

Witch of the Willows

Childhood

I grew up in a small mid-western town in the state of Iowa, not entirely off the map but far enough away from the highway to go unnoticed by the many cars and trucks that passed by on Route 80. Wilton, Iowa, was not as small as nearby Durant, but it was small enough that you either recognized or knew of most people in the town.

Although small, we were not a poor town. Most folks worked at the two big factories on the other side of the highway, and others were part of the vibrant town commercial district, which was essentially just two blocks long with a small park on each end. On one end stood the municipal complex consisting of the mayor and town council offices plus the office of our chief of police and station of just two other officers.

Most of the time, it was a quiet town with traditional holiday celebrations, a dance or two a month for the adults and teenagers, and a small movie theater that showed movies the big cities were all talking about six months ago.

Being a small town meant our schools couldn't support themselves, so back in the early seventies, the councils of Wilton, Durant, and Salem decided to consolidate all their schools into one central district. The grade school, middle school, and high school were all constructed next to each other on a piece of land, which used to be the Heals Farm many years ago.

Since our schools were all consolidated regionally, as a kid, you met and knew a lot more kids than just the ones from your town. Each town had its unique cool places and places you wanted to stay away from, or so you were told, which made you want to go even more.

I first heard of the house of the witch in Mrs. Bartley's seventh and eighth-grade geometry class. It was the middle of April, and we had just come back from Easter break. Tommy Breslin, the big talker, sometimes jerk of the class, stood talking about a house he went to the day before.

"The house looked old and falling apart," he began, "with shutters hanging sideways and all the glass in the windows broken by rocks. Willow trees and bushes surrounded the entire house—so many you could barely see the ruins behind, and the only way in appeared to be through the front gate if you could manage to pull it open. The gate had sharp, rusted spikes running along the top, making climbing difficult and dangerous.

"An ancient-looking hag last owned the house, and my older cousin told me she had been a witch. He and his friends called her the Witch of the Willows because of the willow trees and bushes surrounding and overgrowing the house. He told me you never wanted to look into her eyes, for she would be able to take control of your mind with her witchcraft and make you walk into the house—"

"Where she would pull your pants below your knees and rub her teeth along your johnson."

"In your dreams, Franklin," he said, as everyone laughed at the comment before Tommy continued his story.

“The land around the house in all directions was damp and soft, plus the smell that came from the ground reeked worse than dirty old gym socks from Mr. Morran’s class. Even after you left the area, the smell would stay with you on your clothes and body for hours, like you were a walking corpse.

“We stood there at the gate, and I said, let’s go in and look around, but nobody else wanted to go in cause they be chicken shit. I’m not chicken shit like my so-called friends, so I pulled on the gate, which surprisingly opened as if freshly oiled, and I walked into the overgrown front yard.”

His friends were the Bronson twins—Donny and Jacob—and their cousin Lucas Worek. They lived on the farm next to Tommy, just north of Durant. As I stood there listening, I knew this was garbage, but I didn’t say anything as Tommy continued his farfetched story.

“The gate slammed shut behind me, and I yelled at them ass-wipes for slamming it closed, but they all lied and said they didn’t touch it. The damn thing certainly didn’t slam on its own. I knew my friends were trying to scare me, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“I kept on walking right up to the front porch and sat on the top step waiting for one of the others to join me, but they didn’t have the nerve, so I got up, kicked the door open with my foot, and walked right in the house.

“Honey, I’m home, I yelled, but there was no reply to greet me, just complete silence like the inside of a tomb. Luckily there were no curtains or shutters on the windows, so there was plenty of light. After standing there a minute to look around, I moved into what had at one time been the dining room—which was now empty—almost walking

right into an old dusty and broken chandelier hanging in the middle of the room.”

“Too bad it didn’t knock some smarts into you, Toad.”

The comment came again from one of the older boys, Philip Franklin, whom we tried to avoid whenever possible. He should have been in high school, but they held him back a year due to his worse-than-poor grades. The older boys liked to call Tommy Toad because they said he looked like a frog. They were not completely wrong.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to get back to my story.”

“Story is right,” I said.

“Shut your big mouth, Anderson, before I come over there and shut it for you.”

After giving me a look that dared me to open my mouth to make another comment, he continued.

“The dining room was an empty mess of dirt and fallen wallpaper, so I headed over to the living room and approached the old fireplace. I felt a cool breeze and could hear the wind blowing above the chimney. It sounded almost like someone breathing, and I could hear scratching from mice in the walls. I looked above the mantel and saw a painting of the house from many, many years ago, probably when first built. The place wasn’t too bad looking back then, and the trees, which are now taller than the house, were just a few feet high at best.

“I noticed a person standing in one of the upstairs windows, looking towards the painter. It was a woman with long blond hair, wearing an old-fashioned dress like they wear at the museum in Durant. What

caught my attention were the eyes. Even though they were small, it felt like they were looking right at me, and I got a bit of a chill as I felt a breeze blow across my neck.

“I heard a noise over to my right, and when I turned, I saw a portrait of an old grey-haired woman hanging in the middle of the wall. I felt sure it was the same person, but when I looked back over at the painting of the house, the woman no longer stood in the window. I know I didn’t imagine it, but then I noticed her looking out a different window and smiling.

“I backed away from the painting, tripped over something on the floor, and fell right on my ass. As I sat there, I again heard a noise from the side of the room where the painting of the old hag hung, but this time as I looked at it, I was drawn to the eyes, and it felt like they were now looking right at me. As I stood, a gust of wind brought a fresh smell of death along with air as cold as a freezer. I immediately got goosebumps all up and down my arms, and I swear my balls were trying to move into my stomach.

“While I backed away from the painting, I heard footsteps coming from another room, and I knew I had to get out of her house. I quickly ran out the door and through the gate to find my friends had all abandoned me—the sun had started to set, and it would soon be dark. As I stood there planning how I would beat in their heads, a loud screeching sound came from the house a second before the front door slammed shut. I turned and ran down the road, not looking back.”

“You’re full of shit,” said Randy Donger, one of the larger eighth-grade kids in class. He played football and had a body destined to be a freshman starter if he ever made it out of grade school.

“Tell them, Donny, tell them what happened.”

“Well, he did go in, but he never actually went past the door. Not while we were standing there watching.”

“What the Hell are you talking about, you little piece of dog shit? I walked all through that house! And where did you go anyway? Too afraid to even wait for me?”

“Tommy, I’m telling you, we stood there for well over half an hour, and you never moved. We called out to you, but you just stood there, not moving and not responding to us. You were kind of just moving side to side like you were in some sort of trance. The gate wouldn’t open, and we had to get home for dinner, or our dad would beat us, so we left you standing in front of the door.

“It was about 6:00 when we left, and we saw you walk down the road to your home a little after 7:30.”

The class laughed at Tommy, which I enjoyed as I watched his face turn red. He constantly bullied his classmates, so I was glad to see him looking like a fool—so glad I did something stupid.

I yelled at the top of my lungs, “I call bullshit!”

The class became dead quiet as Tommy came over and got right up in my face.

“I ought to beat the living shit out of you, Silly Willy.”

The class didn’t stay quiet.

“Sure, Tommy,” Randy said, “If you don’t go into a trance again.”

“Shut the fuck up. I challenge any of you to go back to the house with me, starting with you, Silly. Brave enough?”

I never heard Tommy use the F-bomb before, so I knew he was angry. I stood there about to piss my pants when for some reason, I said, “Sure.”

“What’s that we didn’t all hear you?”

“I’ll go with you any day you want,” I said. And then I did something even more stupid.

“I’ll even go with you into the house at night.”

The class went silent again as Tommy stood there, not sure what to say. I could tell he didn’t like the idea of going at night, and I wished I had shut my damn mouth.

“Sure, Mark, Saturday night at eight sharp,” he said as he walked away and sat in his chair.

Everyone else in class also went to their seats as I stood there in shock that he used my name. He had never called me anything other than Silly or Silly Willy, and I understood he was frightened.

“Are you going to stand there all day, Mr. Anderson, or would you like to take your seat?”

I didn’t even hear our teacher come into the room. I hoped she hadn’t been there too long.

“Sorry, Mrs. Bartley,” I said as I sat and felt I had made a colossal mistake.

