

# Part One - The Village of Salem

Something was wrong in the village of Salem.

Anyone who took the time to look beneath the surface could see it. On the surface, people seemed normal enough. Wives tended to their chores of beating rugs, hanging laundry across lines between trees, and clustering together to talk about the town's goings-on. Husbands went about their everyday business, fixing crooked fences, chopping wood to store for the coming winter, herding animals to the local butcher for preparation. Even the children appeared as they often did, a mixture of running errands for their parents and innocent mischief.

Looking at people more closely revealed more. The women clustered in their groups spoke in conspiratorial whispers, eyes darting as they told each other about the ills of the town. Men fulfilling their tasks did so almost forcefully, with expressions that grew closer to scowls by the day. Children looked over their shoulders, worried about incurring the wrath of parents who had been on edge and had snapped at them for not acting quickly enough for their liking.

Something was wrong in the village of Salem, and everyone agreed that it could all be laid at the feet of the women living outside of the village.

The women who lived in the woods were not close, living only an hour's walk from the outside ring of houses, but the villagers within the town were beginning to think that might be too close. The women came into town every so often, trading herbs and items carved from wood that people often found helpful as a kitchen tool or a decorative piece. Sometimes they traded the smith for mending their own tools or cooking pots. When they were in town, they kept mostly to themselves, speaking to few people and answering questions curtly or mysteriously.

When one of the women from the woods was asked to host a visit of the curious to their remote settlement, it was always politely declined, with a vague promise that there was little to see beyond their planting fields. When they were asked about staying in town to be introduced to a brother or cousin who would make a good husband, they always smiled and said they had no interest or need for such things, as if bearing children for expanding Salem had never occurred to them. And worse, they had the same reaction

when invited to church services, held twice weekly. They always gave a polite smile, a murmured thanks, and a vague “perhaps” or “maybe” that never materialized into attendance.

There was a word for women who kept to themselves, spurning men and refusing to accept the Lord and God.

They were witches.

At first, witches living in such proximity to Salem seemed unbelievable. Salem was a village full of people loyal to God and his teachings. The idea that witches in communion with the Devil were walking among them, even only to visit, was uncomfortable to some and anathema to most.

It could not be tolerated.

It *should* not be tolerated.

Although the men and women of Salem all began quietly agreeing that the situation could not continue, many were at a loss about what to actually do about it. It would be one thing if the witches revealed themselves while in the town, but that had not yet happened. None of the witches had begun speaking in strange, arcane tongues, as those in league with evil were known to do. None had been caught casting spells yet, or had summoned spirits to trouble the living. Their visits had thus far been cloaked in pleasantness, but everyone knew that the Devil was known to take pleasing forms to test the hearts and convictions of good men and women.

Until a clearer sign was given, until some event spurred the people of Salem to act, all anyone could do was watch the witches closely during their brief visits and ward their own spirits against temptation. The Lord would guide the people of Salem, would tell them what to do, would protect them from the evil that waited for them in the woods.

## Part Two - The Witches of Salem

Sarah Osborne looked up from her garden, carefully studying the clouds overhead. A gentle breeze picked up, and the faintest smell of moisture told her that a good, soaking rain was only a day or so away. Sarah sighed, thinking to herself that she wished a cooling rain could solve more than just the problems of plant growth.

Turning her eyes from the sky, she looked out at the group of women each tending small fields, carefully planted to yield different crops. Carrots, herbs, potatoes, cabbage, and onions all grew easily here, as did the squash and maize they learned from the indigenous tribes. But it was the women who caught her eye.

Only ten of them lived in their small commune of cottages, ten women that for one reason or another preferred the solitude of the forest and the simplicity of eating what was grown and tended over what was bought. Sarah had been the first to come here twenty years ago, but every few years one or two women would come to her and ask to live nearby. Some had simple reasons, like growing weary of the town's tiresome politics or social structure. Some were more complicated, like the widow Martha Corey or the native Tituba, who was still learning their language. Each had her own reason, but each also helped their small community however they could, lending a hand to build their cottages, tend their soil, or assist when one of them fell ill.

Thinking about their relationship with the town of Salem made Sarah's brow furrow. Only three years earlier, she remembered speaking pleasantly to the occasional goodwife tending her laundry or returning a respectful curtsy to a young woman in a shop. The last time she went to Salem, Sarah saw more frowns than smiles and was met more often with hard stares than polite nods. She had even heard mutters of "witch" when people thought she wasn't close enough to hear.

None of it disturbed her too personally. From the time she was a young woman, Sarah had been fascinated by all of the worldly subjects she could learn about. The movement of the moon and cosmos, the patterns of the weather, which herbs treated ailments and which infused excitement to bland foods. She had little interest or use for the Puritan church, especially as they frowned upon her pursuits of literature, anatomy, and science. At the time, she was willing to accept that she was simply different-minded than the women who seemed content to repeat a cycle of faith, marriage, and children, but it gradually became clear that those people couldn't accept her the same way. Sarah finally chose her small cottage about an hour from the outermost house of the town, leaving the town and her previous life behind her entirely.

As much as she did not let the townspeople's growing discontent bother her, she did worry about the effect it would have on the other women. Once or twice a week, one of them went into the town for something they could not provide themselves. A small bag of herbs to help with fevers or headaches would yield them a sewing kit with needles or the smith's mending to some old iron tongs. A woman leaving the camp with a potpourri of spices would often return with a bolt of cloth or a few pieces of planed wood. Now most women had difficulty finding anyone willing to trade, and more frequently return with the items she had left the camp with.

Sarah had not been to Salem in about six months, but it might be time for her to revisit and see for herself what her own group had been telling her. Sarah had lived there as a young woman before deciding to strike out on her own; some of the women in her group had never lived there at all. Maybe seeing a familiar face would return some civility. At the very least, it could reopen the door to trade.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Althea, who had quietly approached while clapping her hands free of the dirt clinging to her after a morning of planting. Althea was the youngest of the group at only nineteen, but she had been with them her entire life. She was eager to learn about everything around them, had thrown herself into the same studies that Sarah had when she had been Althea's age. She was also eager to the point of being impetuous. More than once, Sarah had to use her authority to redirect Althea from overwhelming one of the others with incessant questions or intrusive requests for instruction. If Althea had patience and could think beyond the moment, she would make a fine leader for the group if anything happened to Sarah. Until those traits were learned, however, she would remain their young ward to be guided rather than consulted.

Althea gave Sarah a slow nod before she spoke, which Sarah returned according to their custom. Custom and propriety were important, but they did not necessarily have to be the customs and proprieties dictated by the town of Salem.

"The planting in the far field is done, but we are going to need a new spade," Althea explained. She continued, but Sarah could tell that Althea was watching her face closely for some hint of intention.

"I have gathered enough plants to make six doses of the headache poultice and three of those we use for swollen extremities," Althea told her, and cleared her throat to continue when Sarah said nothing. "I can go to the smith in the village and trade these for the spade's replacement."

Sarah raised an eyebrow at her.

“The spade needs to be replaced? Not mended?”

Althea nodded, pulling the spade from a deep pocket in her bright, thick skirts. Handing it to her, Sarah saw that it was dull and worn. More than that, she saw that there was a crack forming from below its wooden handle towards the side of the broad blade. In a few more uses, it might break completely.

Sarah kept her face smooth, but her mind raced. The damage to the spade was such that it could have been done purposefully instead of through normal wearing. This was not the first time Althea had asked to go to the town of Salem, and Sarah wondered if the reason today was contrived for that very purpose. Wondering and suspicion were not proof, however.

Instead, Sarah slowly turned the tool in her hands and spoke calmly. “You have never been to Salem, Althea.”

Althea’s words picked up speed as nervousness took hold.

“Yes, I know, but I spoke to Martha and she has told me where the smith’s shop is. And you have all spoken about the town enough at different times that I believe I could walk there as if going to my own cottage. Everyone has been there many times, and I am as capable as anyone else. Is it not time for me to have this responsibility as well?”

Sarah allowed a small smile before returning herself to utter calm. Althea was clever and had chosen these words in advance. Wrapping the request to go to Salem with the validation of her ability as a woman made it so that denying one would deny them both, unless Sarah was careful. Althea had been spending time reading Machiavelli, it seemed.

“The responsibility of going to Salem for supplies is a grave one,” Sarah began. “Grave, because Salem is not as welcoming as it once was. You are capable, and have as much talent and skill as any of us, and right now...” Althea leaned forward with anticipation, and Sarah was genuinely sorry to disappoint her. “Right now I must be the one to go to Salem and see this done. I do not believe it is safe for you at the moment.”

“It has never been safe for me,” Althea muttered, staring at the earth. “Since I was a child, I have been kept from that town and the people in it. I am a woman. At some

point, you must accept that and let me take my place among you. And that includes interacting with the world outside, including Salem.”

This was not necessarily an old argument, but it had been one that Sarah had heard building for some time. She knew Althea’s disappointment, and even understood it. She needed to give Althea something back, something that let her know that this setback was not permanent. She chose her words deliberately as she put the spade in her own pocket.

“You are a woman, Althea, and you are one of us,” Sarah told her. Althea was still staring at the ground. “When I can see for myself what is happening in Salem, I will consider your travel there again.” None of it moved Althea, who was only hearing the denial. “This afternoon, I need you to do something else. I need you to create a seat in the Circle.”

Althea’s head shot up, eyes wide with excitement. She knew what Sarah meant, but Sarah told her anyway. Custom and propriety were important.

“At the next full moon, you will join us not as a child or observer, but as a woman fully part of our community. You will be called upon to offer consideration, and you will do this not for yourself, but to the benefit of all. You will learn to balance your desires against the good of the whole, but you will begin that path by creating a seat among the others in the Circle.”

Althea was brimming with excitement, the trip to Salem seemingly forgotten. This wasn’t just a chance to have a say in the affairs of the group, but to earn the respect of the other women as an equal instead of being seen as a child to be tolerated. Within the Circle, Althea could offer potential solutions instead of complaints, though she would learn that solutions reached in consensus were often not what was originally brought forward.

Althea gave her a deep bow before running off, hands clasped together, which Sarah returned. It was their deepest form of acknowledgement, a way of recognizing and appreciating the spirit of the person in front of you.

As Althea left, Sarah pulled the spade back out of her pocket and turned it in her hands again as she walked back to her own cottage. Damaged as it was, it might be able to be mended after all.

## Part Three - The Mayor of Salem

George Burroughs raised his hands for silence, which did not seem coming any time soon at the village meeting he had called.

Only one in ten people living in the village of Salem had come, but looking at how they had all packed themselves into the small area in the town's meeting chambers, he was somewhat glad the rest of the town had found other things to do that afternoon.

If they had all come, it would have been more crowded, but it also could have turned into a mob very quickly.

George made calm, quieting gestures, but as silence slowly came, the scowls and angry stares stayed. The people were angry, angrier that he had ever seen them about any subject, but he had never considered them to be irrational before today. The hate they wore was thick like a winter cloak, completely covering them and insulating them from reason and consideration. They couldn't see it, and as their mayor he would have to guide them.

"Tell me," George began as the shouting stopped and he had let a moment of pause go by uninterrupted. "What have these women done, directly *done* to any of you, that makes you believe they should be told to leave the village?" Told to leave the village was putting it lightly. Of the twenty-odd people in the room, he had heard more than one angrily growl that the women's huts should be put to the torch. If a few said it, more certainly thought it.

"They have put a curse on Salem with their evil ways, Mayor!" one woman shouted before the others began to angrily voice their support. "They are out there in the woods, worshipping the Lord only knows what, and when we tell them to come to the church to be healed, they cackle with wickedness! Oh, it makes the ears ring something awful and makes the air spin and make you dizzy, it does. It's a spell, and that's God's truth." More of the gathered people started nodding emphatically and began to raise their voice before George spoke again.

"Their laughs are evil..." he said, not giving any indication if he considered this to be accurate. "What else?"

"They bewitch us all, Mayor," one man said, stepping forward. It was the town's cooper, and George knew him well enough to know that the sour fumes coming from him were

not just from his work on the barrels used to trade ale with other towns. More than once, the man had been found asleep on the front step of his shop, tools still in hand.

“They come into the town, dressed to draw the eyes of good folk, meaning to distract us from our work and our wives,” the cooper finished with a sidelong look at his wife standing next to him, who quivered with more fury than most.

George had seen the occasional visitor from the women’s camp when they came to trade their herbs or vegetables for cookware or meat. It was more colorful than what the people of the village usually wore, with blues and light reds that stood out among the black, cream, and browns the townspeople often wore. But it was also modest, not showing more skin than was appropriate, which meant almost none at all. It was different, but it was not lewd. The cooper also had a reputation for a wandering eye; clearly he was attempting to ascribe it to more than his loose morality.

The people went on, claiming more offenses that seemed to be more circumstance than evidence. Often they were reasoned that if not for their presence, nothing would be wrong in the town. Instead there were illnesses, not many but enough to start looking at the women outside of the town as a reason. There were crop failures, but instead of looking at the watering schedule and viability of the seeds used, the women were suspected of casting a plague on the land itself. George let them voice their opinions, hoping they would tire themselves out or realize how foolish they sounded when they spoke their grievances aloud. They never did either.

George finally stood up, banging his gavel to call for silence when his gestures were not enough.

“I have heard enough,” he told them, anger beginning to creep into his voice. He clamped it down hard; that wasn’t the way.

“All of you have told your stories, and none of you have provided anything evidentiary. All you have done is speak ill of those women who, as far as I can tell, have done little to earn such contempt. They come here and trade, fairly, mind you, trade their herbs to relieve the pains of every day labor or flavor our foods, and you call them witches. I have seen them come to the market, and they are rarely here longer than it takes to conduct their business. They seem a peaceful folk, and if they choose to live apart from us, there is little we can do about it.” George’s voice began to gain intensity, but it was not anger that drove him. It was the desire to let them see what he saw.

“We cannot force them to act as we do or dress as we do or worship as we do. If we will not force them, and I say we will not, then we must respect them. They are still women and are still a part of Salem, however remotely. Driving them away would be to deprive ourselves of what they contribute, and I am not willing to do that. Leave them alone, ignore them if you must, but we will not treat them as animals the way some of you suggest.”

The crowd muttered angrily and began to shuffle out of the hall, considering the meeting to be complete now that the mayor had spoken. None of them seemed changed by the experience and some even began whispering and forcefully gesturing before they were even clear of the door.

George watched them leave and sat alone in thought for a time, staring at the benches in the hall where they had chosen to stand instead of sit. They were afraid. What was worse, they didn't know it and they chose a path of hostility to mask it. He knew they weren't afraid of the women; they were afraid of the occasional person falling sick or the lettuce that didn't seem to grow well or the occasional wayward eye that sparked their jealousy. A few quiet women living on their own outside of town couldn't be the cause, but the townspeople wanted to blame them anyway. It was easier than examining the true causes, the things that might reveal their own weaknesses.

For his own part, George avoided Sarah Osborne and the women who came into the town. He knew where they lived, vaguely, he had deliberately not been there in many years. Maybe if he had been willing to correspond with them more or make a better show of receiving them at the markets when they came, this mess could have been avoided. But it was a mess that was here now, and his title meant that he had to correct it before it got out of hand. He wished he could see some way to do that without going to their commune personally, but he could not see it.

He would have to go and speak to them soon, perhaps as soon as tomorrow.

He would have rather faced a hundred of these angry meetings.