



Write your own Historical Fiction 2022

A SALEM STORY

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SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, 1692

The fourteenth of April, in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ 1692, started like any other normal day in the town of Salem. The bell for morning prayer saw the townsfolk gathered outside the white church building, and the sun rose bright and beautiful. Mrs Aleworth's breadstand stood open as normal and travelling carts dotted the sleepy main road. Mary Griggs, her father Dr. William Griggs and her brother Joseph sat in church, full of prayer. Little did Mary know, this day wouldn't be normal. In fact, this would be the day where everything changed for her. But, we are skipping ahead now. For you truly to understand, we have to start elsewhere.

The air in the courtroom was thick and oppressive. Dr. Griggs sat in the public audience, waiting for sentencing to begin. Sweat formed on his brow which he quickly wiped away. It can often be a sign of guilt. Just then a bell rang for the court to stand as Bridget Bishop was escorted into the room. An uneasy hush settled upon the gathering. Judge W Charles Stoughton III rose and called for order.

'BRIDGET BISHOP! Resident of Salem community, sixty years of age, you stand convicted of the heinous crime of witchcraft.'

Dr Griggs stared coldly at Bridget. A woman he had come to know well over the years. Their contact had become a weekly necessity as the ravages of age took hold of her. Dependence on medicine is an ungodly thing; a cruelty of nature born of the frailty of the body. She was shaking like an autumn leaf, ready to fall before the cold winds of winter. Indeed, everybody thought the Devil had consumed her immortal soul and seeing her there on the dais, hunched over like a hag, black shawl and all, gripping the railings for dear life, there was nothing to disabuse them of their judgement. She was one of the cursed.

As soon as the gavel came down, the condemned let out an unearthly howl. The crowd started shouting abuse and hurling various things at poor Bridget. As they dragged her away she pointed a

gnarled finger at Dr. Griggs and screamed obscenities. Confirming their perceptions, the guards handled her roughly. And it was right about then Dr. Griggs stood up abruptly and left the courtroom just as quickly as his legs could carry him.

The fresh air felt better than ever. He breathed in. No-one knew. And no-one would.

Mary waited patiently at the dining room table for her father's return. She had made lunch, as always, and sat there, twiddling her thumbs, mulling over her father's recent odd behaviour. It still stung how he had bellowed when she entered his study without knocking. He wasn't a man to raise his voice; normally calm, caring and godly. What ever would cause such coldness of spirit? Mary jumped as the door rattled open, 'Father!' she said, standing to face him, smoothing out her apron. Dr. Griggs embraced her warmly, before hanging his coat and sitting down. She stepped back, nonplussed. It seemed like the strangest moment for his mood to brighten.

'Was she...?'

'Hanged.'

Mary blinked. Dr. Griggs continued eating.

'Oh Lord, have mercy!'

She waited, but he didn't look up. He simply finished his meal before setting down his cutlery and dragging out his chair.

'I will be taking a nap. Kindly clean my office in preparation for the afternoon's work.'

Mary exhaled sharply after he left the room and hurried to clear the dishes before heading down the hallway towards her father's office.

She was shocked to find her father's office so messy and busied herself dusting and tidying all the loose sheets of paper. A tower of notebooks seemed to totter in the corner with the bowing of the floor as she passed by. Moving briskly towards them, she observed an odd mix of all shapes and sizes. A small but thick leather bound book with a gilt spine caught her eye. Quickly looking round, she took it into her hands where it remained unopened. It was her father's private notebook. The one he had told her never to read. He rarely left it out of sight. Would disobedience allow her to discover a reason for his changes in temperament? Slowly, with fear and trembling, she drew back the cover.

Mary's curiosity suddenly burned bright. Flicking quickly through the pages, she stopped here and there to read various recipes for medicines and admire sketchings of herbs and fungi. But there was nothing to explain what her father would wish to keep hidden. Until her index finger brushed a folded page corner. At first, she was unsure of what she saw. She read the page twice, trying to grasp its significance.

Mushrooms. *Claviceps purpurea* or a fungus that grows on rye. Beneath the detailed sketch, in plain script, the list of symptoms ran down the page. Symptoms she recognised. Those of the witches.

Exactly the same. How strange. How strange that her father knew. That he had not mentioned it in court.

A strange coldness crept up her spine causing her to shiver. The silence thickened in the room. Mary knew immediately something was wrong. From the hallway she heard the creak of boards and scurried to replace the notebook. She just had time to position herself elsewhere and set her face like flint.

Dr. Griggs burst into the room and Mary smiled politely, desperate to mask her emotions. She noticed him peering behind her, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled.

'I left my notebook somewhere in here. Have you seen it?'

'Which one?' And then she added quickly, '... I've tidied so many.'

Dr. Griggs gave her an odd look before continuing, 'My private one.'

'It may be in that stack over there,'

He retrieved it and left the room without another word. After a moment's pause Mary collapsed in a heap.

Mary lay on her bed, staring at the blank ceiling. A single word circled in her mind like a bird of prey. Why? Why would her father fail to say anything? She knew who to ask, but it would be tricky. Joseph was writing at his desk when she peered through the door left slightly ajar. She knocked and pushed her head through the gap. Without looking up, he asked, 'What is it now?'

'Do you think Father is acting oddly?'

Joseph set down his pen, 'Why?'

Mary fiddled with her hem, 'I- just noticed he's been... distant, that's all.'

I know as little as you do. He's been ignoring me too. Leave me alone, I have school work.'

Mary huffed and left. Gathering her coat, she scuttled down the stairs and passed her father's silent study. The afternoon sun greeted her and she lifted her gaze to the harvest fields, dancing under a light breeze,

Following her memories of that curious page, she made for the nearest field of rye, having learnt the fungus likes to grow on ears of grain. Just past the treeline, she quickly found some of the strange, slug-shaped fungus and placed them in her pocket. As she did so, the wind carried a familiar voice to her ear. Skirting back behind the trees, she spied her father standing full square in the field with Elizabeth Hubbard. There were raised voices.

'Are you incapable of taking no for an answer?' Elizabeth insisted.

'But of all the people to betrothe.'

'He may be young but he is kind, William. A quality which appears to be lacking in you of late.'

Dr. Griggs stepped closer. 'There are things he could never give you.'

Elizabeth took a step back, 'I will not ask you again. My mind is set!'

And with that, she fled the field towards town. Mary's father's face exploded with rage. He stalked along the path Elizabeth had taken, and was soon lost to sight.

Her father wasn't home when she got back. Perfect. She snuck into the kitchen, and prepared the mushrooms. She put them carefully in a jar, hiding it behind other food. It would be ready for her later. A bang frightened her. She hurried out the kitchen to her father sitting at the dining room table.

'We're going to court. Four hours.'

Mary nodded. But she was worried. Elizabeth had rejected her father again, and he hadn't come home straight away. And now they were going to court. The worst could only be assumed.

Dr. Griggs pulled Mary into the courtroom roughly. They sat at the end of a row in the public audience. The witch was brought out. Elizabeth Hubbard stood on the dais. Her frailty and vulnerability scared Mary. Had her father done this? Mary's heart hardened. She hated the calm, composed man that sat next to her. The judge spoke loudly.

'Dr. Griggs! Please tell the court what your research has shown you.

'Certainly. After... extensive research, I have made a final conclusion to the cause of the... witchcraft. Nothing matches in terms of chemicals or herbs, so my only explanation for you is that these women have rejected Our Lord and opened their hearts to the Devil.'

'IT'S NOT THE DEVIL! IT'S FUNGI! THE THIN ONES ON THE RYE!' Elizabeth yelled to the court. Mary watched her father's face closely. He didn't flinch.

'I have brought one of those particular mushrooms to court today, to show you Miss Elizabeth is incorrect. In my studies I also came across this but alas - Not the reason, Your Honour,' Dr. Griggs produced the mushrooms identical to the ones on the hill. Mary breathed in. This was it. No way he could escape this. He ate it casually. Mary watched closely.

'We will reconvene in two hours to see if Dr. Griggs has been affected!' Mary sighed with annoyance. Her father left through a different door. Mary locked eyes with Elizabeth, for a second. She felt the young woman's torment and pain. She had to wait two hours for freedom. If it came. Two hours passed, and her father had shown no symptoms. Mary wanted to scream for all to hear, but misery put her in a state of shock. The rest blurred past. She barely felt him pull her out of her seat and drag her home. Her pain made her numb with bitter anger. They got home.

'Make me lunch,' Dr. Griggs ordered. Mary smiled politely and rushed to the kitchen. Pulling the jar of mushrooms she has been using from its hiding place, she thinly sliced the mushrooms, making sure to hide them underneath the rest of the meal. Then she slotted the jar back into the cupboard.

'What are you doing with that?' Mary spun around. Her father stood in the doorway.

'It's just the- seasoning...' she knew he didn't believe her. Storming in, he grabbed the jar and smelt it. Immediately, he dropped it. A small shard of glass lodged into Mary's ankle and she cried out loudly.

'You little-' Dr. Griggs lunged at Mary, 'you thought wouldn't notice, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU?' Mary felt a tear slide out and quickly brushed it away, 'ANSWER ME!' In a flash her vision turned red. 'You have let innocent women die! ALL FOR LOVE! HOW COULD YOU?' Her father grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently.

'How dare you? How. Dare. You? Go through my notes. HOW DARE YOU!' Her tears started falling faster now, she couldn't control them, a never ending stream of hurt and detest.

'How could you let them die?' Dr. Griggs let go of her, breathing heavily. He yanked her down the hallway and up the stairs. Mary's tears fell and fell. He shoved her into her room.

'I didn't. They were experiments. I needed to know if it worked.' Mary hated those words. They made her cold and unfeeling in her heart.

'So you poisoned them? Why didn't the mushrooms work in court?'

Dr. Griggs smirked, 'You stupid little girl... you really don't know anything do you? There are two, identical mushrooms. One has a white dot at the end. One doesn't. I took the one without it to court. I wasn't poisoned. I put the ones with the white spot in all the girls' medicine.'

Mary slid down the wall, her tears dripping, one-by-one, like her last bit of hope. Joseph stood by his door, watching.

'Father, what are you-'

'KEEP YOUR NOSE OUT OF IT, JOSEPH GRIGGS!' Joseph's hurt expression lingered before he slammed his door. Dr. Griggs spun back to Mary.

'I'm going to lock this door. And I'm going to go to court. And Elizabeth will be hung. And you *won't say anything,*'

Dr. Griggs slammed the door shut.

Mary hit it for hours after that. Her hands were raw and red and her tears laid jagged marks across her face. In the end she gave up. She sat, in the pressing silence of her room. Hours were like minutes tripled and played twice. She felt like she'd left her body. Silence was deafening. After hours of seconds, she heard a knock, and a key.

Joseph poked his head through the gap, 'Mary! Are you okay?'

Mary looked at him blankly, 'Why are you helping me?'

Joseph sighed, 'Father... has changed. Ever since Mother passed... he hasn't been the same. And there was a time. He changed completely. Shut me out. Hurt me,'

Mary stood, slowly, 'I want you to do whatever it is you have to. He's not... Father is gone, Mary.'

Mary hugged him tight, 'It'll just be us, though.'

'At least we're still together.'

The night was cold and still. Ravens sat on the towers of the court prison - their caws announcing the fatal entrance of anyone who dared to. Something moved among the shadows. It hurried forward, sliding under the gate and into the courtyard. The figure silently opened a door and hurried down the corridor. Empty prison cell after empty prison cell - until it came to the right one. The trials had taken their toll on the women hunched in the cell. Her once delicate, beautiful face

was now gaunt and pale. It angered the figure to see her so hurt and vulnerable. She knew who to blame. 'Elizabeth!' She whispered through the bars. The figure did not look up, 'Elizabeth!' Elizabeth lifted her head and turned towards the dark figure standing by her bars, 'Here, take this! Tomorrow, tell the judge what is on it,' the figure thrust a piece of paper through the bars. Elizabeth blinked twice and looked carefully at the figure.

'Ma- Mary? Dear, is that you?'

'Shush! Just look at it and tell the judge tomorrow. Oh, and take this.'

A small, thin object landed into Elizabeth's hands. Mary was gone. The convicted witch gazed at the crumpled sheet. In her state of weariness she could barely make out what it said. But she knew it was her freedom.

Mary rushed back to the house. Her heart pounded in the chest. If Elizabeth did not understand what was on the paper she would still be hanged. Mary knocked on the door of the house. Joseph opened it, 'Did you do it?' He asked. Mary could tell he was still hurt by their father's words.

'Yes. It's done.'

Joseph nodded, 'Good. Good.'

Elizabeth trembled in the bullpen. The sheet of paper was tucked away in her pocket. It would all come down to that. She knew it. The guard yanked her forward and into the courtroom. Dr. Griggs was the first person she saw. His eyes met hers. She hated his eyes - they were cold and evil. He smiled politely at her. It appeared a simple smile, but she knew all the layers of deceit and villainy it masked. Judge Stoughton called Dr. Griggs forward. Elizabeth watched as he claimed, yet again, it was the Devil. Elizabeth watched as she was sentenced to death. Elizabeth listened as she was asked to plead for her life. And Elizabeth felt herself pulling the piece of paper Mary had given her. And Elizabeth heard herself reading, and Judge Stoughton laughing with scorn.

'Poppycock! Dr. Griggs, would you be happy to try that mushroom for the court?'

And Elizabeth watched the blood drain from Dr. Griggs's face.
