CHAPTER THREE

THE ENDLESS HOUSE

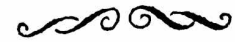
San Jose, CA

It's hard to know where San Jose, California, starts, where it ends, and what distinguishes it from the dozens of adjoining small suburbs that stretch northwest to San Francisco and northeast to Oakland. The city—if you can call it that—is a labyrinth of repetition, a nonspace, a suburban blur that spreads northward from the Santa Clara Valley into two fingers of land: one the San Francisco peninsula, the other the East Bay. Individual hamlets like Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, and Cupertino overlap, their individual downtowns long dried up and replaced by shopping malls and office parks that distort any real sense of geography.

Urban sprawl isn't unique to San Jose, of course, but the city has a miniature allegory of itself in the form of a sprawling, formless Victorian mansion that sits in its very center. If there is a central monument to San Jose now, it is this labyrinthine, inscrutable house in the heart of the city. Tours leave every twenty minutes, lasting roughly two hours, every day but Christmas. During the course of the tour guests walk over a mile, mostly staying inside the house. This is the Winchester Mystery House, just off Interstate 280, facing the major thoroughfare now named for it, Winchester Boulevard, next to a Cineplex and across the street from

two massive shopping malls. It is what many have called the most haunted house in the world.

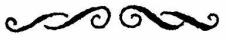
Implacable, anachronistic, unchanging. Holding its secrets within.



The basic facts of how the house got started are clear enough. In 1862 Sarah Pardee married William Wirt Winchester, the son of a successful shirt manufacturer who would go on to found the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. Sarah and William's only daughter died in infancy in 1866, and William died of tuberculosis fifteen years later. In 1885 the wealthy widow moved to the Santa Clara Valley, where she bought an eight-room farmhouse and began work on enlarging it. It grew massively; by the time she died in 1922, it had 160 rooms and sprawled in every direction. At one point it was even larger, but much of it was damaged by the 1906 earthquake, including a seven-story tower, which she never repaired or rebuilt. Many of the rooms remain unfinished, as though the builders simply walked off the job the day Sarah Winchester died.

Opened to the public the year after her death, the house became immediately famous, working its way into American culture in unlikely ways. Author Shirley Jackson grew up not far from San Jose, and the mansion features briefly in *The Haunting of Hill House*: as Dr. John Montague describes the features of Hill House, he claims its builder, Hugh Crain, "expected that someday Hill House might become a showplace, like the Winchester House in California." Ten years later, the Winchester house was used as the inspiration for Disneyland's Haunted Mansion: Walt Disney wanted a haunted mansion but nothing that was derelict or in ruins, so he turned to the immaculate Victorian façade of the Winchester house. Stephen King claims he first heard the story of the house in a *Ripley's Believe It or Not* comic when he was a kid and remembered it for years after. King's *Rose Red*—a television miniseries from 2002 about a

team of paranormal researchers who investigate a massive, sprawling maze of a house—was the closest direct work of his to be based on the Winchester house, but one finds traces of it throughout his other work as well, from *'Salem's Lot* to *The Shining*. And then there's the artist Jeremy Blake, who shortly before his suicide produced a trilogy of short films based on the Winchester house. In them, the façade of the house is merged with shifting, kaleidoscopic colors, images from 1950s cartoon westerns, and the suburban landscape of San Jose. The effect of the films is unsettling in the extreme as Blake's work draws out a latent foreboding in the Victorian eaves and gables of the house. "There's the psychological aspect of the place," he said at the time, "the neurosis and mad logic and creativity all flowing together in this crazy quilt of rooms. It gets unbelievably twisted."



The legend of the house, which has been told so many times that most people take its veracity for granted, begins with the death of Sarah Winchester's daughter and husband. Believing her family to be cursed, Winchester went to a famous Boston psychic named Adam Coons. During a séance, Coons told her that her family was being haunted by the ghosts of all those killed by Winchester rifles, particularly the Native Americans who had been killed by the "gun that won the West," and that the only way to keep them at bay would be to begin building a house that was never to be finished, an endless work in progress. And so Winchester came to San Jose, bought an eight-room farmhouse, and hired crews to build onto her house, literally twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for the rest of her life. When she died in 1922, all work immediately stopped: rooms were left unfinished, nails were left half driven into walls. This is the story Stephen King remembers: "At one séance, Sarah Winchester asked the medium, 'When will I die?' . . . The medium replied, 'When your house is done.'"

This story of the endlessly deferred completion of construction as a means to stave off death reinforces the notion of a woman whose superstition and gullibility led her to create a house beyond the bounds of sense or competence. Nightly séances were conducted in a blue room in the center of the house, from midnight until 2 a.m., when Winchester would summon ghosts to instruct her on the next day's construction and how to keep herself safe from evil spirits. Among the house's signature features is a staircase that ascends half a flight, makes a ninety-degree turn to the left, then ends directly at a wall, as though to trick ghosts who might be pursuing the solitary heiress. These are the prime selling points of the Winchester Mystery House: the dead-end staircases, the trapdoors and false rooms, the labyrinthine network of traps and detours. All of which were meant to confuse the ghosts haunting Winchester, creating a private maze that only she knew and understood, in which she could feel safe from these forces of malevolence.

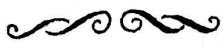
Winchester managed this incredible building feat due to her extreme wealth: because of her stock in the Winchester Rifle Company, Sarah Winchester's income, the tour guides explain, was around $1,500 a day, somewhere north of $32,000 in today's dollars. As such, she bought lavishly and could afford to be eccentric. An early stop in the tour is the so-called Million Dollar Storeroom, which holds several priceless works of Tiffany glass that Winchester had specifically commissioned. The room conveys opulent wealth, but the message is clear: these things belong in a palatial mansion, not a madwoman's house. A crazy person should not have had access to them.

Among the Tiffany pieces is one with an intricate, stunning spiderweb pattern, made with thirteen semiprecious stones. Winchester's fascination with the number thirteen is a well-established aspect of the lore surrounding her life—there are thirteen bedrooms, thirteen bathrooms, thirteen windows in certain rooms—and her triskaidekaphilia is presented as more proof of her morbid eccentricity. It was, supposedly, in the thirteenth bedroom of her mansion that Winchester died, on

September 5, 1922, attended by her improbably named physician, Dr. Euthanasia Meade.

As compelling as this narrative is, there are several problems with it. People talk of the "staircases" that go nowhere, but there's only one—most likely an uncorrected architectural mistake. The fascination with the number thirteen is also a later concoction. No record of a Boston psychic named Adam Coons exists (though Euthanasia Meade was certainly real), nor is there any definitive evidence that Sarah Winchester ever visited a psychic. The story of the ghosts of the Winchester Rifle's victims is almost certainly invention as well. Nor do most people know that Winchester owned several other spectacularly average homes and that most of her later years were spent in her home in Atherton, some miles away, or that she spent very little of the last seventeen years of her life in the Winchester Mystery House, which she called Llanada Villa ("house on flat land"). The blue room in the center of the house, where she supposedly conducted séances each night at midnight? This was her gardener's bedroom.

Still, questions remain. If this story is mostly, if not entirely, false, then what is the real story—why is the house so large, why did she keep on building, and why doesn't it have any kind of observable order or plan? Why tell this lie instead of the truth, and why did it take such firm root in our psyches? How did it come to obliterate nearly all traces of the true story, and why does it remain so alluring?



Sarah Lockwood Pardee was born in 1839 in New Haven, Connecticut, into an upper-middle-class family. (Throughout her life she was called not Sarah but Sallie, after her maternal grandmother.) The third-youngest of six children, all but one of them girls, she grew up amid the Golden Age of New England industrialism. The wizard Eli Whitney had just moved his factory to nearby Hamden, and all around New Haven mill towns like Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, thrummed with life. Sarah's

father, Leonard, was a woodworker by trade and established himself as an expert craftsman of the ornamental flourishes that came to define Victorian architecture.

Among those who were rising on the wave of American industrialism was the Pardees' neighbor Oliver Winchester. He had arrived in New Haven from Baltimore in 1845, virtually penniless but determined to make a name for himself. Possessed of an ideal combination of business acumen and mechanical understanding, within ten years he had reversed his fortunes. Using an innovative design for the production of men's shirts, he and his business partner, John Davies, founded the Winchester and Davies Shirt Manufacturing Company, which would in a few short years transform into a juggernaut of industry.

From 1850 to 1860, Leonard Pardee, building homes the barons of industry could now afford, increased his income tenfold, to $15,000 in assets (roughly a million dollars today). But he had a problem: too many daughters in an age when women were mainly thought of as a financial liability. He gave his children a strong education—they learned foreign languages, art, and music—and then set about marrying off his girls. The second to reach the altar, Sarah married her childhood neighbor William Wirt Winchester in 1862. It was a simple ceremony that belied the wealth of the two families: there was a war on, materials were sparse, and it was not a time for ostentation. The week that William and Sarah married, there were battles in Louisiana, Missouri, and Virginia. It had been a year since the first battle of Bull Run had awakened the United States to the horror of battle, and in a few weeks the Second Battle of Bull Run would grind up another eighteen thousand soldiers. By then, death had reached all corners of the North and the South.

Most of the Pardees and Winchesters stayed out of the war, being rich enough to spend the $300 for a deferment. (Sarah's brother served in the first Battle of Bull Run but chose not to reenlist when his initial three-month appointment was up; her brother-in-law Homer Sprague was the only member of her near family to see sustained conflict.) If anything,

though, Oliver Winchester wanted more involvement in the war. In 1857 he had bought the failing Volcanic Repeating Arms Company from Horace Smith and Daniel B. Wesson, two designers who had invented a promising but as-yet-unsuccessful rifle that could fire multiple shots without the cumbersome and complicated reloading process of most rifles. (Smith and Wesson, of course, would found another arms company, bearing their names, that would find a great deal more success.) Winchester knew that a repeating rifle, a rifle that one could reload in a matter of seconds rather than minutes, could change the landscape of war forever, and he was convinced that the U.S. Army needed to adopt it. He took one of his most valued mechanics from his shirt factory, Benjamin T. Henry, and worked with him to improve on Smith and Wesson's idea.

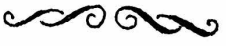
Despite its obvious advantages, the resulting Winchester Repeating Rifle, nicknamed "The Henry," failed to make an impact on the war. Some individual soldiers purchased them, but the army never adopted the rifles wholesale; by the end of the Civil War, repeating rifles made up only 1 percent of all weapons used in battle. At the time, William saw his father's venture into weapons as an interesting side project; the real family fortune still lay in shirts. By then William was the secretary of Winchester and Davies, and he and Sarah had built themselves a comfortable life—one ideally suited for a child. On June 15, 1866, Sarah gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Annie, after William's sister, who had recently died in childbirth.

The delivery was fairly uneventful, but almost immediately Annie seemed to deteriorate before their eyes. A doctor diagnosed her condition as marasmus, a deficiency in which the body cannot process calories or manufacture its own protein. Normally marasmus results from severe malnutrition, but Annie was not lacking in food; her body simply could not process it. In an utterly cruel irony in a nation that had recently undergone such deprivation, Annie, born to one of the few families well off enough to provide handsomely for their child, was dying of want.

Annie Winchester died on July 25, a mere forty days old. William

returned to his job at Winchester and Davies, but his father's other business was rapidly changing. The Henry rifle had finally begun to take off, and with it, the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. By securing lucrative contracts with foreign militaries, Oliver Winchester was able to keep his company thriving even through a postwar depression. By 1869, with the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the rifle assumed a new purpose: the company began aggressively marketing it as *the* best weapon for frontier self-defense. In time the Winchester rifle would earn the nickname "the gun that won the West," becoming synonymous with America's westward expansion and the Indian wars.

As the West became increasingly important to the company's fortunes, Winchester established offices in San Francisco, and in 1870 he sent William and Sarah to the Bay Area to oversee their installation. In portraits of the couple taken during that trip, William looks haunted, hollowed-out; his eyes hold a haggard allure, fixed deep into the distance. The tuberculosis that plagued him most of his adult life is not quite visible, but he seems fragile. Sarah, on the other hand, seems to face the camera head-on, even from a three-quarters profile. She exudes, if not beauty, then a vitality and a quick-wittedness, an awareness of the world around her and a desire to reshape it.



When people speak of the deaths in Sarah Winchester's family that drove her to build her house in San Jose, they mostly mean the deaths of her infant daughter and her husband, as if these two events happened coterminously. In fact, they took place sixteen years apart. Annie died in 1866, and Sarah continued to live on in New Haven until the mid-1880s. She and William never had another child, but by the few extant accounts, they lived generally happily and comfortably during that time.

Then in early 1880 Sarah's mother died, and in the winter of that year, her father-in-law, Oliver Winchester, died, followed by her husband less than a year later from tuberculosis. A few years later, she lost another

close relative. By the mid-1880s Sarah Winchester found her family life decimated.

But when she moved to San Jose, she didn't come alone: she came with two sisters and their families. Why San Jose? Sarah and her husband had visited San Francisco in the 1870s, and found it quite pleasant, but the real reason has to do with her brother-in-law Homer Sprague, who in 1885 was appointed president of Mills College, in Oakland. When he and Sarah's sister Antoinette (Nettie) moved to the Bay Area, both Sarah and another sister, Isabelle (Belle) Merriman, and her family all moved together. In San Jose they would re-form their family, and Sarah, who had married into money and had the most stable fortune, would build a home to house them all.

In those years after the Gold Rush, the San Francisco Bay Area promised much. San Francisco's population grew at around 8 percent a year during the 1860s and 1870s, from 135,000 people in 1867 to 233,700 in 1880, and they were still coming in droves, thanks to the railroad. Most came seeking not gold but the "life-giving Nature" of the West; as one unnamed physician of the time put it, "Nor is sickness that scourge of humanity here to harass and hinder us in our pursuits. The general salubrity of California has justly become a proverb. The surgeons of San Francisco have remarked that wounds heal here with astonishing rapidity, owing, it is supposed, in a great measure, to the extreme purity of the atmosphere."

People afflicted with all manner of disease came to California, but consumptives most of all; stories were told of tubercular cases, or "lungers," as they were known, miraculously healed simply by breathing the dry, warm air of the West. According to one historian, by 1900 one-fourth of all migrants to California were tuberculosis patients who had come for their health and ended up staying. And so as Sarah Winchester joined the disease train to the San Francisco Bay Area, she was followed by her husband's killer, the White Plague.

She settled in the small but ambitious rural community of San Jose. Always in the shadow of its neighbor to the north, San Francisco, San

Jose by then had begun to try to distinguish itself. It could boast of its great Electric Light Tower, built in 1881 for $5,000. Straddling the intersection of Santa Clara and Market streets, the tower was 207 feet high, topped with six carbon arc lamps that provided 24,000 candelas of light—so bright, one could read by its light over a mile away. "For the first time the citizens of San Jose realized that they had the wonder of the nineteenth century," the *Daily Herald* proclaimed, "that they lived in the only city lighted by electric light, supported by a tower, which like the Colossus at Rhodes, stood astride her two principal streets." Local cops preferred working the beat around the tower, because migrating ducks would often fly into it and fall, electrocuted, dead to the ground, and the cops could pick up the dead ducks and sell them to restaurants.

Despite this welcoming beacon of progress and light, most people reaching the Santa Clara Valley found a city adrift. "California was a hotbed that brought humanity to a rapid, monstrous maturity," the *Annals of California* reported in 1855, "like the mammoth vegetables for which it is so celebrated." People everywhere "lost their brains," which is to say, they went insane. Suicides by strychnine and arsenic were common, including that of a woman named Claude Lorraine, who'd lost a sock containing $500, and a man named Riley, who botched a suicide attempt in January of 1884, told the police he was tired of life and wanted to die, and apologized for not making a "better job of it." Newspapers referred to suicide as "solving the Great Problem," as in the headline that ran in the July 13, 1885, *San Jose Daily News*: "STRYCHNINE: Margaret Risley Solves the Great Problem." The Great Problem was life; the solution was death.

Sarah Winchester's original idea was to enlarge her house so that it could comfortably fit her family. But her brother-in-law Homer Sprague's tenure at Mills College ended almost before it had begun, and within a year he and Winchester's sister Nettie moved to North Dakota for a different university job. Meanwhile, her sister Belle Merriman and her family had

moved to San Francisco, leaving only their daughter Marion, whom Sarah all but adopted. The goal of building a great house for herself and her siblings' families ended almost immediately.

And yet Winchester kept building. She initially hired at least two architects but quickly dismissed them, preferring to do most of the work herself. Most of what we know about her building methods come from two surviving letters written to her sister-in-law Hannah Jane (Jennie) Bennett in 1898. They speak not of a madwoman beset by spirits but of a woman experimenting with the construction and design of her house. "I am constantly having to make an upheaval for some reason," she writes on June 11. "For instance, my upper hall which leads to the sleeping apartment was rendered so unexpectedly dark by a little addition that after a number of people had missed their footing on the stairs I decided that safety demanded something to be done so, over a year ago, I took out a wall and put in a skylight." Despite what you're told on a tour of the house, she did not employ workers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; when she found that the plaster she wanted couldn't be set in the heat of summer, she dismissed her workmen in order to wait for cooler weather, and she writes, "then I became rather worn and tired out and dismissed all the workmen to take such rest as I might through the winter." Her fatigue is a constant refrain. "If I did not get so easily tired out I should hurry up things more than I do," she wrote, "but I think it is better to 'go slow' than to use myself up. Just having the furnace man here and going over all the details with him used me up completely for a day or so."

There's a passive-aggressive quality to Winchester's building: she was nominally getting her house ready to entertain guests, particularly family from New Haven, who were accustomed to houses of a certain size, but then continually begged off guests under the pretense that the house was never quite done. "I hope some day to get so situated that I shall feel that it would not be an imposition on my friends to invite them to visit me," she says, more than ten years after she began improvements on her house.

At some point the perpetual building seems to have become a pretense to keep her family away.

This is one, perhaps uncharitable, way of looking at the house. Another perspective is that at some point the building ceased to be a means to housing her family and became an end unto itself. We are not used to seeing Sarah Winchester as an architectural pioneer, but she was. At the time she began work on her house, most would have seen the phrase "woman architect" as a contradiction in terms. Perhaps the most famous female architect of the early twentieth century, Julia Morgan, had not yet applied to École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris. When she did, in 1897, the school had only recently begun allowing female applicants. Particularly recalcitrant was the architecture school: Morgan had to apply three times before they were willing to admit a woman. The second time she nearly made it, but according to one judge her score was lowered because "they did not want to encourage young girls." Morgan would go on to define the architecture of the San Francisco Bay Area in the first half of the twentieth century before being hired by William Randolph Hearst to design many of his buildings, including, ultimately, Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California.

It's tempting to compare Winchester's house to Morgan's work—two female architects at the dawn of the twentieth century. But the tendency to judge the house by other architectural models or too closely through the lens of its creator is to miss the thing itself. Without any overall or grand design, without any intention of a unified effect, the Winchester mansion sprawls and flops in a dozen different directions, moving like a coral reef. Its aesthetic, its beauty, is precisely in its lawlessness. The house is, in a way, a form of automatic writing, a stream of consciousness made spatial.

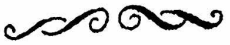
For many visitors this is also what makes the house so unsettling. The Winchester house can feel endless, much larger on the inside than it is on the outside. This is something you find in Shirley Jackson's Hill House, and you find it in the disorienting space of Disney's Haunted Mansion (only from an aerial view do you understand that nearly all of the ride

happens not in the house itself but in an adjacent warehouse space, giving you the sense that the tiny mansion you enter goes on forever inside). The disturbingly endless house appears repeatedly in horror novels, from Poe's House of Usher to the eponymous structure in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, built elegantly around the unsettling fact that the house in question is slightly larger inside than it is outside. And this is to say nothing of the numerous gothic novels that feature secret passageways, where the endlessness isn't supernatural, including the estate in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls." If houses are supposed to be places of security, then most terrifying is the idea that they might go on forever, that they might be labyrinths.

But this isn't the only reason the Winchester house has captured the imagination of so many. Add to this another kind of haunting, the one popularized by Charles Dickens in his 1861 novel *Great Expectations,* a novel involving the spinster Miss Havisham, living alone with a young girl named Estella in a massive mansion. Everything in her house is frozen in time: place settings are covered in cobwebs and dust, but readied as though at any moment the dinner party might begin again. As Pip tells us,

> I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago. I noticed that Miss Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. As Estella dealt the cards, I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave-clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.

Here, too, we find a fictional story ready to be transposed onto Sarah Winchester, complete with the young girl, played by Winchester's niece, Marion Merriman. The spinster in perpetual mourning, time standing still, the perpetual sense of arrested decay—none of this had much to do with Winchester, but from outward appearances it was a perfect fit, and it offered a ready-made explanation of what went on behind closed doors. Ghosts, you could say, flock to women left alone.



On Friday, March 29, 1895, an unsigned article titled "Strange Story: A Woman Who Thinks She'll Die When Her House Is Built" was published in the *San Jose Daily News*, with the subheading "A Magnificent Mansion on the Saratoga Road Near San Jose—A Maze of Turrets and Towers." The legend of Sarah Winchester, widow in perpetual mourning, superstitious kook whose wealth was squandered in a deluded quest to keep the spirits at bay, truly originates here.

"The first view of the house fills one with surprises," the article proclaims. "You mechanically rub your eyes to assure yourself that the number of the turrets is not an illusion, they are so fantastic and dream-like. But nearer approach reveals others and others and still others." With a mixture of wonder and a tinge of horror, the anonymous *Daily News* writer taps directly into the idea that the house may literally be endless:

> How it is possible to build on an already apparently finished house and preserve its artistic appearance through so many changes is a query that nobody can answer, but the fact remains that it has been done. From every point of view new towers appear, and one has to make a circuit of the building to see all of these, for every addition to the many that is made has one or more separate roofs, and every roof is elaborated into a tower or resolved into a dome.

From there, the article gets down to business.

> Ten years ago the handsome residence was apparently ready for occupancy, but improvements and additions are constantly being made, for the reason, it is said, that the owner of the house believes that when it is entirely completed, she will die. This superstition has resulted in the construction of a maze of domes, turrets, cupolas and towers, covering territory enough for a castle. Although no part of the structure is over two stories high, the house is large enough to shelter an army.

As the article continues, it lays out the story that has come to be associated with Sarah Winchester, which has remained almost entirely unchanged in over a century.

> As fast as new rooms are finished—and they are all made with the very latest and most modern of accessories—they are furnished with the utmost elegance and closed, to be used hardly at all. Mrs. Winchester and her niece live alone in the great residence, and its doors are closed to all but a few. The tap, tap, tapping of the carpenters' hammers never disturbs them in their many and luxurious quarters, which are far removed from the sound as if it were somebody else's house that was being built.

Here one finds, arising almost *ex nihilo*, the entire mythology all at once: A building somewhat anachronistic, no longer fully in use. A woman, arrested in time, living in the past, unable to move forward and rejoin the stream of humanity. A house that never ends, that's built as a labyrinth, that is uncanny in the way it uses familiar domestic elements while upending them in a strange, discomfiting way.

One last element that would have been on the minds of readers of that original article might have contributed to the vicious rumors that began to spring up around Sarah Winchester. Two years earlier, on May 5, 1893, the United States suffered its worst economic shock in decades, one that would lead to a depression that would be eclipsed only by the Great Depression of the 1930s. By 1895 unemployment had gone from 4 percent to 14 percent; there were more than 500 bank failures and 1,600 business failures. Henry Adams saw the panic of 1893 as a conspiracy from Wall Street, by that "dark, mysterious, crafty, wicked, rapacious, and tyrannical power to rob and oppress and enslave the people." According to H. P. Robinson, the editor of *Railway Age*, writing in 1895, "It is probably safe to say that in no civilized country in this century, not actually in the throes of war or open insurrection, has society been so disorganized as it was in the United States during the first half of 1894; never was human life held so cheap; never did the constituted authorities appear so incompetent to enforce respect for the law."

In this context of social upheaval, in a city like San Jose, already teetering on the edge, we find Sarah Winchester—a recluse, a woman, someone who gave to charity but did so anonymously, who had no real social circle to stand up for her. She made an easy target, and the slurs of insanity, the echoes of Miss Havisham and her own pathological mourning—these things all clung to Sarah Winchester because she appeared to those around her as a gaudy reminder of the haves versus the have-nots. She was the 1 percent, and the city resented her for it. And so it punished her through gossip and myth.

At any other point in time, in any other place, and with any other person, any other structure, none of these stories would have gelled quite in this way. Sarah Winchester's house is unique not because of its architecture or because of the motivations for its construction but because it was vulnerable to a series of resentments that converged in a singular moment in history.

Defenders were few and far between. Two years later an article titled "Only Gossip: No Truth in the Story of the Winchester Palace" appeared in the *San Jose Evening News*, arguing that the myth was the "result of rural

rumors." The article quoted an "acquaintance" of Sarah Winchester's, who said bluntly that the "story about Mrs. Winchester being superstitious, and believing that she is going to die when the house, or rather all additions are completed, is all nonsense. She is not superstitious, but is an unusually sensible woman. She has erected a magnificent home. She has made many improvements on the first plans. It may be that building is a fad with her, and if it is, she is able to satisfy it, for she is a woman of ample means." This acquaintance, not satisfied, went on quite pointedly:

> We are constantly inviting people of wealth to locate in Santa Clara valley. Mrs. Winchester is one of the most desirable settlers we have ever had. If people who come here with fortunes are inclined to spend it, I do not think it is wise to circulate reports that they are "cranks" merely because they do not get "thick" with the neighbors. . . . Mrs. Winchester is a lady of refinement and culture. . . . If she wants to build a castle on her premises near Campbell, she should be permitted to do so without ascribing her motives to foolish superstitions. If people of wealth who settle in Santa Clara are to be ridiculed when they spend their money lavishly, we might as well put up the bars. . . . After awhile the lady might not want to have a nail driven about the place for fear that someone would run off to a newspaper with a cock-and-bull story. This would be the means of preventing the circulation of a large amount of money among builders and furnishers and that is why we encourage people of wealth to locate in Santa Clara valley. We want industries developed, improvements made and this valley beautified.

The article was indeed a corrective to the urban legends of the reclusive Winchester, but it was curiously couched in the language of civic investment, encouraging the wealthy to relocate to the Santa Clara Valley.

The house was either the work of a rich, mentally unstable widow or a potential source for local jobs and investment. The story of Sarah Winchester's house, built on the fortune of the rifle that "won the West," is always, one way or another, the story of money.

After her death, her numerous real estate assets were sold off one by one. Of all her holdings, including the houses and vast plots of land she owned throughout the valley, the Winchester house itself was, according to her lawyer Samuel Leib, "appraised as of no value." Gargantuan, sprawling, beautiful, as salable real estate the house was worthless: too odd, idiosyncratic, lavish, and useless to be sold to another buyer. At an auction of the property, no one bought it; the only interested party was a man named John H. Brown, who didn't have the money to buy the house but offered to lease it, with an option to buy it later.

Brown had come a long way: from an amusement park called the Crystal Beach Resort on the Canadian side of Lake Erie. There he had invented one of the earliest roller coasters: a ten-mile-an-hour ride called the Backety-Back, which in June 1910 had killed a woman who'd somehow been thrown from its slow-moving car. Brown relocated his family to California, where he heard of the Winchester house and the rumors regarding its construction. Among Crystal Beach's other attractions was a "house of mystery" that Brown had seen draw large crowds. According to historian Mary Jo Ignoffo, who put together a biography of Winchester, it was Brown who took the rumors of the Winchester house and reinvigorated them, building a mythology around it and offering tours. As attitudes toward America's westward expansion and manifest destiny changed, so, too, did the role of the Winchester rifle in the tour, now emphasized as the gun that had killed untold Native Americans, all of whom were now haunting the widow who'd profited from the murder weapon. As with the Myrtles Plantation, vengeful American Indians have loomed large in the script.

Among those who took a tour in those first years was Harry Houdini,

who had spent much of his professional career by that point debunking psychics and disproving supernatural phenomena. Yet when he got to the Winchester house, his attitude seemed to change completely. After his visit, he did not speak of the folly of superstition or of Winchester being crazy or duped by disreputable psychics. After repeating the story that by then had been accepted as gospel, Houdini went on: "The whole thing is beautifully inlaid because the woman wants the workmen to take plenty of time. Never was there such a marvelous place."

After the great debunker gave his seal of approval to the tourist attraction that Sarah Winchester's house had become, its business grew steadily. Over the years her former employees and friends made attempts to correct her story; when she died, Leib's son and business partner Roy commented that she was "as sane and clear headed a woman as I have ever known, and she had a better grasp of business and financial affairs than most men." Testimony from her many employees over the years mattered little, though; what mattered, then as now, was the story that taps into those larger social and cultural trends, perfectly embodied by such an architecturally unsettling house.

The legend of Sarah Winchester depends on a cultural uneasiness to which we don't always like to admit. An uneasiness about women living alone, withdrawn from society, for one. An uneasiness about wealth and the way the superrich live among us. And, perhaps largest of all, an uneasiness about the gun that won the West and the violence white Americans carried out in the name of civilization.

These may be unconnected anxieties, but they're brought together in this story of a rich woman alone, haunted by the American Indians killed with her father-in-law's gun. It's a compelling story, perhaps, because it's one in which Sarah Winchester is punished for these transgressions—driven mad by guilt, unable to join society, her money wasted and misspent. Winchester herself had little documented guilt about the role of the rifle in American history, but we've projected shame on her nonetheless, as though we can quarantine such thoughts in the mind of someone long dead so the rest of us can go about our days unburdened, enjoying the California sun.