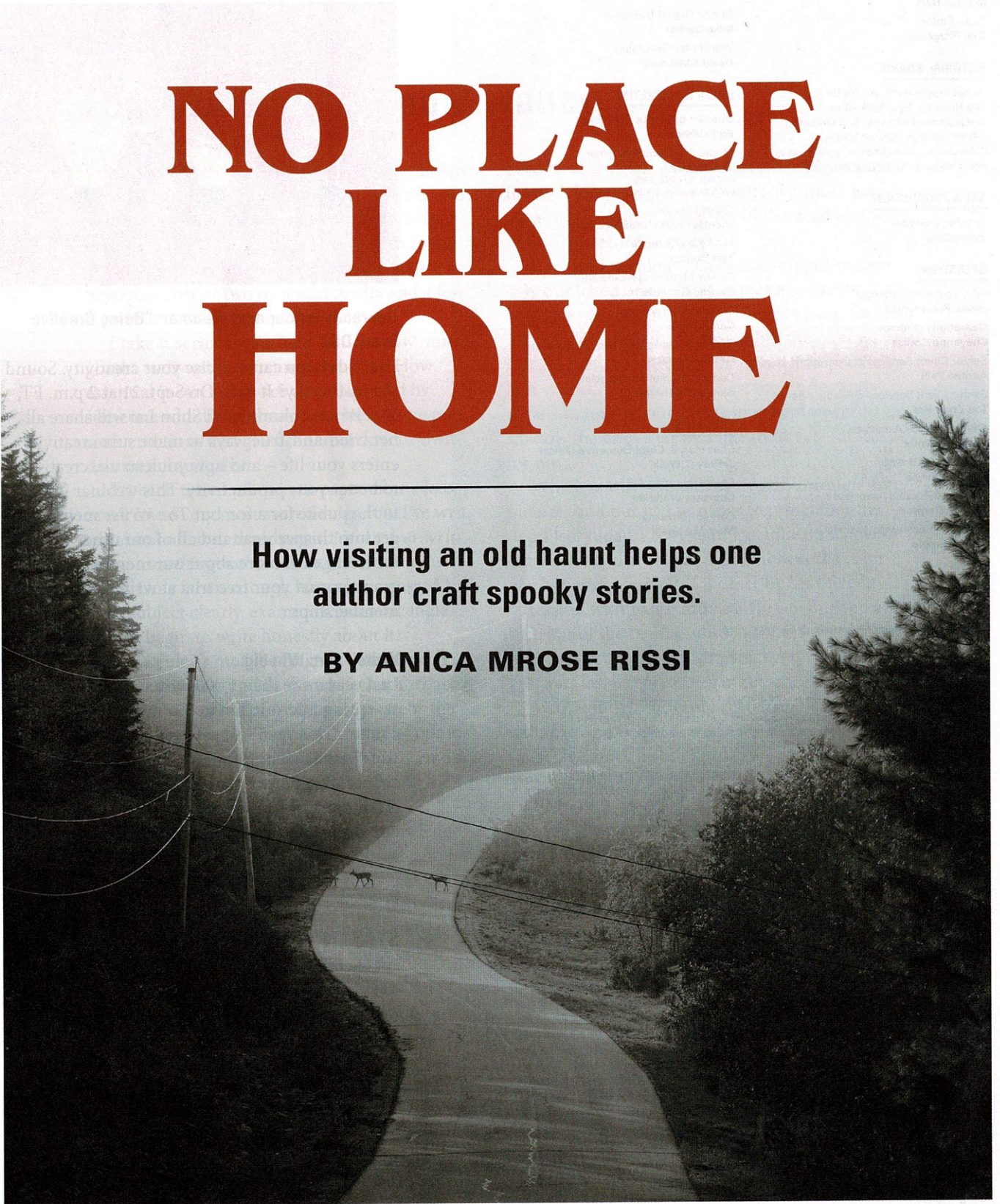


NO PLACE LIKE HOME

How visiting an old haunt helps one author craft spooky stories.

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI



In this room where I write in the summertime, I avoid looking over my shoulder. I know what lurks behind me: three cloth dolls trapped in a shadow box my mother mounted on the wall. One doll holds her arms wide, inviting you in closer. Another's face stays serene, but her painfully angled body appears broken. The third's flying hair and feet suggest she was pinned in place while fleeing. They press their faces to the glass and stare, unable to move or blink.

It's no wonder I was inspired to write horror stories here.

I grew up in Stephen King country, among deep woods, old barns, and Maine accents. Thick fog haunts the early mornings; clouds of bats swoop at dusk; and at night, the narrow roads are empty and dark, except for the blue glow of moonlight. Guests accustomed to cities or suburbs are sometimes spooked by the shadows in this farmhouse – by the creaky floorboards and rattling wind. I keep a nightlight on when they visit. I assure them the spiders are harmless.

Although my childhood home would make the perfect set for a horror film, its cobwebs and closets don't scare me. If the monsters under its beds were going to get me, they would have done so long ago. Yet in this place, my most deeply buried fears hover eerily close to the surface, among a bevy of childhood emotions. The ghosts of my past linger in these walls. The pine and saltwater air brings gusts of memories. It's the secret to why I do my best writing here.

I write books for children and teens, and although many details and logistics of childhood have changed since I was a kid (hello, internet, cell-phones, and STEM education), the *feelings* involved have not, and those are what I strive to tap into when writing. A scene comes alive when I channel the hopes and nerves that

kept my body and brain buzzing the night before the first day of school. The choking pain and desperate confusion when a close friend gave me the cold shoulder. The joy of slowly unwrapping an especially promising gift. The barely suppressed annoyance that skittered across my skin when a parent unfairly misunderstood me. I don't enjoy regressing to an adolescent state any more than most adults, but on a professional level, having access to the place where I was a child and teenager – and where the emotions and logic of childhood seem present and real – is invaluable.

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In this place, my body remembers. But some of my most vivid memories from childhood are of things that never happened to me. They're of events and emotions I experienced only as a reader immersed in stories. That, too, is writerly gold.

Details from books I haven't opened in decades are wont to creep up on me here, in this house where I read them – especially scary details. The ominous *tap tap tap* on a car roof. The tug of a green ribbon adorning – and securing – a beloved's neck. The blue spittle and lack of toes that reveal certain grownups to be witches. I remember the thrill of being terrified by these stories – and the thrill of experiencing that terror in a place where I was safe, protected, and loved.

Imagining the worst that could happen is a way of building a talisman against it. The reader who imagines

herself in a horror story unconsciously plans what she might do to survive it. She learns to recognize and plan for how to face certain monstrous situations. Scary stories have the power to make readers shudder *and* think.

Any story I write, scary or not, contains at least one question for which I'm seeking answers – the thing the story is really about (for me, if not for the reader) and the secret reason I'm writing it. Sometimes I approach a story already knowing what questions I need to explore. More often, a significant part of first drafting is unearthing the underlying questions that will guide the writing and be further poked and prodded in revisions. Scary stories, so ripe for allegory, are perfect for examining subconscious fears and revealing what lies beneath. Writing them here in my childhood home, I pull threads from the knot of my deepest, darkest worries and weave them into my fiction to make it shimmer with truth.

The stories in *Hide and Don't Seek*, my new middle-grade collection of 20 original, contemporary spooky stories – some funny, some spine-tingling, some hide-under-the-covers scary – are intended, first and foremost, to thrill and entertain. They're built to surprise and amuse, to horrify and delight – to make readers shiver, giggle, and shriek. But many of them also go deeper. I hope their underlying themes about boundaries and consent, power and privilege, bullying, shame, and the dangers of teaching girls they must always be "nice," will help kids who encounter similar monsters feel better equipped to recognize and name them.

Through writing what scares me, I hope to make readers feel less alone in the dark.

— Anica Mrose Rissi is the award-winning author of more than a dozen books for kids and teens, including *Hide and Don't Seek: And Other Very Scary Stories*. Find her online at anicarissi.com and follow @anicarissi on Instagram and Twitter.

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