

# *Farmhouse Apparition*



The Victorian house slouched in rotting solitude; no maintenance had been done on the dwelling for many years. Windows without curtains stared listlessly from the second story. A broken hexagonal window in an attic dormer gave a Cyclops appearance to the house. Two loose shutters hung along the sides of a cavernous living room window. One swung back and forth in a strengthening breeze. The front porch leaned toward the west. A tire swing, hung from a horizontal limb of an old apple tree by green nylon rope, swung slowly back and forth. A telephone line scraped across a galvanized-metal roof gutter, lending violin-like squeaks to the percussion of a banging shutter.

The weathered gray barn listed sideways toward a garden patch filled with weeds that grew during many years of neglect. A cottontail rabbit hopped unscathed through the garden's open gate.

I walked toward the house through light mist and buttoned the overcoat as a chill ran up my back. A peculiar foreboding flooded over me as I stared at remnants of a once handsome house. You know the feeling. It's the feeling one gets before taking a boat out on a choppy lake, and before leaving a hospital room when you know the person you visited will be seen next in a coffin.

But, the open house sign beckoned and I walked along a brick path to the front steps. Why had I driven to this desolate real estate listing that was several miles out of Terre Haute? My wife asked, just before I left to catch the plane, "Why not look for a house in the country? The kids will enjoy fresh air and they can have some animals. Maybe I can have a horse to ride again." This was definitely a house in the country. But, was this a house we could live in? I shook my head in doubt and knocked on the front door.

A woman's lilting voice called, "Please come in." I took off my hat and entered, ducking beneath the doorframe from habit.

“Good afternoon. Thought I’d take a look at the house your company advertised.”

Her back was turned toward me. She pushed her fingers through long raven-black hair, turned, and stared at me with the darkest blue-eyes I had ever seen. Our eyes held for a few seconds and she said, “I’m Jennifer. Please come in. You are very welcome.”

Jennifer was dressed in a black wool skirt and white silk blouse. A red cloth scarf was pinned to her right shoulder by a red and black agate brooch. Her lipstick matched the red color of both the scarf and brooch. She wore white stockings; black high heels complemented muscular calves. Makeup didn’t hide brown freckles that dotted her nose and cheeks.

“What brings you to Terre Haute?” Her voice drawled a bit as she pronounced the town’s name.

“I accepted a teaching job at the university, and I’m looking throughout the city and around the countryside to find a home for my family.”

“I went to school at that university and graduated in business. Good school.”

She gave me a folded one-sheet brochure that listed features of the property: built in nineteen twelve, four bedrooms, two baths, remodeled kitchen, new gas furnace in basement, two-car detached garage, forty acres, new barbed wire fence along the north side of the largest field, barn with stalls for three horses and eight stanchions for cows, chicken house, tool shed, low taxes, price reduced from forty-one to thirty-nine thousand dollars, school bus stop at front gate, Terre Haute North high school, and immediate possession.

“Good price for a house with outbuildings and forty acres of land. Is there anything else I should know before I look around?”

She smiled, reached out, took my hat and coat and put them on the sofa. “As you can see the place needs some tender loving care, but the work will pay off.”

“You mean with lots of sweat my equity will grow?”

She smiled and nodded. “You’ll learn that many houses in and around this part of Indiana need tender loving care.”

I walked into the kitchen and turned the stove’s gas burners on and off. I looked in the refrigerator. It was clean and empty except for a bottle of orange

juice and an apple that Jennifer probably put there. I turned on the hot and cold faucets in the kitchen sink and looked in the cabinet under the sink to inspect the age and quality of the plumbing I asked, “Do the furniture and appliances come with it?”

“No, but I’m sure you can get a good price for everything. There is even a John Deere tractor, I think it’s a late forties model A, and some implements in the barn that will be sold at a farm sale if a buyer doesn’t make offers. You can get everything here for a steal, that’s for sure.”

“May I look around the house?”

“Certainly, but I’d like to go with you.”

A car pulled into the driveway and stopped. Doors slammed and in a few seconds a man and woman barged through the door. He was a short pig-faced man about 50 years old and she was a tall blonde on the young side of 30. Neither wore wedding rings.

“We want to examine the place. Anything like implements included?”

“Yes. Here’s a brochure that I made up.” The agent handed brochures to both. “You are welcome to look around.”

“Thanks.” He looked at his companion and laughed. “Looks like a nice honeymoon cottage, doesn’t it?”

Mascara had run down the young woman’s left cheek from crying. She said, “You’ll have to take care of everything outside. You know how I feel about my nails.”

The agent looked closely at the man. “Do I know you?”

The man held out his hand, “I’m professor Mulby and until two years ago my wife, God rest her soul, and I lived about three miles north down in the old Jeffers’ place. This is my fiancée, Marie.”

Jennifer smiled and said, “I took your American history class a few years ago, professor. Congratulations to you both. I’ll be happy to show the house and outbuildings to you.”

They shook hands while I started to tour the first floor alone. I heard Jennifer telling them the good features of the house and land. Their voices drifted in and out as I made my way through the rooms. I went down the first four steps to the basement and stopped when I saw the new furnace. Rat fecal pellets were scattered on the floor.

The house has potential, I thought, but it would require a lot of work.

The wallpaper would have to be stripped and walls painted, new carpets put down, drapes and curtains hung, repairs in the siding followed by at least two coats of paint, and I'd put in new double-paned windows and blow some insulation between the studs of the outer walls.

But, there was something about the place that gave me a sinister feeling; I guess it was the foreboding I felt earlier. Why, I asked myself, hadn't the place sold? When I checked it out at the company's main office, the secretary said it had been listed three times in the past two years and hadn't sold.

I started up the stairs to the second floor and, as I took the first step, Jennifer was suddenly beside me. "I'll go with you." I raised my eyebrows. She looked toward the professor and Marie and said, "They'll be fine."

For the first time I smelled her perfume, but I couldn't identify the odor. Was it peach blossoms? Her arm rubbed mine. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. She smiled.

"That's okay, Jennifer. If you don't mind I'd like to take my time and go alone. I need to calculate how much it will cost to fix this place up." I showed her my notebook where I had been scribbling figures.

She turned abruptly and went back to her other clients.

The master bedroom was just off the hall near the top of the stairs. I entered and was surprised at its large size. There was room in the corner for my work desk, chair, and file cabinet. Dusty maroon-colored drapes hung from wood rods and were pulled back to let in light. I looked out the window toward the garden and barn. The rabbit was eating something near the gate.

I wandered through the bathroom and noted in my spiral book that it would need a shower stall, new sink, and tiles. I thought for a while and wrote an estimate of seven hundred dollars for a remodel.

There were three more bedrooms and I walked through the first two thinking that the kids would have plenty of room. Then I walked down the hall past a linen closet and stepped into the fourth bedroom.

I jumped back and crashed into the doorframe. Lying in the middle of the floor was the body of a dead man, dressed in bib overalls and wool plaid shirt. His head was cleaved in two and an axe was on the floor next to the body. Fresh blood ran all the way to the door. I had stepped in it. I turned and started out the door, but looked back toward the body. It was gone. It had disappeared. The axe and blood were also gone.

I grabbed the doorframe to steady my trembling body. My heart pounded so loud I could hear it as I ran along the hall and down the stairs.

Jennifer sat on the sofa near my coat and hat, and looked up as I bounded down the last step. I stopped near her and asked, “Jennifer, may I see you in private?”

She smiled and rose from the couch. “Excuse me,” she said to the couple, “I’ll be right back.” We walked into the kitchen and I closed the door.

“Jennifer, was a man killed with an axe in the far bedroom?”

She stood so straight that there could have been a 2x4 nailed to her back. “Why do you ask?”

“Because, by God, I saw him on the floor with blood running all over. And an axe was lying beside him. When I turned to look back at him as I left the room the man, blood, and axe were gone.”

Jennifer’s face drained of all color. Even through the cosmetic cover, she was white as fresh snow. Her forehead wrinkled. “What was he wearing?”

“Bib overalls and a plaid wool shirt. Now, answer my question.”

She sucked in a deep breath and sat on a kitchen chair. She put her hands to her face and muttered, “There was a murder here two and a half years ago. A neighbor, apparently intent on buying the place, killed Mr. Jury with an axe in that room.”

“Well Jennifer, I’m certainly not interested in the place.” I walked into the living room and grabbed my hat and coat.

Marie looked at my face and asked, “What’s wrong?” She rose from her seat as Jennifer walked back in. “Tell me what’s wrong.” The professor raised his eyebrows.

The door slammed behind me. I ran down the path, jumped into the car, and left the door open for light as I started the engine. Something sticky came off my shoe and stuck to the accelerator pedal. I looked down and saw a dark substance on the pedals and floor. I closed the door, turned on the headlights, and drove rapidly down the driveway. I glanced in the rear view mirror to see if anyone or anything was following me. I rolled down the window to air out the car, which now held the odor of fresh blood.