

The Veil



A short story by
Gary S. Crutchley

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Produced in the UK in association with 'The history of the Crutchley family' web site.

www.crutchleyhistory.co.uk

The Veil

William was never the type that most people would think of as a conventional amateur genealogist. The very notion of the family historian conjures in most people's minds, the image of an individual who is drawing close to their retirement years and who inhabits the shadowy, dust shrouded regions of the local library in a determinate quest to conjoin with their own past by identifying as many as possible of their forbears and growing fractal-like the tree of their previously undiscovered lineage.

William was the very antithesis of this perception. He was born beneath the shadow of the mushroom cloud, pushed kicking and screaming into the world coincident with the genesis of the technological age. From childhood, like a latter day guiding star, technology had always been his passion, science his first true love and it had forged his opinions, mapped out his career path and now offered him passage to a future. It was true, William had always harboured a certain enthusiasm for history, but it was largely academic, a hobby competing for his leisure time with numerous sports, which because of their ability to promote and safeguard his health, had grown more important to him as his years advanced.

For William, history was strictly in the past. His main preoccupation had always been his family. They were his life force, his motivation and his very reason for being. He loved them, shielded them, supported them through life's traumas and, as he reached the midpoint of his third decade of life, William was trying to engineer the type of future that he had always imagined for them.

But as William cast a half glance over the local free newspaper one morning before departing for work, his outlook was altered by fate and he was about to join the burgeoning ranks of the amateur genealogists. Hidden away amongst page upon page of estate agents advertisements, was an article regarding a series of long forgotten photographs discovered in the back of a dark cupboard that were now yearning to be reunited with some quondam existence. The black and white images, each showing unmistakable signs of great age and the deleterious effects of having been confined for so long to that dank cupboard, were faithfully reproduced by the newspaper. As his eye passed over them, one of the images seemed to leap out of the page towards William.

It took William a few moments to fully believe what it was that his eyes were telling him and he felt a fuzzy tingle of excitement crawl down his spine as he looked once more. One of the monochrome photographs showed a man and a woman in their early twenties, posing for the camera in front of a large Laurel bush. They were smiling and holding hands. He was dressed very smartly, in a dark suit,

buttoned in the middle and was wearing a shirt whose rounded collar gave away a tiny clue to the age of the photograph. His dark hair was neatly combed backwards, held firmly in place by some unseen waxy fixative that imparted a glossy sheen. The lady wore a billowy white dress which finished in exquisite flows of frills at her ankles and was further embellished by a sumptuous lace collar around her neck. On her head was a large, dark coloured, flimsy straw hat decorated with a disproportionately large, quasi-comical daisy flower positioned on the hat band. You could easily see it in both of their faces, and it was evident from the poise of their bodies, you could even detect it emanating from the photograph, and it was unmistakable. They were in love.

William recognised them immediately, he had seen this photograph before. They were his grandparents. He had never known them, they both died while he was still very young and his father had not told him a great deal about them. His only recollection was their names, Samuel and Sarah and that they were born sometime around the turn of the last century. But seeing the picture was enough, it proved to be an intellection for William, the spark to the blue touch paper, which would ignite the fuel of his quest yet to come. That morning, as he drove to the office, the urge to discover his lineage was born and began to grow. A lunch time browse across the vast vacuity of the internet provided enough information to allow him to determine how to begin his genealogical journey.

The very same evening, William clambered into the attic of his home and blew the dust off a box of documents that he had stored since the death of his father. He had not really examined the contents in any great detail before confining them to the darkest recesses of his home. The wounds opened by the death of his father had been too raw, the emotions too overwhelming and consequently the documents had lain completely undisturbed ever since. Now, finally it was time to look inside the box and William had a purpose.

Amongst the inevitable assortment of retained bills, insurance documents and birth certificates was the document that he had hoped to find, that he remembered being shown by his father, together with the photograph that had appeared in the newspaper. The neatly folded, fragile green paper rectangle was the marriage certificate of Samuel and Sarah, the last tangible testament to the love that the photograph so eloquently recorded. But to William, this particular document was much more than that, it was the first stem and callow branch of a sapling family tree, so suddenly encouraged into life by the newspaper article and William's own natural inquisitiveness.

William's keen analytical mind soon enabled him to begin to nurture his tree, growing it on paper, ring upon ring, branch by branch, ancestor after ancestor. In the days that followed he frequently hunted through the records preserved at his town's library, chasing the quarry of his heritage. His tree flourished, growing outwards and upwards in equal measure with the increase in his own interest as he made each new discovery and addition. William soon added his great grandparents, and his second great grandfather. His work was progressing well and the records were revealing William's family history to him in all its many vivid colours.

William finally came across the name of his third great grandfather, Thomas and at that moment the nature of his quest imperceptibly began to warp and distort, assuming a different, more caliginous form. Something associated with the research itself began to assume control of William, as if it were intent in reaching its goal by availing itself of William's naturally elevated energy level. The more that he learned about Thomas, the more the research itself seemed to coax and guide William, without him being aware of its effect. It was seeping into his subconscious like a muddy puddle flowing into a dry sponge, and was pointing him towards the further discoveries that it coveted. It was as though Thomas himself desperately wanted, even hungered to be reconnected with the world and to have his story told, through William.

Thomas was born on April 15th 1808. Exactly one hundred and sixty years later, to that very day, William entered the world. That was the first coincidence, many more followed in its wake. At first William was vaguely excited and felt strangely honoured by the similarities that existed between himself and his ancestor. But as the controlling grip exerted by that which needed his research began to tighten, he began to not notice the coincidences as each occurred. By profession, William and Thomas were both pharmacists, they both fell in love with women bearing the Christian name Helen, even married on the same day and month. It was as though obsessive research had mutated and a powerful and tenebrous veil had come to rest upon William, smothering him and assuming control of his every action. But he himself was utterly unaware of the repressing presence or force that was driving him along its chosen path.

William could not see it, but Helen had already observed its effect. To Helen, William was becoming obsessive, focused and increasingly distant from her and her children. He was putting a disproportionate amount of effort into achieving some distant personal target that had no practical relevance to her or her precious brood. But she could not reach him and she had always been able to talk him around, whatever the circumstance. She had seen him behave this way before, when he had important matters to attend to

at work, but it was nothing like this. This time it was very different, she too could sense that William was being controlled, but she assumed that it was by his own refusal to let go of his study until he had reached some self-determined point. But in the past, William had always taken time out to play with his children and to be with her. Strangely this time he seemed to be totally absorbed, utterly lost in what he was doing. Just as it was to William, to Helen the presence and manipulating power of the veil was invisible.

Thomas died peacefully in his sleep on August 2nd 1891. The discovery of this date was the penultimate piece in William's genealogy jigsaw, his tree was almost mature and the veil had grown in strength and reached the pinnacle of its powers. It was on the verge of attaining its ultimate goal and one final shroud guided visit to the library revealed to William the place where Thomas had been laid to rest.

William pulled his car up next to the kerb and walked through the gnarled iron gates of the cemetery. He had no idea whether he would find anything, most of the cemetery had long since been cleared after years lacking maintenance and the repeated attention of local vandals. He stepped from the path onto the grass and began to wander through the headstones, scanning each to identify the occupant of the grave. They were all too young, much too young. There were no graves older than 1960, yet the cemetery he knew was much older than that. Thomas's headstone was no more, probably dashed to pieces and desecrated during some drug induced teenage haze, a monument lost to William and his family for all eternity.

As if to compound William's sense of frustration, it had begun to rain. He decided to abandon his search, he already had his dates and his ancestor's names, his tree had matured into a sturdy and ancient oak, and he needed no more. It was clear to him that the cemetery would yield nothing and he was getting wetter as the rain began to fall more heavily. William began to zigzag his way across the wet grass, back through the headstones towards his car.

As he reached the gates, the veil made its final, decisive move, the knockout blow, the rocket right hook from nowhere to clinch the bout. Summoning all of its remaining ethereal energy, it hit him full force, William spun round and stood transfixed, staring at the little chapel a short distance away. It was as though he had spontaneously developed tunnel vision and everything else was blocked out, other than the wall of the chapel and two old yew trees at its side. Not knowing why, or even being at all aware of the grip of the veil, he walked dazedly back towards the chapel, suddenly oblivious to the near torrential rain.

As he drew nearer he saw the headstone, a pollution blackened slab of carved English sandstone standing about five feet tall and partly obscured by the yew trees. It was unmistakably Victorian and was adorned with ornate columns on either side. The top of the headstone was carved with ivy leaves and it rose to an apex that was surmounted by a crown. Layers of stone on the front face of the headstone had begun to flake away and it possessed a moss green hue. The inscription seemed biblical macabre by today's standards, 'Die in the Lord and inherit eternal life'. Below were inscribed Thomas's name and the date August 2nd 1891.

Finally, the veil had completed its task, achieved its end, its energy and power was now totally depleted. William was abruptly reconnected with the world of the living as it lifted its dark weight, melting away and melding into the ether from whence it had come. It was as though scales had fallen from William's eyes, or a chill wind had brushed his neck and suddenly heightened his senses, he was aware once more, could live again. He reached out and touched the headstone, it was cool and damp.

At his feet, there was a faint, imperceptible shiver in the soil. William didn't even feel it.

The End

