

## **The House with a Thousand Faces**

Written by Ryan Meier

Anne and Jill had been best friends since the second grade, experiencing nearly everything together. Their first crushes, their first kisses, and, of course, their first heartbreaks. Senior year was bittersweet for the two best friends, as their looming graduation promised to send their lives in different directions for the first time. Both would be off to college and the three-mile separation they had grown accustomed to would expand to over five hundred. As the summer came to an end, they both committed to a year of fun, promising to remove their inhibitions and make it a year to remember.

Halloween approached and the usual mischief night activities of being chased by high school boys who egged each other, toilet papered trees, and drank their parent's stolen liquor simply didn't appeal to them. That was so two years ago. This year, in the spirit of pushing boundaries, they committed to conquering a fear that haunted them since they laid eyes on it during their childhood. They would enter and explore the old Roaring Brook Manor.

Roaring Brooke Manor was old and decrepit, long ago deemed inhabitable. However, the mysterious (and absent) owners continued paying the tax bill – and the fines – that went along with leaving the house unmaintained in the township. As the dust accumulated, so did its legend and intrigue amongst the community. Many boastful teenagers had bragged about their midnight strolls through the haunted house, but few could prove their bravery. This Halloween's eve Anne and Jill would do just that; all while becoming legends of their own.

The plan was simple and firmly in place. Anne and Jill both confirmed with their parents they would be sleeping at the others' house. They charged their cellphones and dressed for the chill of late October, heading out in Anne's Ford Focus towards the outskirts of town.

Despite their bravado, the ride went by with silent nervousness. Jill, in charge of broadcasting their adventure live on Facebook, loaded up her messenger and sent a mass message, teasing the upcoming video stream as something no one would forget. She was right.

They parked the car on the side of the road a few hundred yards short of the mansion's property. The local police would be out patrolling tonight and neither had the intention of

being brought back home by one of the officers for trespassing. They walked in the darkness using the moonlight to guide them through the overgrown grass of the sprawling estate.

The porch creaked under the weight of their steps as they approached the front door. The wind whistled through the surrounding trees, giving both of them the feeling they were living in a horror movie. Jill had been so distracted it took her several minutes to realize she had forgotten to begin their broadcast. Both girls had to consciously release the tight grip they held on each other's hands so the video could start.

"Okay," Jill said, her voice soft as if someone might hear them, "On the count of three. Use that knocker, you know, like we're visiting."

Anne smiled and nodded, taking a deep breath as Jill counted out loud. The iPhone's light came on as the live feed started.

"Hey you all!" Anne announced, winking at the camera, "Happy Mischief night! I'm sure the usual boneheads are out causing trouble... yes I mean you Tommy! But why don't you put down your eggs and shaving cream and join Jill and I on an adventure."

Jill backed up, stepping down the creaking stairs to show Anne standing in front of the manor's front door as she struck a few poses. Shares and 'wow-faces' streamed across the screen as their audience grew. Without hesitation, Anne turned and grabbed the ice-cold oversized knocker. A large, brass face frozen in a terrified scream looked back at her. She slammed it down three times and listened.

"I guess no one's home." She said with a sassy shrug before twisting the knob and letting herself in.

Jill followed as Anne fired up her flashlight, giving the large room a faint, dusty glow. They thought the handheld light would have been enough, but the sheer size of the home dwarfed the light, leaving the edges of their vision in total darkness.

Large lumps of furniture covered with dusty sheets sprinkled the first-floor rooms as the two strolled through. Anne did her best to keep up an act of confidence, smiling through her anxiety. She put a great touch on the drama by approaching the grand piano and laying her fingers on several of the minor keys, echoing the spooky tones through the house.

Comments and likes scrolled across Jill's screen and she spoke several of them out loud. "Go ahead upstairs you chickens," was one, while "this is the greatest thing ever" read another. Hundreds of students now watched the live feed as Anne and Jill's nerves melted away with their newfound fame.

They climbed the grand staircase, leading them to the second floor where a series of doors stood closed. Neon graffiti scrawled across the walls; dozens of horrible faces were illuminated with each beam of light. Without the need to discuss it, they both knew there was only one door they could choose to enter. At the far end of the hall stood a black door with a red, painted replica of the screaming face from the knocker on the front door. Anne and Jill's mock bravado disappeared, and their Facebook viewers could only hear the creaking steps of their shuffling feet as they approached.

The door swung open easily, exposing an empty room without windows. As Anne flicked the flashlight from side to side, they both settled their attention on the room's center. Drawn in chalk on the floor was a large keyhole, surrounded by a wider circle. At its center sat a rounded stone.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, holy shit."

The Facebook feed exploded. Hundreds of comments flew past the screen, the audience excited at the girls' find. Some of the arrogant, proud teenage boys called the pair out for setting it up ahead of time. Whether they had or not, no one seemed to care. Anne, her heart pumping hard in her chest, looked back at the camera and asked the crowd what they should do next. It was unanimous. Sit down and let the stone do the talking.

Both girls settled into the circle, sitting cross-legged across from each other, while Jill kept the camera rolling.

Anne flashed another nervous smile at the camera, before leaning down and placing both of her hands on the stone. Doing her best Ouija board impression, she closed her eyes and concentrated, feeling a cold, damp darkness fill the room around her. Anne breathed rapidly, feeling the cold air sting her lungs.

"Oh my god, Anne," Jill sounded scared, "stop it."

Anne continued breathing with her eyes closed. "I know, its freezing in here."

"No, Anne. Stop moving the stone you're freaking me out." Panic rose in her friend's voice and the Facebook feed began to shake in her hands.

"I'm not-" Anne started, opening her eyes to find the stone tracing the outline of the keyhole without her realizing it. Her initial instinct to pull back failed, her hands magnetically held to the stone. A moan of fear slipped from her mouth.

"I can't get up." Jill whined, frozen in her cross-legged position in the circle. Anne couldn't do anything but look up at the camera in terrified horror as her hands followed the stone on its path to completing the keyhole.

"Anne, stop it! Stop. Seriously."

Her dry mouth couldn't form a response. The outside circle emitted a faint glow as pulsing red firelight forced itself up through the floorboards. Anne's eyes went wide as her face started to tingle.

"What the fuck, Anne?" Jill jerked her body, desperately trying – and failing - to force it from the floor.

Anne's face flickered and scrambled, reminding Jill what it looked like to flip through the television channels quickly. Her friends' familiar faces twisted to one of a stranger. Looking back at Jill and the camera was an older, native American man with a gruesome slash across the side of his face.

Jill screamed as her friend's face flickered again, twisting into a dark featured man with vacant eyes and a crazed glare. The stone continued tracing the outline of the keyhole, the circle's pulsing red glow stabilizing line into a brilliant shine.

Anne's face continued to contort, swapping from portrait to portrait, each more terrifying than the other. The faces radiated hate and contempt, greed, and lust. Evil channeled itself through the young girl's face, broadcasted to all of her friends.

A cold breeze swirled through the room as the stone neared the end of its path. Jill's screams were quickly swept away as the pitch of air consumed her ears. Unable to look away, she watched in confusion as her friend's face stopped flashing. Her skin smoothed, melting

away as the breeze stopped, the stone freezing in place. The face that remained still wasn't Anne's, but it was one they both remembered fondly.

Staring back at Jill was the face of Anne's grandmother, a kind woman who had passed away several years earlier. Concern was written all over the wizened face, and she spoke through a strained tone. The ghostly image's voice belonged to the grandmother, not the granddaughter.

"Run. Now, Jill. I can't hold him for much longer. Grab Anne and RUN!"

The invisible bonds that held Jill in place released and the young girl jumped to her feet, dropping her phone and reaching for her friend's arms. She sighed in relief as she pulled Anne's arms free from the stone, yanking them both from the glowing circle. They landed hard on the dusty floor, quickly picking themselves up and dashing from the room.

Anne and Jill, squeezing each other's hands as tightly as they could, leapt down the grand staircase and bound out of the house, not slowing down until they were locked safely in the car. Both out of breath, they couldn't do anything but hold each other and cry, thanking Anne's grandmother for her help. Without speaking it, they both shook at the idea of what might have happened if the keyhole had finished being traced.

The iPhone continued broadcasting for a dozen seconds or so after Jill dropped it. Lying face down in the circle, it was only able to relay audio to the terrified audience. A howl of fury reverberated through the room, the roar of a thousand tortured souls. Anne and Jill had become legends that night, only in a way they hadn't expected. Each of them, in the deep recesses of their mind, would carry that experience for the rest of their lives. Every time they saw a face in the darkness, or a shadow in the mirror neither could help seeing a flash of someone else; someone sinister; someone trying to escape from the depths of hell.