

Clarksville

by Angie Brodil

[excerpt]

It was hardly any wonder Jack and John thought Mia's house had been haunted. While Veronica was right and the lawn itself was neatly trimmed, the hedges seemed to be winning the battle in regards to taking over the yard.

The house itself looked like a beast that had been aging poorly. The dark shingles gave the illusion of scales; the slanted windows on the top gave the illusion of eyes. The disrepair was hard not to notice, truthfully.

All the other houses on the block were only one story or so high. In comparison, the Kounalakis house towered over the neighbors. It gave the house the appearance of being the only rotting fruit on the branch of a tree.

Ruby squared her shoulders as she moved up the gravel walkway. That's another thing, she thought to herself. Weeds were poking up from the gravel driveway, rasping at the cuffs of her jeans. The steps to the porch creaked when she stepped up on them, the boards seemingly sagging under her weight.

As she moved to peek through the window, Ruby felt a shiver pass through her body. It was dark, and the decay inside the house seemed to match the rot on the outside. From where she stood, she could see dust on an end table and cobwebs building up on the windowpane.

It was more than just that, though. Ruby felt like she'd crossed some sort of boundary, some proverbial line in the sand. She was doing, it seemed, what no one else in Clarksville had bothered to do.

Just as she made up her mind to pull back, she caught a flicker of movement. Faster than she could react, the door slammed open, barely missing Ruby by not that wide a margin.

"Who is it?!"

Ruby couldn't help but stare for a moment, taking in the figure that had thrown the door open. Mia Kounalakis was ancient, maybe up to Ruby's shoulder, and barefoot. Her dark eyes were magnified by her reading glasses, even though they squinted towards Ruby in a sort of scowl.

"I, uh...I didn't think you were home." Ruby moved a little closer, stepping carefully and uneasily over the rough sinking floorboards of the porch. "I just wanted, um, to..."

“Rob me? Break in?” Mia jabbed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, her thick accent becoming more pronounced the angrier she got, it seemed. “My God, I’ve been in this damned town forty-five years. You’d think by now I could have some peace.”

“...I guess I wanted to check on you.” Ruby let her gaze drop down to her own feet, feeling rather self-conscious all of a sudden.

“Eh?” Mia looked more than a little surprised by that, her shoulders drooping a little as she studied Ruby, as though the girl was a package she hadn’t ordered.