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4,600 words.

RUST
A Ghost Mystery Novel
by SUSANA K. MARSCH

Chapter One

The Funhouse

His name was Mike Monroe. He called me over as I ran out the door pale and trembling, while my house screeched behind me like a car crushed at a junkyard, and offered me coffee on his porch. The warmth of the cup steadied my nerves.

“Young man, ya don’ know what ya’ve gotten yourself intah, do ya?” He said taking a sip, “It’s been almost twenty yeahs and I can’t forget it, I’m not surprised the house hasn’t forgotten eithah.”

“What happened here?” I asked.

“The realtah didn’t tell ya?”

I shook my head.

He glanced at me and sighed. There was doubt in his eyes, as if he wasn’t sure he should tell me. I’d seen him since I moved in and he’d always seemed nice, yet reserved. This was the

first time we'd interacted beyond the occasional wave and "how aah ya?"

"Listen, kid, I'm gonna tell ya the entire story, just as she told me. Remembah, these are *her* words, not mine."

Mike Monroe took another sip and began. His husky old-man's voice broke through the lazy quiet of the summer afternoon. As I listened, the words became pictures, and the pictures became words on paper, thus portending the next story I was going to write and the woman that would shape it.

It wasn't so much the stench of blood that bothered her, but the taste in her mouth; metallic, reminiscent of rust on her long-forgotten bicycle. She hadn't used that bike since the fifth grade; when she had let it drop on the grass in the front yard, running straight for the house, unaware of the unsettling silence surrounding it.

She had run into the parlor trailing mud from her white sneakers, while the screen door had slammed behind her, making a loud thwack as it hit the door frame, followed by a quieter one as it bounced back and settled in place. Back then, she couldn't have known what was happening in the living room. There'd been no sign of anything wrong beforehand, no hint that her grandfather would die while she rode her bike up and down the street; but years later, she would remember it as the before-and-after moment of her life.

Now that moment seemed so far away, so insignificant. Funny how it had once been paramount in the shaping of her person, yet now seemed so puny she wouldn't even have thought of it, if not for that metallic taste in her mouth; the taste of a rusty bicycle, the taste of blood.

The smell remained in her nostrils as she stood in the parlor, the same screen door

slamming behind her. Everything seemed as it should be, but there was something wrong, something eerie about the place. She felt as if the house and her whole life had been violated, yet everything seemed in order.

She tiptoed up the stairs, the lingering violence growing stronger with each step.

She dared not speak, lest she rip apart the ghostly silence that suffocated the house and bring more violence into being with the sound of her voice. It seemed as if this unnatural silence had created a vacuum somewhere deep in the walls and sucked away all comfort and safety, which defined this home.

As she opened the door to her brother's room, her memory jumped back to the day so long ago when she had run in with muddy shoes, expecting to find a smiling mother and the much promised afternoon snack of milk and cake.

It had not been so then, and somehow, now, she knew that she would not find her brother asleep. He was on his bed, yes, but his face turned toward the door, his eyes wide open in terror and blood spilled down the side of the bed from his gutted body.

She staggered back, and trembling, moved down the hall to her parents' bedroom. The door was ajar. She pushed it open as the reek of blood hit her. They were on the bed; their bodies hacked, blood creating pools on the carpet and splattered on the walls. There was so much of it. It seemed to eat into the plaster. It poisoned the air and defiled all relics of happiness, family, childhood, and innocence.

The house was silent, it was an eerie quiet, and yet, deep inside, she knew she was alone in that big, dead house. She knew 'they' were gone. Only a few hours before, the house had been empty, but even with her father at work and her mother and brother at the park, there had been

life pulsing through it. Now, it was full of death, and she was alone in that tomb.

She could stay there no longer, not among the ruins of all that she held dear. Woozy and faint, she ran down the stairs. She passed the living room where she had found her family that day far in the past, kneeling beside the couch and sobbing as her beloved grandfather had taken his last breath. She flew out the door, death clinging to her, and despair leaving a wake of malodorous rupture in the night air.

“What became of her?” I asked. He finished his cup and set it down on the window-ledge behind him.

“I dunno. I remembah she said she ran to her boyfriend’s. Some guy lived not so fah away. The police came and went y’know, but never found nothin’. They watched for weeks an’ knocked on our doahs for months, but nothin’. They never caught who did this. All I saw was the doah gapin’ open. I called the police, y’know.”

He looked up at the house across the street. It stood, gloomy and dark, at the end of the lane, surrounded by the thick, tall trees of the forest. I followed his gaze; I knew there was something strange about this house; the darkness within it was different—it was heavy. And the old man was right, there was a metallic taste to the air inside it.

“Anna,” he said out of the blue and I froze at the sound, “her name was Anna, boy’s name was Tommy, Beth an’ Paul were the parents. Last name Jenkins. I saw her y’know, the day she left with nothin’ but a suitcase. Just walked out the doah. I was standin’ right heah’, tendin’ the roses when she walked by an’ I talked to her, called her ovah, y’know. Her face was all sad an’ pale an’ her eyes sunken as she said goodbye. Said she’d go stay with her boyfriend for a

while an' then an aunt up in Maine. That's all I know. But y'see, I was lookin' right in her eyes an' when I told her I'd pray for her an' her family, I saw a glint, like a spark light up from way inside, an' I swear there was somethin' evil about that look, an' it gave me the chills. 'Twas ninety degrees out heah an' I was cold as ice. I watched her walk down this street an' I remembah thinkin' to m'self: that girl had somethin' to do with it all."

"Nobody heard anything? Screams, anything like that?" I asked, trying to keep my composure. 'Anna' was the word that rang out through the house at night.

"Now you're stahtin' to sound like the cops back then. Nah, it was Memorial Day weeken' an' the Dawsons an' Connors were already gone for the holiday. My wife (God rest her soul) was deaf, so she knew nothin' of what went on. I was workin' the late shift for the Big Dig back then an' it was gettin' to be our busiest time. Aftah all, buddy, this is Boston, there's only two seasons: wintah' an' construction. I was turnin' onto our street when I saw someone duckin' into a yahd, but thought nothin' of it till I got to the Jenkins house and saw the doah wide open. It was past midnight, so I called the cops. Anna told me latah she hid behind a hedge cuz she thought it was them comin' back for her."

I asked him a few more questions about the investigation, but he knew next to nothing. He said the police had kept a tight lid on the whole thing and that the papers hadn't covered the murders much. Politics had been the order of the day back then. He remembered they had asked him what the family was like and whether he thought the girl could've done it.

"I said no way, sweet girl like Anna, nevah. But that was befoah she said goodbye. Befoah I saw that evil in her eyes."

Apparently, the police couldn't find any convincing evidence, and no motive was clear.

We talked for a while longer. He was a big man and I could tell he'd been quite muscle-bound back in the day, your typical construction worker. Now he was gray-haired and had a musty smell about him.

He told me how this was once a quiet street where most people knew each other; Anytown, USA. They kept their doors unlocked and their yards clean. They waved and talked and had coffee together. Dinner parties almost every week. He said it used to be all friendly and whatnot. He told me the family was nice, quiet, and nothing suspicious ever went on there. They weren't noisy or disrespectful, they were good people, he said with a shake of his head; good people.

I asked him to tell me again what had made him think that the daughter had had something to do with it. I couldn't say the name, the house said it too often. He shook his head and said,

“Just a feelin', y'know. Like a hunch. Somethin' about her eyes that day she said goodbye. They scared me shitless. Then lotsa pieces stahted fallin' into place, y'know, details that you only think of aftahwahds. I told the cops, but they said it wasn't enough.”

He described how Anna always seemed more detached than the rest of her family. How she was often cold and mean to her much younger brother. Little things she did and said—he couldn't remember now—but it had seemed right back then. Seemed right still. There was a stark contrast between the Anna in his story and the Anna now. He said that just as Anna had told him her grandfather's death was the before-and-after moment in her life, for him there was a “befoah and aftah ‘The Look’”.

“Have you heard from her, did she ever come back?” I asked.

“All I can tell you is what I’ve already told ya, kid,” he nodded towards the house, “there’s been people movin’ in for a while an’ then they leave. Just up an’ leave, y’know. The last time ’twas a couple o’ yeahs ago, a young family about your age with small kids. They weren’ heah’ two months when they just up an’ got in their cah one night. Left the doah wide open an’ everythin’.”

He looked up at the house and shook his head again, “Yeah, somethin’ ain’ right about that house, just like somethin’ wasn’ right about that girl. I can only hope her aunt in Maine is still alive.”

I looked up and down the street and realized for the first time that none of the houses looked inviting. Yes, the stoops were clean and flowers bloomed in the sunshine, but there seemed to be invisible dark clouds hanging over them, like miasma.

Could this horrible incident be permeating the walls of the other houses on this street too, staining their lives with grief and fear? The old man said that no one had locked their doors before the murders. Now they go on with their daily lives, but always looking behind, jumping at shadows, unable to separate themselves from the carnage that happened next door.

I wish I’d known the magnitude of the damage before I’d bought the Jenkins house for a song. There is no painting over this.

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I walked back to the house and smelled the rust scent as I climbed the stairs. It was always there, like a trail leading from the front door to the parlor and up the stairs to the small hallway. There were two bedrooms on the left and the master bedroom on the right. The bathroom was at the end of the hall. The master bedroom had a bathroom of its own.

When I bought the house, I figured once they finished renovating it, the smell of rust would be gone. I even told the workmen to look for anything rusty and let me know what to do about it. They found nothing, and now the house is done, with brand new doors and plastered walls, but the scent remains.

I went to the master bedroom—my bedroom—and gulped. My bed was ruffled and the closet doors were wide open. Things and clothes were strewn about the room, and I took deep breaths to calm myself. This was new, the house had never done this, it had never touched my things. I stood in the doorway trying to decide whether to walk in and clean up or sit down at my desk and write. I closed my eyes, but the images of murdered parents were still on my mind, and the mess in my bedroom was not distraction enough to remove them. I couldn't help but imagine blood splattered over my painted walls and it made my skin crawl. Mike Monroe's account was all too vivid, and I shook, not just from fear, but from the need to write it. The words still rang out in my head and, despite the impression they'd caused, I held onto them, lest they should curl up in the back of my mind and torment me in my dreams. I knew that once I wrote, once Mike's account was visible on paper, the images it formed would not be so horrifying anymore. Once they were out of my system, I might relax. *Maybe you can even get this published, Johnny-Boy, cross over into another genre.*

I went into one of the small bedrooms, which I had turned into an office, and sat down at my desk. It faced the window that looked out on my backyard. The yard itself turned into the woods. I don't know why, but I always thought of Rivendell, The Last Homely House, as if the backyard was the last outpost looking out into The Unknown. When I first bought the house, I even toyed with the idea of a lamppost at the farthest end (my very own tribute to Narnia), but

now I wasn't even sure I could live here much longer. It wasn't homey at all.

I wrote, and the evening crept up around me, the light from my computer screen casting eerie blue shadows on my bookcases. I rubbed my eyes and stretched. I was done with my draft, and now it was time to clean up the mess in my bedroom. I went in, opened the window, and began putting things away. On my bed, a big plastic box laid on its side, its contents spilled out like guts. I knew that box, it was full of my grandfather's things, and I had taken it from my parents' house as they'd cleared everything when they'd moved to Maryland a couple of years ago. It had sat unopened in my old cubby-hole apartment and I had brought it with me to this house.

I felt a pang of sadness as I put everything back in the box. His blue wool scarf, a couple of books, his reading glasses, and a notebook that had "Adams Family History" handwritten on its cover. I was about to open it when a strange, icy breeze blew through it, its pages flapping from beginning to end, and it whispered my name. My heart jumped, and I stuffed the notebook in the box, closed the lid and shoved it way into the back of the closet. *You're losing your mind, Johnny-Boy*, I thought, and yet, I had this strange feeling the notebook was a harbinger, and I was right on the verge of unearthing something frightening. I felt I was in a different dimension, like the surrounding stuff wasn't real, like I was in a dream, just about to discover its meaning, when my stomach grumbled and the spell was broken.

I took a deep breath and looked around me. I had put away everything. Right, time to get something to eat. I looked out into the black hole the woods became every night, trying to decide whether to make myself a sandwich or go out, when I noticed I couldn't hear the crickets chirping from the open window.

It was coming, I knew it by now. Everything went quiet moments before, as if it needed to draw a deep breath and suck in all that existed.

“ANNA!” the house screamed, the sound coming from inside its very walls. It was louder every time; what had begun as an almost imperceptible whisper when I moved in had turned into a harrowing scream.

I grabbed my wallet and went to the small diner a couple of blocks away. I was becoming a regular there, and as I nibbled on the sandwich that the waitress brought me, I thought about what was going on in my house. Doors would slam and lights would be flickering. Whatever remained in its walls drew its power from light and sound. Then the screams, blood-curdling ‘aaarghs’ and pleas of “no, wait” and at last, the horrible rumbling, as if the house caved in on itself. Then nothing after that, not even the creaking of wood. Moments later it would all be normal: the sounds of the forest coming in from the open windows, the hum of the refrigerator as it started up, even the lightbulbs would shine brighter.

As I paid the check, it occurred to me I could’ve had the same meal at home. I could’ve eaten outside on my deck looking out at the woods with a nice cold beer and it would’ve been much cheaper, too. I decided it was time to put an end to this business.

When I first saw the house, I imagined myself living here, a yet non-existent wife by my side, little juniors at our feet. But now, I couldn’t wait to get away from it. At thirty-two, my career had just taken a turn for the best—I was succeeding as a writer, and I now had the means to own a home. Peaceville wasn’t the swankiest neighborhood in the Boston area, but it was close to the city without the posh suburban feel. The house was what I was looking for and I considered myself lucky to have found it in my price range. It had everything within walking

distance, but the woods behind it gave the isolated feel I wanted.

Why don't you just leave, Johnny-Boy, just pack up and call it a day, and at once I stopped the fantasy. I couldn't leave. There was no way I would ever sell it above what I had paid, no matter how cheap it had been. My grandfather had left me a pretty good inheritance, but I had spent most of it on my education and career, on the house and furniture and, while my best friend, Mark, the Engineer, had taken care of the renovation at a discount, I had given a good down payment, to lower the mortgage. It had been an excellent deal.

My financial situation wasn't dire, but I couldn't afford another place without selling this one, especially not at a loss. I'd thought about asking my parents for money, but they were enjoying themselves after retirement, and I didn't want to seem like a whiny kid who quit at the slightest obstacle. Asking my sister was out of the question; she's been telling me for the past few years how she hoped my artistic profession would pull us both out of poverty someday. She joked, but somehow, I felt there was truth behind it. And besides, the house was perfect for me; I just hadn't counted on it being haunted.

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The problems started a few weeks after I moved into the house; around Memorial Day, now that I think of it. At first it was only a sense of dread, whispers, creaks, drafts; but now, on most nights, it turned into an actual house of horrors. It had to stop. I decided on my walk back I would find out what happened and see if that would put the house to rest. My sister loves ghost stories and has always told me that hauntings stopped when the mystery of ghosts' deaths was solved or whatever they had left undone was finished, so I figured I needed to find the killer and solve the murders to bring closure.

I had plenty of clues from my conversation with Mike Monroe. I would look for this Anna Jenkins in Maine. A Google search would be a good start, I thought, as the house loomed before me, as dark and uninviting as I had left it.

Always terrified of ghosts and things that go bump in the night, I looked up at the house and realized I was living my worst nightmare. I tugged up my jeans and made my way to the front door. I was certain I'd lost weight since all this had started, and now, as I trembled and opened the door, all the courage and resolve I'd felt on my walk was fading in the face of the sinister darkness. I took a deep breath and stepped through the door.

I ran up to my office, turning on the lights as I went. I always turned on every light in the house even though by now I knew it did no good; when the voices started, the house always went dark. But still I felt better. It was emasculating, but I felt safer.

"Johnny-Boy, you're such a wuss," I said to myself, "you're such a lily-livered, pansy-ass wuss."

Everyone calls me Jack. My grandfather was the only person who ever called me Johnny-Boy, and, since I can remember, he's always been my Talking Cricket. His is the voice of reason in my head and it always calls me Johnny-Boy.

"Look at you, Johnny-Boy, talking to yourself and afraid of the dark like a little girl. It's time to man up," I said, "it's time to take your house back."

So I sat at my desk and googled Anna Jenkins. The first link that came up was to the Peaceville Daily News. It was a digital transcript of the brief article published after the unsolved Jenkins murders in Peaceville. It contained the same information as Mike Monroe's account, except that there was no mention of anybody hiding out in the bushes. There was even a quote

from Mike himself about finding the bodies. It also stated the police were still searching for the murder weapon and that no suspects had appeared.

The next couple of links lead to Facebook or Twitter accounts, but there was no way of knowing which was the Anna Jenkins I was seeking. I knew she was a teenager in the nineties, since Mike had mentioned working on the Big Dig project, so she must be about my age now. None of the ladies on these accounts fell within my age range.

I scrolled further down and came across a link to the Osprey Cove Memorial Library. It led me to the Events page for 2013, which announced a lunch commemorating fifteen years since the death of the beloved librarian, Jennifer Jenkins, in December 1998. It also included a digital transcript of the original obituary and, as I read it, I froze.

“Ms. Jennifer Jenkins of Osprey Cove, Maine, passed away on Christmas Eve. She fell down the stairs of her home, breaking her neck. Anna Jenkins, her niece and only surviving relative, found her. After a thorough investigation, detective Babcock of the Osprey Cove Police Department declared the death an accident.”

It was nothing more than a few distant lines, but it was enough to confirm Mike’s theory: this girl was a modern-day Lizzie Borden—she left a trail of suspicion behind her, but never enough evidence to convict. I also wondered who’d written this morbid obituary, it seemed too detached to come from a loving relative.

I had my first clue. I searched for the Osprey Cove Police Department website and found the contact numbers. I would call the non-emergency line and ask for a detective Babcock. I looked at my watch and saw it was close to ten at night; there was no reason to bother anyone there now. I figured I could live through one more night of the house’s shenanigans and try to

contact the detective tomorrow.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes for a moment, exhausted. Even though I'm young, I felt ancient. A little embarrassed by myself, I called it a night.

"Johnny-Boy," I said, "look at yourself; ya just turned thirty-two and you're already going to bed like a seventy-year-old man. What's next? Frequenting the early-bird special at the diner?" *Wacka wacka.*

I sighed. *I need to get out more*, I told myself as I headed to my bedroom.

I brushed my teeth and began undressing for bed. I had gotten one leg out of my jeans when the world went quiet again, so I looked around me. There was blood dripping from the walls. It wasn't dripping, more like being splattered from the inside out. More and more stains were bursting as the lights flickered. I felt cold and began to shake. When my breath turned to mist, I began to laugh. It was a strange hysterical laugh at first, like a 'heeheehee', and as I realized how ridiculous I sounded, I threw my head back and guffawed, both at my inanity and at the absurdity of the situation. There I was, bare-chested and one leg still in my jeans, laughing; a lone man in the Last Homely House.

"Really?" I shrieked, "Could you be any more clichéd? Blood on the walls and cold spots are so last century! It's been done before!" and quoting *South Park*, I yelled, "Simpsons did it! Simpsons did it!" in a screeching, childish voice.

Then, I felt as if someone put their mouth to my ear and heard a strange distorted whisper, like the voice of a man, a woman and a child all in one. "Keep you safe," it said. My heart stopped. I lifted the covers on my bed and dove in head-first like Superman, although in mid-change; the leg in my jeans a frightened Clark Kent and my bare leg a pathetic Man of Steel.

I pulled the pillow over my head and lay still for a long while. I was scared shitless. I had gone from ancient to childlike in a matter of moments, as if my life had happened in reverse—the old man exhausted after a long life, then the young man with a big mouth and a big bravado and at last the small and helpless child, hiding under the covers.

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