or is it merely a name? What's in a name? Can you look upon the letters and think anything but your own demise? Do you guard yourself from the truth which the stone implies? Who was this? What are they now? What part of them remains or are they pale dust & bone... or worse? What horror if they are more than this?! Could it be that part of us was part of them?

The letters, unmoving, seem to answer these thoughts with cold clarity. And on reading and *rereading* those letters and that name which we share – that name that binds us to the greater existence – we see what they really spell; “YOU ARE ONE OF US!” The letters tell us that in some distant day we will be back here again but lying behind the stone; not standing before it. That day, whether close or far away, we won't be here to know or tell. Others will take our place walking among this hardening earth. Perhaps *they* will visit *us* then and ponder similarly the lives we might have led. Or maybe they'll forget us.

I've heard it said a hundred times that those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it, but is all history not worth repeating? It is all possible that this deceased Ward we visit today once lived a life more enjoyable, even, than our own. Or maybe they were someone evil – a murderer. There is doubt that simply knowing about the history of a murderer makes us today any less likely to commit murder ourselves. The phrase is selfish and reduces the value of stories of the past. It pins them up as warnings to be heeded by the living instead of celebrating them as the roots upon which our tree stands. These bodies buried beneath us – our ancestors – our connected to us in ways we cannot see. Their stories are our stories. So, those who forget the past are doomed only to forget themselves. We want to remember and so our journey begins.

Salem, Massachusetts – a city today of 44,000 residents – began as Naumkeag; a summer fishing place for the ancient Massachusett peoples that was bounded by two tidal rivers feeding into a coastal bay. A gushing freshwater spring pooled amid them. This world, long lived, was doomed to pass. To be sure, the first peoples had little awareness by the age of discovery that European maps had labeled this land ‘America.’ They had known it for thousands of years as ‘Turtle Island.’ Soon it would be lost to them when Smallpox from contact with white explorers and war with their Tarentine neighbors greatly reduced their numbers.

In the early 17th Century, a growing number of Puritan migrants from Great Britain colonized the land they eventually called ‘Salem,’ or ‘peace.’ For decades the town grew to become one of the largest and wealthiest in the Americas. In the 18th & 19th Centuries it was a renowned seaport particularly in its trade with the East Indies and China. At the time of America's revolution,

Salem was at the epicenter of the conflict and barely avoided witnessing the first battle of that bloody war for independence. Years later it would become a site of tremendous advances. It was the birthplace of the U.S. National Guard, the studio of the early Federal-style architects, and the testing place for the early experiments in tele-communications by Alexander Graham Bell. The novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the country's earliest fiction writers (and who, as we'll find, we consider a family friend), used his birthplace home as a backdrop for groundbreaking works like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Hawthorne's attention on the town was not always considered affectionate. He, like most of us, found it difficult to remove Salem from the memory of its most infamous moment. It is true that Salem holds a wondrous significance in the early prosperity of the United States, but that history is overshadowed by its curse. When we walk down the stone pavement of the city center today, Essex Street, we find a kaleidoscope of gaudy attractions. Pseudo-museums, exploitative novelty shops, and overpriced tourist traps. For decades citizens have wrestled with the city's sense of identity.

There are some who profit from eager visitors with a likening toward the macabre; the city pulls in 30% of its annual tourism in the month of October alone thanks in no small part to popular plays, movies, and television shows like *Bewitched*, *Hocus Pocus*, and *The Crucible*. There are others who value the city's history and who frown at the sensationalizing of the past often blurring the line of fact and fiction. Still others who have flocked to Salem not as visitors but as new residents seeking community in a living magnet for counterculture. They are the Neo-Paganists, the Wiccans, and the Satanists; folks who see an opportunity to transform the city's fearful legacy into one of peace and inclusion. All of them clash together on Halloween weekend, the busiest time of the year, when restaurants are crowded, the streets are gridlocked, hotels are booked out (often a year in advance), Christian protestors wave bibles and scream in microphones as revelers in costume enjoy the historical reenactments, parades, and festivals in the 'Witch City.'

So... Salem today is a bit of a mess. It may well be that as long as it exists it may never put to rest the trauma of that fateful time, 300 years ago, when its townspeople turned on each other. This would be the infamous witch-trials of the year 1692; the object of wide-spread fascination and horror for generations. Steeped within that story is our own family curse, because Salem's history is our own.

We find our deepest roots in the oldest places; places that haven't changed so dramatically in the last 300 hundred years. Of course, 'Ye Ole Burying Ground' is much the same. The graveyard is known officially as the Charter Street Cemetery. While the oldest known tombstone was erected in 1673 the cemetery is believed to have been first established in 1637, making it one of, if not *the*, oldest known European cemeteries in the country. In the beginning graves were unmarked though eventually they were capped with wooden plaques that would have rotted away centuries ago. There is no telling how many people were buried among the one and a half acres. The stones that we can see, numbering over 600, were made of schist, sandstone, and marble and were erected in the later part of the 17th century.

But there is another place, too, which we solemnly march toward. It is a House a few blocks to the west of that now buried spring of ancient Naumkeag. It is a startling three-story wooden structure with dark grey walls and three sharp gables like witches' hats piercing the sky. It is the

House of our ancestors; the Wards and the Corwins, who lived in this eerie dwelling for two-hundred years spanning five generations. It is the only surviving structure in the city with direct ties to the hysteria of 1692, and as such they call it the Witch House.

The House presents an aged nobility. The wood planks that make up its siding are horizontal lines, cracked like wrinkles on an elder's face. The building, large for its time, is tiered slightly like an upside-down cake, with each story extending a few inches beyond the walls beneath it. The mass grows as the House climbs, thus when you stand beside it, you stand under it as well.

The House – really a mansion - looms over us as we dare to stand before its stoic gables. Some say there is an evil presence within. It is a House constructed on the wealth of clergymen, judges, and statesmen, and after all, these people - the wisest, calmest, and holiest of their day - stood, as Hawthorne observed, the closest to the gallows in 1692. Though it was lost to our kind generations ago, we still hold an attachment to it, much like its many successive proprietors from the mid-1600's to the time just before the American Civil war. Were they troubled about the moral right to hold it? Was each descendent of these liable parties and inheritors of the House aware of the crimes committed by their father and grandfather? If so, are they not likewise responsible for passing on the guilt of that horrendous time to their own children?

It may be true that whatever evil occupied these walls is long buried in that nearby burial ground, but in old Houses like this, dead people have a habit of returning! In a much terrifying sense, the dead live within us all. Our bodies are their Houses. Our skin makes up the walls and our eyes the windows. We fill ourselves with their words and their ideas. As the character Holgrave declares in *The House of the Seven Gables*, we read dead peoples' books, we live by their laws, and we die by their diseases. We live in the Houses of the Dead. The law tells us when we die, we pass on our wealth and property, but could it not be true that more is passed than that? Where does evil go when a villain is buried? Are the foulest traits of humankind any less inheritable than money but by a different process of transmission?

Within the Witch House walls are found the secrets to our family's mark on the early America and the foundations of our lives today. There awaiting us are the stories of peacemakers and warmongers, sailors and landlubbers, patriots and loyalists, wives and their husbands and their children, of course, judges and witches. The spirits of our past have been hidden but today we refuse to let them be forgotten any longer. To know them and speak their names is to keep beating the blood which connects us to our roots, to this House, to the cemetery, and to Salem. And so we shall.

We step inside the timber frame of the rickety Witch House and darkness envelops us. The iron latch locks loudly back into place on the door behind us. A scream shatters within our ears.