

Ruth D. Hein

### Ghostly Tales of Minnesota

#### **Dedication:**

This book is dedicated to . . . The Ghosts without whom this collection of stories would not be possible.

In some instances, names and locations have been changed at the request of sources.

Content Warning: This book contains several references to suicide and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

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Ghostly Tales of Minnesota

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### **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgments	V11
A Hovering, Smothering Spirit (Worthington)	1
The Old Arch Thom Place (Rushmore)	5
Boomer's Bristling at Something (Tracy)	10
Doorknobs, Dishes, and Disappearing Acts (Worthington)	13
My Father Cared (LeRoy)	17
Flying Tumblers (Worthington)	20
Grandpa's Hand (Windom)	23
Serenity Disrupted (Windom)	25
Some Kind of Spirit	29
A Hanging Phone (Dennison)	32
A Warm Spot (Atwater)	35
A Host of Ghosts?	38
Fertile Soil for Ghost Stories (Lamberton)	43
Farewell from the Fog (Pipestone)	46
Meet Molly (Nobles County)	48
Finding the Missing Paper (Paynesville)	53
Academic Ghosts (Stearns County)	56
A Ghost in the Drain? (Moorhead)	60
Not Ready Yet (Lyon County)	62
A Face from the Past (New London)	64
An Orange Ball of Fire?	69

Did More Than Pertume Rise from the Manure Pile? (Worthington)	71
Problems with the House (St. Cloud)	74
A Promise Best Kept (Worthington)	78
A Prophetic Passenger (Worthington)	82
Who Held the Warning Light? (Adrian)	84
A Spirit Stronger Than Nails (Adrian)	86
A Letter Edged in Black (Adrian)	88
Swamp Ghosts (Murray County)	90
"Spirit Little Cedar" (Grand Portage)	96
A Wizened Face (Mankato)	99
A Game We Play (Isanti County)	102
Time Smiles the While (Worthington)	109
About the Author	112

### Acknowledgments

n the preface to Ghostly Tales of Southwest Minnesota (1989), I admitted that there were "more Lghosts lurking in this area" than I could fit into that book. I didn't know then that I would be the one to record them before they were forgotten, or that I would also find ghost stories from other parts of the state.

But this new collection, Ghostly Tales of Minnesota, would not have materialized without the help of the storygivers. I needed to know about their experiences so that I could build my stories around them.

My sincere thanks to all who either told me a story or told me where to find one. Special thanks to correspondent Diana Anderson, who let me use her story that appeared in the Worthington Daily Globe's Halloween issue as the core of my story "Serenity Disrupted." And many thanks to the publisher and editors who helped to perfect this book.

With the help of library and historical society materials and personnel, historians, and newspapers, I was able to research settings and backgrounds. Some names and locations are disguised to respect the wishes of the storygivers.

Finally, thanks to my husband and family for not putting me on trial for being, once again, so "preoccupied with ghosts."



### A Hovering, Smothering Spirit

randma Emma was glad that the day had come to an end. Tidying up had taken awhile. The grandchildren had hauled out all the toys, one by one, as they thought of them. Bingo and Checkers had to be put back on the shelf. Slap, Crazy Eights, and the other card games had to be put back in their basket.

Usually that was done before the kids left. They were good about that. But this time was different. There was the call saying the sheep were out on the road, and everyone, including Grandpa Will, left in a hurry.

Emma had everything straightened up by the time Will came home.

"Well, that should be the last time now. We fixed the fence, while we were at it," he said.

"Did they just push it down, or what happened?"

"They got to rubbing their backs and necks on the barbed wire. You know how they do. That strained the stakes until they tipped, and the sheep just walked the fence down and got out. But we took care of it."

"Good. I'm tired. I'll bet you are too. I think I'll call it a day and crawl in."

"See you later, then," Will said. "I'm gonna watch the news and weather first."

Emma crawled into bed, pulled the covers up, and settled in for sleep.

Their home was on a farm on the edge of a town not far from Worthington. They weren't farming the land anymore. They had retired. It was a quiet place, and sleep came soon enough that night.

But it didn't last long.

Emma began to struggle and hit out toward something. She didn't know what it was, but she felt as though she was being smothered. Her actions woke her. She looked around the room.

Nothing there.

She felt foolish as she realized that she must have been dreaming.

Another night, about a week later, Emma again struggled in her sleep. The feeling was the same, but she also saw a gray, indefinite mass coming down toward her.

"Will! Will!" she cried out.

Will snapped awake and turned on the lamp. He looked at his wife beside him. She seemed all right, but she looked and sounded all washed out when she told him that she must have had a nightmare.

This went on for a long time. It didn't happen every night, but off and on. At first, Will tried to tell Emma she was just sleeping poorly and having dreams.

Emma wasn't convinced. The more she thought about it and tried to relive the feeling or to tell someone else about it, the more it troubled her.

Each time it happened, it was as though a gray mass came down to smother her. When it seemed to bear down upon her shoulders and neck, she'd wake up and scream.

Will always quieted her and comforted her. He put his arm over her and told her, "It was just another dream. Try an' get back to sleep."

That only helped temporarily. After many restless nights, Will told a neighbor about the dreams.

Henry listened carefully and spoke up after Will finished. "Emma might just be having dreams. But on the other hand, there may be something more to it. Why, they might not be dreams at all. Do you believe in spirits?"

"Ya mean, like, good spirits an' evil spirits?"

"Yah, or the spirit of someone that died and is still hanging around."

"Still hanging around! What on earth . . . ? There's no one rattling around in that old house but the two of us, and I don't want to hear nothin' more 'bout spirits!"

"But, Will, didn't you know that there was a murder in the house you bought? It happened a long time ago. Most of the neighbors just got used to knowing it and sort of forgot about it, I guess. Matter of fact, so did I—until you told me about Emma's dreams."

"You might as well tell me the rest of the story now, even if I might not be able to sleep because of it!" "All I know is that someone was murdered in that house, long ago. Come to think about it, it seems to me it was a woman. Say, what room are you two sleeping in?"

"We took the one on the second floor, back in the northwest corner."

"Why, I believe that's the room where the murder happened. But that's all I know about it."

"Thanks for telling me. If the spirit of that person is hovering in her old room, maybe she's upset. We just have to do something about it. We have to confront it, I guess."

The next time the hovering gray mass appeared to be closing in on Emma, Will spoke up. He emphatically announced to everyone present, "There's no need to be upset or jealous or angry or anything else. Emma had nothing whatsoever to do with the murder. Why, she didn't even know it had taken place. And now, be so kind as to leave us in peace!"

The spirit never appeared again, but Emma still had a hard time getting to sleep on some nights. She couldn't help remembering those troubled, sleepless times. She couldn't help but wonder if it was a dream, a presence, or if it was connected with that murder.

Will and Emma moved a few years later. The house and the farm buildings on the old place were destroyed as a matter of course.

Although she still wonders what the deal was, Emma sleeps soundly in her new home. "Somehow, I feel lighter, as if a weight has been lifted from me. Maybe it has. I'll always wonder."

## The Old Arch Thom Place

ime brings change. As generations pass, old buildings are destroyed and new ones built; old trees are cut down and young ones planted; people move out, and others move in. With all the changes that took place on a certain farm west of Rushmore, one would have to know the site to find it now. The buildings are gone. The huge barn, still there in 1978, is gone. The house was finally burned down by a descendant tired of the constant need for repairs or replacements.

The beautiful apple orchard that grew near the house is gone; there is no grove of tall cottonwoods north of the barn. Even the stumps have been grubbed out for a few more acres of tillable land.

All that remains are a couple of lines of shrubby trees planted later that border the old house yard.

The land beyond those trees is farmed. Soon enough, farm machinery will probably move through the only untilled space: the yard. Then there will be no visible sign of "the old Arch Thom place," but the stories will not be as easily wiped out.

Folks talk about the old Arch Thom place. Because of some strange things that happened there long ago, people also refer to it as "the Arch Thom haunted house," even with the house gone.

After Arch Thom left the farm, they say he operated the Rushmore Elevator. He rented out the house and farm for a while, around 1915, to John and Grace De Yonge and their 13 children. The children who remember the incidents best are their son, George De Yonge of Pierre, South Dakota, and his sister, Angeline Klaahsen of Sibley, Iowa. When they think back to those early years, they remember odd events.

Angeline recalls things happening on the stairway to the second floor. "Sometimes when we went down, it felt like someone was giving us a gentle push forward. There was a door at the bottom of the stairs, and then the dining room was next. Once, Dena fell at the bottom of the steps. Mother asked, 'What's the matter with you?' and Dena said, 'It was like I was tripped, and all of a sudden I was on the dining room floor.'

"Other times she said, 'I got pushed!' It happened every now and then. The door would burst open, and there was Dena, on her knees beyond the bottom step."

It wasn't usually hard for Angeline's mother, Grace, to keep track of the young ones playing together; she usually knew where they were by listening for them. One day, they were all outside near the plum trees while Grace worked in the kitchen.

When she heard children playing and talking upstairs, she went up to see what they were doing inside, but she couldn't find anyone up there. They were all out in the yard, just as she had thought.

Of course, the children heard bits of their elders' conversations. When Grace and John talked of these mysterious incidents, the children became aware that there was something different about their house.

Grace seemed to be most aware of the strange feeling, especially in the south bedroom intended to be the master bedroom. They used it only for storage while they lived there because Grace was always reluctant to use it as a bedroom. When she was in that room, she was sometimes heard saying, "That's enough of this nonsense," or "You can leave here any time now."

George remembers one night when he was going out to the barn. "It was real dark out," he said. "We didn't have yard lights, like now. And I didn't take a lantern along, 'cause I figured I knew the way well enough. I was on the path to the barn but closer to our blacksmith shop that stood between the house and the barn. When I heard strange noises coming from the shop, I turned around and headed back to the house. I reached it in nothin' flat. Never did remember what I was gonna do in the barn that night."

Around 1915, it was not surprising when folks lost their way and had to stop somewhere for directions or a place to stay the night.

"One pretty, young schoolteacher driving her ponydrawn buggy got lost on a moonless night. She couldn't see the turns in the road, but somehow she found our house," George said. "Maybe she saw the mailbox out by the road and turned up the lane. Anyway, she was so bewildered that she was nearly hysterical when she knocked on the kitchen door.

"Mother lit a kerosene lamp and led her to a room where she could rest until morning. I put her pony up in the barn, with feed and water. At daylight, the poor woman looked like she hadn't slept for a month. Mother sent her in the right direction for wherever she had to go, and we never saw her again. But we always wondered if she was so shaken up because she was lost or if something out there had scared her."

Grace's husband, John, used to tell their children one of the stories that hasn't died out. John said, "One night that same year, when we lived in that old farmhouse near Rushmore, someone banged hard on our door. It was real dark outside and in the house, too, because it was bedtime and we'd already put the lamps out. When I lit a lamp and opened the door, the man standing there said, 'I'm lost, and it's so dark I can't see my hands in front of my face.'

"I asked him in. He said he farmed down near Bigelow, but he didn't want to spend the rest of the night trying to find his farm. He said, 'I could see just enough out there to see the outline of your big, white house. I'm sorry I got you out of bed, but I didn't know what else to do.'

"We didn't talk anymore after I showed him where he could sleep. The next morning, he was up bright and early and ready to go on his way. 'Gotta make up for lost time,' he said, 'and get for home now. By the way, what place is this?' Father answered, 'Why, this is the Arch Thom place, and we're the De Yonges.'

"When the fellow heard that, he said, 'Man, if I'd known this was the Arch Thom place, I wouldn't have stopped here for \$1,000. You could have shot me dead 'fore I'd a stayed here!' and out the door he went without so much as a thank you."

At least these few threads have now been put down for generations who will read the story but not be able to find any signs of the house. That is, unless the ghost responsible for these incidents returns to show them the way.

# Boomer's Bristling at Something

ome years ago, Eleanor and Rosie were sorting books in an upstairs bedroom of Eleanor's twostory house in Tracy. Eleanor and Clarence's dog, Boomer, was with them as usual, although he was no help at all with the books.

Rosie told the story later:

"When Boomer started to growl," Rosie said, "I looked up, and I could see the hair on his back rise up. I mentioned it to Eleanor, and she said someone was probably out in the yard or going by the house. I wasn't so sure.

"Eleanor said, 'Why, Rosie, do you think there's someone hiding in the closet or something?'

"Eleanor checked out the closet, poking into every corner and reaching between the hanging clothes. She found nothing that didn't belong there. "We went back to sorting the books. Boomer went back to growling and making a fuss. He was so restless! We got to feeling like something wasn't right; it scared us.

"We followed each other closely down the hall and downstairs to the kitchen. Boomer followed us, and we closed the stairway door. But he didn't let us relax. He kept going back over to the stairway door and growling.

"Clarence was at work, but when El called to tell him how the dog was acting and how frightened we were, he came home to check it out. He tried to get Boomer to come upstairs with him, but the dog wouldn't follow him. He'd go about halfway up, and then he'd stop and growl, staring up the stairway.

"Clarence finally gave up on Boomer and checked the closet and the whole upstairs himself.

"We never did find anyone hiding up there that day—or anywhere else in the house. But we thought Boomer must have sensed something or someone unfamiliar. We tried to tell ourselves that maybe Boomer got scared of a little mouse that we couldn't see.

"Eleanor and I began to tell others in the neighborhood about it. They listened and sort of clammed up.

"Later on, El and I went to visit John, one of her elderly neighbors who had lived across the street. During the conversation, John asked El if she and Clarence still had their dog. He laughed when he remembered the name they had given him because the dog really didn't make much noise; he growled and bristled more than he barked.

"That reminded us of the day Boomer growled and bristled at nothing—at least, nothing we could see. We told John about it.

"John thought for a minute before he said, 'Well, there might have been something there, if you believe in spirits. There was a time, in the first years that I lived across from your house, that a man hanged himself there. I believe he was found upstairs, in that same bedroom, in the closet. Isn't that the one where you can slide the ceiling panel over to get up into the attic?'

"John was quiet awhile. Then he continued, 'They say he fastened the rope to a ring in the attic rafters and then went back down the ladder, leaving the attic access panel open. When he was ready, he kicked the chair out from under himself, out into the bedroom."

# Doorknobs, Dishes, and Disappearing Acts

acques "Jack" Tolsma is a businessman in Worthington. People who know him and his family also know about things that happened on his grandfather's farm not many miles from the Minnesota-Iowa border. In the mid-1930s, when Jack was seven or eight, he lived in the small, two-story home on that farm with his father, mother, sister, and Uncle Sv.

"Dad and Mother had the downstairs bedroom," Jack said, "and the rest of us slept upstairs. My room was the small northwest bedroom. A crazy thing that happened there has stuck with me all these years. At night, I'd shut the door when I went to bed. Before long, I'd hear the knob turn. The door would open about a foot. I'd get up, close it, and get scared. It happened enough times that I told the others about it.

"Uncle Sy tried to help me figure it out. He slept in my room, too, for a while, and it happened again. Uncle Sy would get up and shut the door—and shut it good—and it would open again about a foot . . . never all the way.

"Whenever we blew out the kerosene lamp, we would hear the doorknob turn. Then the door would open, and Uncle Sy would get up and close it. Sometimes, at night, I still think I'm hearing the sound of that knob turning.

"We started putting a skeleton key in the keyhole and locking the door from inside the room, leaving the skeleton key in place. As soon as we blew out the lamp, we'd hear the sound of a key turning, then falling to the floor. When we got up to look, the skeleton key would be on the floor. When Sy lit the lamp again, the door would be open, about a foot. Mine was the only room this ever happened in. If we left the door open, nothing would happen. It was just left open then."

Other things puzzled the whole family. "We would see to it that the kitchen was cleaned up and the table cleared before we went to bed. In the night, some of us would hear the kitchen table being set. Sure enough, when we got up in the morning and went down to the kitchen, we'd find the table set for the whole family, just as it would be if one of us had set it, everything in its right place. Someone thought maybe Mother couldn't sleep and just got up to set the table for something to do to take up her time, but she said she never did.

"One night," Jack went on, "we were all sitting in the kitchen except Dad, who wasn't home that evening. Mother, Uncle Sy, my sister, and I were sitting around, reading or studying our Sunday School lessons. "Someone—I forget who it was—looked out the window toward the barn and saw what looked like someone carrying a kerosene lantern from the barn to the house. We thought it was Dad coming home, that he had stopped in at the barn first.

"Sy and I went from the kitchen, through a door, into a side porch, and then to the outside door. When we opened it, we heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow.

"Uncle Sy called out, 'Pete, is that you?'

"Everything disappeared: the lights and the sounds.

"There was a lantern in the porch. Uncle Sy lit it and went out in the yard to check if someone was out there. When he got to the place, he could see footprints that came halfway from the barn to the house and then just stopped—not like most folks would stop, pulling one foot up even with the other while they stood still, but each footprint single and forward from the other. Then that was all. They weren't backtracked in, either. That was the only time that ever happened."

The other unexplainable happenings also took place at night. Always at night. Other folks witnessed it, or at least tried to.

Many times, people heard violins playing in the grove near the house and saw lights in the grove as though someone was carrying lanterns around out there.

"This happened in the winter too," Jack explained, "so they weren't lightning bugs flying among the trees and grasses or swamp gas lighting up as it met the heavy night air.

"It got so that people would come out from town and park in the road to listen. They'd turn their car lights off to watch for the mysterious, moving lights. "We didn't have air-conditioning then, and on some of those beastly hot nights, some of us would take blankets out and lie there in the backyard until the house cooled off. Some of those nights, we would hear the music. It was as if the violins played the same song, over and over and over, and then suddenly the music would end.

"The effect of those incidents stayed with me a long time. Later, our family moved to a big house in town. Whenever I went up to bed, I'd always stomp on the steps to scare the ghosts away.

"I don't have proof, but we were told that the Jesse James gang once stayed near our farm. Could their spirits have been haunting the grove from time to time, swinging their lanterns there in the night?"

### My Father Cared

an Bartel told me about something that happened to him when he lived in a two-story house in LeRoy in Mower County, very close to the Iowa border. His father died when Dan was 16, and he lived with his mother and sister.

"When I was 17," he said, "I liked to play record albums and lie in bed listening to them. After the turntable automatically shut off, I would usually fall asleep.

"One warm Saturday night in May of 1972, I chose a favorite album and put it in place on the turntable. That night, the hall light was on because my sister had a friend spending the night. They were off downstairs somewhere when I went to bed.

"I apparently fell asleep while the album was still playing. My stereo was an older model, and when it shut off, the turntable made a loud click that woke me. "I opened my eyes and then blinked and squinted a couple times. I saw two female figures staring down at me, both wearing something long and white. In the light from the hall, I could see their white hair, long and straight. When I sat up for a closer look, I could see that their hands and faces were also very pale.

"At first, I thought it must be my sister and her friend playing a joke on me. I thought they had powdered their own long, straight hair and maybe coated their faces and hands with some kind of stage makeup. Some joke!

"I didn't appreciate having my sleep disturbed that way. More angry than scared, I yelled, 'Get out of here!'

"They both backed slowly toward my bedroom doorway. One moved out of my view into the hall. While the other passed through the doorway, I had a better look. With the hall light behind her that way, I could see she had no shoes or, for that matter, no feet either! The figure seemed to sort of float away and vanish.

"That was when I jumped out of bed and ran into the hall, thinking if it was the girls, they had run down the hall to go downstairs. But no one was in the hall, and no one was in my sister's room across the hall when I went by it.

"As I started for the stairs, I noticed Mother was still asleep in her room. So it had to be the girls. But if it was, how could they run down the hall and go downstairs without me hearing the steps squeak like they always did?

"It was starting to get to me. I didn't like what I was thinking—or, rather, couldn't think it through to a reasonable explanation. And no feet . . . how could a girl float like that?

"When I got downstairs, I searched the whole main floor. There wasn't anyone down there. This was getting a little scary.

"When I looked outside, the yard light was on, but my sister's car that should have been out there was nowhere in sight. My sister and her friend must have gone to town. So who was up in my room?

"I couldn't cope with this alone. I went up to Mother's room and woke her. When I told her what had happened, she kept calm, but she acted like she knew more than she wanted to say. What she did say was, 'Dan, I don't know how to explain it so that you will understand. But it might help if you stay a few minutes after mass tomorrow to talk with our priest.'

"When I asked, 'What for? What does he have to do with this?' she said, 'Nothing, directly. But just tell him what happened and see what he thinks.'

"The next day, I did as Mother suggested. I felt awkward and a little foolish, but I visited with the priest. He seemed to know I was there for more than a casual visit. On his gentle prompting, I finally told him what had happened.

"He said, 'The figures you saw were probably angels of God sent down by your father to check on you. He cared enough about his son to do that.'

"So that was it! Somehow, after that day, I felt closer to my father than I had while he was living. I knew for sure that he cared about me, even if he wasn't there to work with me or play catch with me. I knew my father cared, and everything would be all right from then on."

### **Flying Tumblers**

he children had all grown up and left the nest. Sure, one or the other—and sometimes all eight at once—came home to Worthington now and then, and they called sometimes, but their mother still missed them, especially when she was home alone. Or thought she was.

One day, while Bob was at the VA Hospital, Lucille was enjoying the bright, sunny weather. Usually she didn't relish solitude, but this day was different. There was absolutely nothing gray or gloomy about it, so how could she feel anything but cheerful? Standing at the kitchen sink and doing dishes again was routine. But this day she enjoyed routine more than usual.

Lucille lifted another glass from the sudsy water, gave it a good rinse, and set it on the towel to the right of the sink. That was where she always set the dishes until she put them back into the cabinet. While Lucille

reached for a plate, the glass she had just set down on the towel suddenly flew up, sailed across the big kitchen, over the top of the round oak table in the center of the room, and onto the floor on the other side of the table. It didn't break.

"That really shook me up," she told Bob later.

When Lucille turned to look, she saw nothing that could have caused the glass to fly across the room. It wasn't even the kind of gray, spooky day that might make you think about scary things happening when you're in the house alone. But it made her remember another time, when Bob was at home.

That time it was in the quiet, early evening. Lucille relaxed in the recliner in a corner of the living room. Bob lay on the sofa, turned so that he happened to be looking away from the action. He completely missed what happened.

Lucille had set a glass of water on the top of the step table next to the recliner. A few minutes later, the glass flew up into the air and landed intact on the carpeted floor, the water still in it.

Lucille was startled. "Bob, did you see that?"

"Huh? . . . What? . . . Oh, I dozed off. What are you talking about?"

"That glass, sitting there on the floor, I had it here on top of the table, and all of a sudden it just . . ." But Lucille gave up; Bob was snoring.

Since he hadn't seen the glass airborne, he didn't pay the least attention to what his wife was saying.

Lucille gingerly touched the glass. As she picked it up, she was thinking about a lot of possibilities. Did the spirit that lived with them on Nobles Street feel a bit lonesome now and then? Did it want a bit of attention in the quiet times? Did it miss the children who had talked, laughed, played, and kept it company all of those years, when they were still at home?

### Grandpa's Hand

iana Anderson of Windom shared something quite unusual that happened to her grandfather. She told me, "George Herman Doeden was my grandfather. I never knew him when he had both hands, but he was always very special to me and I loved him dearly.

"When I was a small girl, I was told the story of how Grandpa had lost his hand in a threshing accident. I couldn't see that he even missed it, though. He always got along just fine and seemed to be able to do everything anyone else did. He had a hook he could use when he needed it, but I hardly ever saw him wear it.

"Grandpa would let me sit on his lap and touch the stump of his arm. I never thought of it as something to be scared of. It was so soft, and I thought, *How smooth*. But I also thought how it must have hurt him when he lost his hand. He must have been in his early 20s when it happened. After they got his hand out of the machine, they buried it in the cemetery at Worthington. I suppose

it was his parents who buried it. And I used to think about that.

"I knew that when people died, they were buried in a cemetery. I decided that the cemetery was also a logical place to bury a dead, useless part of a living person, like Grandpa's hand. It seemed a more proper way of taking care of it than just discarding it.

"Only thing was, when they buried Grandpa's hand, they didn't know it would make a difference how they placed it in the ground.

"As the weeks went by and the stump healed, Grandpa kept feeling his hand as if it were still there. They say that's not unusual. It has something to do with the nerves. But there was more to it than that with Grandpa. He said it was more like his hand was there and was uncomfortable, but he couldn't move it or make it more comfortable because it wasn't really there. That caused him a lot of distress.

"Someone who heard about his trouble told him, 'You must dig up the hand and lay it at rest with the palm down. Then it will rest easy.'

"So they dug up the hand and turned it over and buried it again, palm down. After that, Grandpa was greatly relieved because the sensation of his uncomfortable hand was gone. His hand could rest easier, and so could he.

"I thought about what had happened. I thought about it a whole lot. Now and then, I even visited that special place in the cemetery. Although my imagination might have conjured up horror scenes of a hand reaching up from a grave, I left that for the movies. As I said, his hand was resting easy now, and he wasn't troubled by it anymore. I accepted that, and nothing about it ever haunted either of us later."

### Serenity Disrupted

Diana Anderson of Windom tells another tale.

It was one of those golden days in southwest Minnesota during bow season, a day to enjoy Lthe serenity of the woods. Stealthy moves were the order of the day if you hoped to sneak up on a deer.

Fourteen-year-old Dwayne started the early morning with alertness and enthusiasm. By the time he left the old van, though, he had calmed himself, as he knew the importance of keeping quiet.

Diana, Dwayne's mother, looked forward to the annual event when she and her parents and her son went hunting together. She hoped her son would know what to do if he was lucky enough to walk up on a deer.

This time, Diana's mother, Frieda, couldn't join the party. She had to help serve a luncheon at the church, and she couldn't be sure that she would get to church in time if she went to the woods first. Diana's father, Roy Doeden, was getting along in years. He was content to

#### **About the Author**



uth D. Hein grew up in Van Horne, Iowa, as the middle child in a ghost-free Lutheran Jparsonage. With an MA from the University of Northern Iowa, she taught high school English and creative writing for 28 years—21 of those in Decorah.

Ruth lived with her husband, Ken, on a small acreage near Worthington, Minnesota, where she collected ghost stories and wrote the historical column for the Worthington Daily Globe for 14 years. She passed away in 2011.

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