

# Holiday Spirits

**Six Frightful Winter Tales**



**Multiple Bram Stoker Award Winner**

*Lisa Morton*

# HOLIDAY SPIRITS

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**Lisa Morton**

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“The Christmas Spirit” originally appeared in the anthology *Haunted Holidays*, published in 2014 by Gallowstree Press

“Daddy’s Girl” originally appeared in the anthology *Shrieks and Shivers from The Horror Zine*, published in 2014 by Imajin Publishing

“The Haunted House” originally appeared in the collection *Monsters of L.A.*, published in 2011 by Bad Moon Books and reprinted as an e-book by Cemetery Dance in 2018

“The End of the Season” is original to this volume

“Blind-Stamped” originally appeared in the anthology *Shelf Life: Fantastic Stories Celebrating Bookstores*, published in 2002 by Dream Haven

“Silver Nitrate Blues” was first produced as a one-act play by First Stage Alert as part of the evening *Spirits of the Season* in 1995. This is its first publication in short story form.

For more of Lisa Morton’s work, please visit <http://www.lisamorton.com>

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## THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

Ray handed her a small package wrapped simply in tissue paper with a length of hemp cord wound around it.

Elise looked up in surprise; the clock on the mantel read just after four. “Why so early?” She regretted the words as soon as she said them; she knew Ray would think she was refusing the gift. She tried to recover with a smile as she reached for the present.

He handed it over. “Just open it.”

She did, with an odd knot of dread in her stomach. Things hadn’t been good between them for a while, ever since the fertility experts had been unable to help them conceive. Elise had inherited Great Aunt Priscilla’s house a month ago, and they’d decided to get out of the city, leave London and spend the holiday at the old country place before they put it on the market. It was an isolated cottage, situated near a peat bog in the Yorkshire countryside. Aunt Priscilla hadn’t actually lived in it for years, having forsaken the isolation for the relative comforts of the city. It’d taken them six hours to negotiate the holiday traffic coming up from London, and the place was a slight let-down—neither old enough to be romantic and intriguing, nor nice enough to bring a decent price. “Dear God,” Ray had said as he’d pulled their bags from the car, his feet crunching on ice and gravel, “someone actually lived out here?”

The inside was dusty and dim, with just enough furniture left behind to make it function as a residence. Elise had brought a few Christmas decorations along, but the strings of twinkling lights and fragrant green wreaths did little to enliven the gloom.

That arrival had been two days ago. They’d quarreled and retreated to silence since; today, the 24<sup>th</sup>, Ray had spent most of the day in the village while Elise had pattered in the kitchen with a roast and Christmas pudding. Now she tried to act happy as she unwrapped the gift, but she was imagining it as something sarcastic and cruel—a baby name book, perhaps.

It *was* a book, an old hardback bound in plain green cloth. She opened it and read the title page:

*The Christmas Spirit*

By

Mrs. H. Warren

Privately Printed by the Author

1895

“I found it in the antique store in the village,” Ray said. “The proprietor thought the author might have lived around here.”

Elise flipped forward a few pages, looking for a clue about why Ray had bought this, but she found only a first chapter about a young widow spending Christmas with an eccentric aunt. She looked up at Ray, trying to seem merely curious.

“Remember last week, we were talking about how people once read ghost stories to each other on Christmas Eve? I thought maybe we could read this aloud tonight. Might be fun.”

“Oh, yes—of course.” Elise closed the book and saw the author’s name in gilt on the spine—Mrs. H. Warren. There was something vaguely familiar about the name, but she couldn’t place it. “I wonder who she was, and why she had this privately printed...”

Ray laughed as he headed for the kitchen, going for the wine. “She probably wasn’t good enough to sell to a real publisher. Nowadays she’d just put her self-published e-book online.”

“Probably.”

By the time Ray came back with a glass of Merlot, Elise had read the first two pages. “Actually, it’s not bad.”

He sipped the red wine, settled into the worn old green couch before the hearth, and said, “Read it to me.”

“Now? Shouldn’t we do it after dinner, when it’s dark?”

Ray shrugged. After eight years of marriage, Elise knew that gesture meant he wasn’t happy, but he didn’t think it was worth fighting over. She relented. “Tell you what: Pour me a glass of that, and I’ll start reading.”

Smiling, Ray rose, heading to the kitchen.

The smell of the roasting meat filled the house, a small fire glowed from the hearth, and Elise tried to feel comfortable in the house, but she couldn’t. She remembered visiting it once as a child. That had been in June, but even then the house had been chilly, and there was something Elise could only describe as “oppressive” about its atmosphere. Her Great Aunt Priscilla had lived here then, surrounded by frilly pieces of the past—ceramic dog figures, tatted doilies, ruffled pillows, framed photographs of other people’s children—but Elise wondered if all the manufactured cheeriness had been her aunt’s attempt at covering up the essential gloom of the house.

There’d been something else on that visit, something Elise had never confessed to skeptical husband: She’d been playing outside, alone, in a small out-building that served as a combination storage shed/garage. She’d felt an odd sensation, like a chill without a cold temperature, and had turned to see a man watching her. He was inside the garage, in the farthest, darkest corner. Even shadowed as he was, she saw quite plainly his old-fashioned suit, his handsome face, his large hands. “Hello,” she said.

He didn’t answer.

“Do you know my aunt?”

He continued to stare.

Eight-year-old Elise felt another chill, and turned to race back to the house. She bounded into the kitchen, where her mother and aunt were preparing tea. “Aunty Priscilla, who’s that man in the garage?”

“What man, dear?”

“He wouldn’t tell me his name, but he’s wearing very old clothes, like something from an a black and white movie.”

Priscilla, already a pale, older woman, had gone completely white. Elise’s mum had noticed, grabbing at Priscilla’s arm in concern. “Are you all right? What is it?”

“Oh, it’s...” Priscilla shook her head before continuing, “...there’s no one there, dear. Just a pile of old cans with some towels draped over them. You’re not the first one to see something there.”

“But I *did* see a man.” Elise turned to her mother. “Mummy, there *is* a man out there, come see —”

Mum had cast a quick look at Priscilla, whose expression remained carefully blank. “I’ll be right back.”

Priscilla just nodded.

Elise led her mother across the yard to the outbuilding. She raised her hand to point. “He’s back –”

She broke off as she realized they were alone. No man in an antiquated suit; just what Priscilla had described, a stack of containers and cleaning cloths.

“There, darling, you see? Aunty Priscilla was right. There’s no one there.”

Elise hadn’t openly protested, but she knew what she’d seen. A man.

Or...something that was not a man.

That’d been nearly thirty years ago. Not long after that, Priscilla had moved and the house had been forgotten, until a few weeks ago when Elise had been shocked to find that Priscilla had died with no other kin and had left her estate to her grand-niece. There wasn’t much—a small bank account, some old belongings, a family album that Elise found fascinating—and Elise doubted the old cottage would be worth much. Unless it could save her marriage.

She heard footsteps overhead, and wondered why Ray had gone upstairs. Perhaps he’d forgotten something –

Ray returned from the kitchen, extending a full glass to her. She took it, puzzled. “Were you just upstairs?”

“No. Why?”

“Odd. I heard footsteps.”

Ray set the rest of the wine bottle on the table near the couch and resumed his seat there. “Ooh, that sounds like the beginning of the ghost story right there.”

“Hardly.” Elise sipped her wine, then picked up Mrs. Warren’s book. “This was written in 1895, so don’t expect CGI effects.”

“Just read.”

Elise cleared her throat and began. “Chapter One...”

### *The Christmas Spirit*

By

Mrs. H. Warren

#### Chapter One

At twenty-three, I was too young to be a widow, or at least that’s what everyone told me.

But accidents don’t care who’s too young or too old; they’re impartial when it comes to age. Otherwise, my Henry would still be alive, instead of moldering in a grave at the age of twenty-four.

“A freak accident”, they called it. No one could have foreseen the machinery blowing apart in quite so spectacular a fashion at the exact instant that the factory foreman—Henry—was walking past. A plate-sized cog wheel caught him in the head. They said the machinery could never have been expected to do that, that it was really quite safe. They told me it had been instantaneous, that he hadn’t suffered.

I, on the other hand, certainly had.

Henry and I had been married for two years. At the time we were wed, I had no family to speak of except dear old Aunt Vanessa; Henry, on the other hand, had family, but despised them all and invited none of them to the wedding. Until we could start our own family, we were really all each other had.

But we hadn't been blessed with children yet. We'd bought a lovely little place just outside Manchester; it had enough room for the son and daughter we hoped for. We clung to the notion that my own mother had had me late in her life—she'd been in her thirties—so perhaps ours would simply arrive later.

Then my world was taken from me. Henry was dead. There would be no children.

He'd left me with enough money to survive on for the immediate future, but when he died it was two weeks before Christmas, and I was quite naturally devastated, to the point where Aunt Vanessa feared I might attempt something foolish. She wrote me letters daily, urging me to join her for Christmas. "Dearest Jane," the letters would say, "you know how I care for you and worry about your future, because you're really all I have left." She even suggested that I might consider a permanent move.

I wasn't ready yet to give up our little Manchester home, but the idea of spending Christmas alone also held no appeal to me, so on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December I wrote her back to tell her I was coming. It took me a day to make arrangements, and I was off.

The train north was decent, but finding transportation from the station to Aunty's cottage proved more difficult—Carlton Abbey, the village where I disembarked, had no regular cab service. I finally found a man who agreed to drive me out in his open hay wagon, but because it was now late in the day, we'd have to wait until tomorrow morning.

"Nobody goes out that way towards dark," he muttered, in the thick local accent.

Luckily the village inn had a room to let; it was clean and quite tolerable. The bartender's wife was a kindly middle-aged woman named Sarah who had broad hips and vivid red cheeks. She brought me a bowl of savory stew once my bags had been taken upstairs and surprised me by asking if she could sit with me and talk for a few minutes. "Of course," I answered.

She pulled out one of the sturdy pub chairs and addressed me with a serious tone. "I don't mean to pry, miss, but...how much do you know about that old house and your aunt?"

The question surprised me. "Not much about the house, and only a little more about Aunt Vanessa."

"Have you visited these parts before?"

I shook my head. "No. I've only met my aunt a few times, and those were always when she visited my family. We never came to see her."

Sarah thought for a moment, and then said, "The house is not right."

"Whatever do you mean? Is it unsafe?"

"In a manner of speaking. And your aunt—she's not a bad sort, but there are things about her you don't know."

"Such as...?"

Sarah caught her husband watching her from behind the bar as he polished glasses with a towel. She lowered her eyes, pulling away from the table. "It's not my place to say more. Just...be cautious, miss."

She left, returning to the kitchen. After a few moments her husband followed, and I heard a muffled conversation occur between them.



I finished the excellent stew and returned to my upstairs room without seeing them again. The bed was comfortable enough, the fireplace kept the temperature at an adequate level, but sleep eluded me. I kept going over Sarah's words in my head. Something was wrong with the house? And my aunt apparently possessed—what, disturbing qualities she'd kept hidden from the rest of her family?

I would find out the answers to these questions soon enough.



Elise lowered the book. "And that's the end of Chapter One."

Smirking, Ray said, "I think I've seen this movie before. It's not exactly wildly original, is it?"

"It does feel a bit like a Hammer horror movie. Still, I like its earnest tone. Shall I keep going?"

Ray poured himself another glass of wine, and Elise realized he was already drunk. "Why not? Let's hear all about Aunty."

Elise returned to the book. "Chapter Two..."



The next morning—the 23<sup>rd</sup>—dawned chilly and gray. Outside, snow was falling; it had already piled up against the sides of Carlton Abbey's few buildings. I wondered if my trip to the house would be delayed, but Mr. Murphy, the wagon driver, appeared at the inn at exactly 8 a.m. He handed me a rough woolen blanket. "Here, miss—you'll need that for the trip."

We loaded my bags onto his buckboard wagon. The two horses drawing the contraption stamped in the cold, their breath coming in cloudy snorts. Finally we took our places on the open driver's bench, tugging hats and cuffs and blankets into place. Mr. Murphy gave the reins a little flip, and off we went.

It's possible that, at some point in my life, I've been colder, but if so I have no memory of it. I wondered if we wouldn't have been better off in a sleigh, but the snow hadn't built up much yet and the simple but tough wagon served fine. Mr. Murphy wasn't a loquacious companion, but I did learn that he made this trip once a week, bringing food and supplies to my aunt. Occasionally he brought her into the village so she could tend to various matters, but I was the first visitor he'd brought out to her.

The trip took about an hour. By the time we passed the peat bog and the cottage appeared behind a whitened hedge, I wondered if I might have frostbite. I was moving stiffly as I stepped down from the wagon and heard a voice from the house: "Oh my dear, my Jane, come inside at once!"

I hadn't seen my Aunt in twenty years, and my memories of her were colored by childhood's perceptions. I remembered her as a small, neat, very pretty woman with a sweeping mass of dark hair. Now she was mostly silver-haired, prematurely bent and slightly pudgy. The lines of her face were still clear and striking, though, and she moved easily, without the stiffness I was currently conveying. She rushed out, took my arm, and led me into the cottage. Mr. Murphy followed behind with my bags.

Aunt Vanessa took me into her parlour and gave me the seat of honor closest to the fireplace, which was currently blazing. I let her remove the heavy blanket and my outer wraps, and hand me a cup of steaming tea. Seeing me settled, she went outside again with Murphy.

They returned a few moments later with several boxes of supplies. Mr. Murphy hastily gulped a cup down, accepted payment, doffed his hat once, and then turned to go. “Merry Christmas to you and your family, Mr. Murphy,” she called after him.

When he was gone she closed the door behind him before joining me in the parlour. “Now, darling Jane, tell me how you are.”

“Thawing,” I said, my teeth still chattering.

We chatted amiably for a bit, about the dreadful weather, and my train trip, and the world outside Carlton Abbey. Finally I seemed to have reached room temperature, and Aunt Vanessa showed me to my room. Mr. Murphy had already carried my bags there.

It was charming, with a large, fluffy bed, a small fireplace, dresser, basin, mirror, rocker, window seat. The decorations were warm and comforting. Aunt Vanessa suggested I take a rest before supper, and I agreed. I’d slept little at the inn; now that I was here and warm again, I was surprisingly drowsy. I lay down on the bed, thinking merely to test it, and drifted off almost instantly.

I awoke when someone came into the room.

I was half-asleep when I heard the footsteps. Thinking it was my aunt peeking in to check on me, I opted for a few more minutes of sleep and didn’t open my eyes. But then I had the sensation of someone standing over me, and so I did force myself awake. I looked up to see that the light in the room had dimmed—the fire had gone out, the light spilling in through the window was less—and it took a few seconds for me to make out anything. Then I saw: A silhouetted figure at the foot of the bed. A large figure, with broad shoulders. A man, in other words.

I tried to call out, but couldn’t seem to move, to even force sounds from my throat. My limbs were equally unresponsive, my heart hammered but uselessly. I was paralyzed.

He stood there for some time, not moving, not speaking. I couldn’t make out his face or any particulars about him.

I finally closed my eyes, tightly, as if I could somehow make him vanish by refusing to see him. Almost immediately, I felt something in the room change—it lightened again, a crushing sense of essential *wrongness* gone. I opened my eyes.

He was gone.

I took a few moments to collect myself—to let my heartbeat return to its usual pace—before I rose and left the room behind. I found my aunt in the kitchen, sipping tea and writing in a journal which she closed as I entered. “Ah, there you are. Did you nap well, dear?”

“Aunt Vanessa, who is the man I saw in my room?”

Her polite smile disappeared instantly, her shoulders slumped, she set the tea cup down, rattling it in the saucer. “Oh. Oh dear. I’d hoped this wouldn’t happen...”

“That what wouldn’t happen?” I sat down across from her and poured myself a cup of tea from the pot in the center of the table.

“That you wouldn’t meet Joe.”

“Who’s Joe?”

“Our ghost, dear.”

I set the cup down and stared at her, incredulous. “Ghost? But surely...”

“Oh, please, dear Jane, don’t tell me there are no such things, or that you don’t believe in them.” She stood, pumped more water into the tea kettle, and hung it over the kitchen fire.

“Aunty, do you mean to say that you think your house is *haunted*?”

She returned, sat across from me, and fixed me with a resolute stare. “I don’t ‘think’ it, dear—I *know* it. Joe, you see, is a man named Joseph Hood, and he died here under rather tragic circumstances thirty-six years ago.” She broke off as her eyes took on a distant look, then she continued. “In fact it will be exactly thirty-six years ago tomorrow.”

“He died on Christmas Eve?”

Aunt Vanessa nodded. “He was intoxicated. He came into the living room, dropped something near the hearth, tried to reach for it but tripped and fell into the fire.”

I realized she was referring to the same hearth I’d warmed myself before just a short time earlier, and I shuddered. “How horrible.”

“They said he at least didn’t suffer—he knocked himself out when he fell.”

“Who was he? Did you know him?”

My aunt looked away, and I had the distinct sense that she was covering something up, or being less than completely forthcoming. “Yes. He...worked for me. Just a local fellow. I was the one who found him, in fact.”

The way she choked up on the last bit seemed authentic, and I had a rush of sympathy for her. I stood and moved behind her so I could rest my hands on her shoulders in an empathetic way. “Oh, Aunt Vanessa, I’m so sorry.”

She reached up and patted my hands with hers. “It’s really quite all right, dear—it was such a long time ago. And frankly, having Joe around since has frequently been...well, interesting.”

I resumed my seat and decided to humor her. “What does he do?”

“Oh, he’s quite harmless. He might slam a cabinet door, or knock on a wall. He must be quite impressed with you—I don’t actually see him all that often.”

After that, we talked about other things. I told Vanessa about my life with Henry, and she told me about her family growing up. They were an intriguing group of people, this part of my family I didn’t know at all—a collection of eccentrics that included a tea trader who’d sold opium in China, a madwoman who’d died in an asylum, and a professional street mummer.

We chattered away through the late afternoon, past sunset, and well into the night. Finally Aunt Vanessa yawned and said she needed to seek the solace of her bed. I was initially uncomfortable with the thought of returning to my room, but I soon convinced myself that whatever trick of light and shadow I’d seen couldn’t possibly exist at night, and so I retired as well, taking a book with me. I stoked the little fire and slid under the blankets, convinced that sleep would elude me...but after an hour of wading through the sadly-dull book, my eyes became heavy and I slid into a deep and dreamless slumber.



Elise lowered the book and looked around the house. Ray poured more wine for both of them. “Was that the end of the chapter?”

“Yes,” Elise said, distractedly. After a few seconds, she added, “You know what’s odd? The house in this book could be the very one we’re in.”

Ray followed her gaze around the room. “True, but I would imagine that most of the old country houses were built like this.”

“I suppose so...still...”

Ray smiled. “It’s more fun to believe it’s the *same* house, is that it?”

“You caught me.”

He laughed and toasted her. “Please continue. This is so much more entertaining than watching another Fanny Cradock re-run on the telly.”

Elise—who loved cooking shows—shot her husband a vicious look before raising the book again. “Chapter Three...”



I awoke in the morning surprisingly refreshed and happy to be where I was. Yesterday’s storm had passed, and the day was bright, with just the occasional puffy white cloud scudding past the sun.

Aunt Vanessa and I spent the day like two old sisters, nattering about in the kitchen preparing foods for a Christmas dinner that could have fed ten. We fixed goose and mincemeat and puddings and popcorn; we even made a wassail bowl, although there were only two of us and we had no intentions of going wassailing come evening. The lovely scent of the wassail—cider, cinnamon, nutmeg—mixed with the other food smells to fill the house with a cheerful holiday scent.

Day passed into evening. We laid out our merry feast and indulged ourselves. We were soon both quite besotted from the wassail. I’d never been much for drink; even a small amount went straight to my head. By midnight we were both reeling and stumbling as we wished each other a Merry Christmas and made our way to our rooms.

I undressed and crawled beneath the covers, warm from the drink and the food and the pleasant evening. The little fire began to die down as I headed into sleep.

At some point in the night I became aware of a dream I was having. I was still disoriented from the wassail, and unsure where I was. I felt another in bed beside me, felt the firm muscles of a man, and thought I must be dreaming of Henry. It would only be later on that I would realize how odd it was—if not close to impossible—to be so self-aware during a dream that you *knew* you were dreaming.

I shan’t describe the dream in detail here, for it progressed in an extremely intimate fashion. Suffice to say I was ecstatic to give myself over to it, to have my Henry for one more evening. Even though he was somewhat rougher, more impassioned, than I recalled him having ever been, I considered this dream of Henry to be the most cherished Christmas gift imaginable.

A terrible headache awoke me in the morning, the after-effects of my wassail consumption. For a few seconds, I felt only the grinding pain in my temples, ears, and just above my teeth. Then I realized I was unclothed beneath the blankets, although I’d gone to bed in my usual proper nightgown, which lay discarded on the floor beside the bed. Increasingly alarmed, I drew back the covers, and saw small red splotches dotting the white linen. I looked down at myself, and saw the blood had come from crescent-shaped marks on my shoulders and bosom. They were unquestionably bite marks, and their pain was a large part of my headache.

I bit back a scream and leapt from the bed. That was when I saw it—red marks dabbed on the pillow that had just been beneath my head, marks that formed seven letters. The letters read:

*LOVE JOE*

I did cry out then, not so much a scream as a sort of prolonged sob. It was enough to rouse my aunt, who proceeded to bang against my door, calling my name. She asked me why I’d locked the door, and I realized I *hadn’t*. I went to it and turned the lock, and she entered.

When she saw me, she gasped loudly. She was asking what happened when she saw the bed—or, more specifically, the pillow.

Her expression went cold, and she said, “You need to leave here. Today. NOW.”

I didn’t argue. I requested only the time it would take for me to attend to my wounds and gather my things.

She waited for me in the living room. When I came in, struggling with my bags, she told me to leave them, that she’d have them sent later. She had a neighbor less than a quarter-mile distant who had a horse and carriage; he could take me back to the village.

She offered no kind word of sympathy, no apology or explanation. Nor did I ask for any.

Together, we walked out into the chilly Christmas morn. It was overcast again, though not snowing yet. Our breath came out in opaque puffs as we trudged along the lane. We finally reached her neighbors, the Lees. They were a family of five, simple farmers with generous dispositions, who rushed to my side in concern when Auntie told them I’d fallen ill and needed immediate transportation to the village. They agreed instantly; the father, George, went out to hitch the horses to their carriage.

Aunt Vanessa gave me a rather cool embrace, muttered something about being sorry our Christmas had ended so poorly, and then left.

Once she was gone, I asked George’s wife Annie who Joe Hood was. She gaped for a second, and then bade me sit down as she made a hot cup of tea for me. She sat beside me as I sipped the good, strong tea, and she told me the story of Joe.

“You may believe your aunt to be a lifelong spinster, but the truth of the matter is that she was married once—to Joe Hood. She was twenty, and although you might not know it now, she was considered a beauty among the local folk. She wasn’t rich, but she’d been left enough money to live comfortably for the rest of her life.

“Because of all that she had any number of suitors, but only one caught her fancy: Joseph Hood was a young man who’d come up from the south—some said he’d been run off after a scandal with a society lady—and he was very comely. He saw an easy life with your aunt, so he wooed her. They were married just three months after they met, and Joe moved into the cottage with your aunt.

“That’s when she found out what kind of man Joe Hood really was: He drank, he cursed if asked to work, but worst of all, he chased after every young lady in the county—including myself. I wanted nothing to do with him, but there were others who gave in to his tender words and caresses.

“Vanessa was hardly blind; she saw how Joe flirted with all the others, and it turned out she possessed something of a temper. They’d have terrible fights, and Joe would take off for the village pub again on their one horse.

“Well, on the first Christmas Eve after they were married, Joe came home late from the pub, drunk as usual. Later on the story was that he’d fallen in front of the hearth, hit his head, didn’t even know as he was burned alive. But there were many of us who thought otherwise: That your aunt had surely had enough, hit him on the head with something like an andiron, and put him in the fire to concoct that story.

“It worked, too—they couldn’t prove a thing against her. Plus, Joe was hardly well liked hereabouts, so the constabulary didn’t exactly exert much effort on proving he’d been murdered.”

I felt a chill despite the hot tea. My aunt was a murderess? And the crime had taken place in a house I'd been invited to share for the rest of my life? "The house..."

Annie reached out and touched my hand for support. "Did something happen to you there?"

I nodded, ashamed to admit the full truth. "Last night... I was—attacked."

Annie exhaled sharply before saying, "Your aunt was wrong to invite you, and on the very night of the murder, no less. She must have thought she could control him, or that he was weak —"

George entered then, saying he had the carriage ready; he told me he'd come back later in the day with my bags. I thanked the two of them for the great kindness they'd shown me.

Now that I look back on it, I think I can say in all truthfulness that I owe my life—or whatever is left of it—to them.



Elise looked up from the book, dazed. "My God. Well, I suppose we know now why she had to self-publish this. Sex with a ghost simply wasn't done in 1895."

Ray, who had already broken open a second bottle, laughed and added, "I'm still not clear on whether we're supposed to take this as fact or fiction."

"Oh, Ray, surely..." Elise broke off. She'd been about to say, "It *must* be fiction," but then she realized she wasn't so sure. A memoir about hysteria, perhaps? Wasn't the spiritualist movement in full swing when this written? Perhaps Mrs. Warren had been more deeply influenced by all the stories of ghostly contact than she'd been aware of.

Ray gestured at the book. "Is there more?"

Elise flipped through it. "One more chapter. The rest of the pages are blank—I guess to give it enough heft for the binder."

"Well, let's finish it out, then."

Elise turned the page. "Chapter Four..."



George was as good as his word, and arrived later on Christmas Day with my two bags. There was no train back to Manchester until the 27<sup>th</sup>, so I spent a quiet Boxing Day in the pub, letting Annie tend gently to my injuries.

A day later I was home again, determined to put it all out of my mind.

A month later I found employment working for an elderly solicitor. The work involved mainly writing letters and keeping accounts, and my employer was benevolent and thoughtful.

In March, I was finally sure: I was with child.

I sat up late into the nights, working out timelines: It *could* be Henry's. We'd been together as man and wife the night before he'd died. I tried over and over to tell myself that was the only logical explanation. Of *course* it was Henry's.

But the pregnancy became increasingly difficult. I knew, of course, about morning sicknesses and the usual little traumas, but that was nothing like what I was going through. Everything, even water, made me violently ill. I was constantly besieged by excruciating abdominal pains. Blood trickled frequently from my womb, staining my undergarments.

My employer not only gave me time away from the job, but provided the best medical care. The doctors were puzzled; they'd never seen such a condition. They asked me if there was

any history of problematic pregnancy in my family. I told them I knew very little about my family.

I never confessed what I knew about the father.

At five months, I looked (and felt) ready to burst. I was completely bed-ridden by then, and I'd taken to biting a rolled piece of cloth to prevent shrieking in agony.

Finally, one night in early June, the pain peaked. It was midnight, and I was alone in my bed chambers. I felt a shudder take me, a great deal of warm fluid gushed from between my legs, and the sensation of ten-thousand glass shards piercing me caused me to (thankfully) lose consciousness.

I awoke several hours later, weak but at last out of pain. I struggled to a sitting position, looked down and saw –

I shall never describe what I saw, what had passed from my body as I'd lain unconscious. I was too spent to move, so I waited. The doctor who arrived to check on me in the morning saw the dead thing on the bed and promptly sicked up his breakfast. After, he assured me that he would dispose of it in fire and tell no one what he'd seen.

I was four weeks recovering. Thanks to the careful attentions of my doctors, I did regain my strength. I returned to my work and to my life.

That was some time ago now. I've done my best to put the whole experience behind me, but I've been unable to. I still bear semi-circular scars on the upper part of my body, and I will never conceive again. There've been men who've shown me attention, but I've fled in terror from them. I've never heard from my aunt, although the lovely Lees have corresponded with me throughout the years, bless them. We never speak of Vanessa or of that Christmas.

I know that as much as I try to forget, the rest of my life will be spent re-living that terrible night I spent in the house by the bog, a house where a sprightly yellow paint job and pillows quaintly embroidered with nature scenes couldn't hide a hideous crime and the undying nightmare it had spawned.



Elise closed the book and set it on the table beside the couch. Neither she nor Ray spoke for several seconds.

At last Elise said, "My God."

Ray could only shake his head and gulp wine.

Elise looked down—and her eyes widened at what she saw. "Ray..." She pointed at something beside him on the couch. He picked it up.

It was an ancient satin couch pillow, its sheen faded but still in good condition, hand-embroidered with an image of birds flying over snowy trees.

"This is the house."

Ray picked up the pillow and squinted at it before tossing it aside. "Coincidence..."

"The yellow paint job? The bog? The pillows? Ray, this is *the* house. The one in the story. I'm sure of it."

"That's it—no more ghost stories for you, my darling—"

Elise abruptly stood and went to one of her bags. She'd brought Aunt Priscilla's old family album with her, since she'd thought going through it in her aunt's old home might be a nice small tribute. She found the old, velvet-covered album, stuffed so full of pictures that it

bulged out, and carried it back to the light by the hearth. She'd remembered something she'd seen in there, tucked in among all the photos of distant relatives she didn't know –

There. It was a large photo, showing around two-dozen people, dressed in the fashion of the 1930s, three lines on a short flight of steps. There was writing on the back—“*Family Reunion 1935*”—followed by names.

The third name from the right in the top row was “Aunt Jane”.

Elise flipped the photo over and peered at the named woman. She was in her sixties, with short gray hair and a flower-print dress. Her expression was the oddest among the group: She seemed to be trying to smile, with a slight tilt to her lips, but her eyes were serious.

Elise showed the writing on the back of the photo to Ray. “There, I knew it: Ray, she’s a relative.”

Peering at the writing, then the photo, Ray asked (slurring his words), “Who is?”

“Jane—Mrs. H. Warren. The woman who wrote this book.”

Ray hiccupped as he tossed the photo aside. “Don’t be absurd, Elise. I’m sure every family in England has an Aunt Jane.”

“But I’m sure I’ve seen mentions of ‘Warren’ in Priscilla’s things, too. We could probably track down the deed history of this cottage to be sure.”

“And then what?” Ray staggered to his feet and threw an arm out at the hearth, in an overly-dramatic gesture. “‘Ladies and gentlemen, step right up and see where the ghost was murdered’? Shall we charge a pound a ticket, sell souvenir shirts?”

This happened more often than not when they were together: They drank too much until the alcohol led to a fight. Elise hadn’t wanted to argue on Christmas Eve, but now there was no escaping it. “Why don’t you want to acknowledge that it’s at least a possibility? Didn’t you say that the man who sold you the book said it was written by a woman who’d lived around here? It’s not exactly a heavily-populated region, is it?”

Ray raised his arms over his head. Wiggling his fingers, he began to utter a ghostly wail.

Elise was done. She stormed out of the room, heading down a short hall to the first room she found with a locking door. She entered, flipped a light switch, slammed the door, turned the lock. Outside, she heard Ray continue to utter his ridiculous moans. She regretted having left her phone outside; she could’ve at least plugged in the earbuds and drowned him out with music. Not Christmas carols, though; she’d had enough of the holiday.

He finally went silent, and she waited. Would he come knocking on the door, drunkenly taunting her? She didn’t expect an apology, or even an offer at compromise. That wasn’t Ray’s style.

She turned to examine the room. It had a soft bed, a fireplace, a small dresser, a rocking chair. The bed covers were only slightly dusty. She pulled them back and saw that the bed was made beneath and seemed surprisingly clean. Outside the room, full night had fallen; she had no idea what time it was.

She turned on a bedside lamp, turned off the overhead, removed her shoes, and fell into the bed. The room spun; she’d had too much wine. She knew the sensation would pass soon, so she waited.

While she waited, she thought about the story. She was sure Jane Warren was family, and that this was the house. At that thought, her heart skipped a beat.

Because if this was the house, then this bedroom...



She started to sit up, but the room whirled around harder. She was afraid she'd be sick, so she forced herself back down. Besides, if she came out of the room now, what would Ray say? He'd surely launch into a fresh round of mockery. No, she wouldn't give him the pleasure.

She waited. The spinning slowed. Time passed. Her thoughts grew muddled. The temperature dropped as night set in; she pulled the musty blankets up over herself, enjoying the warmth they brought.

And sleep arrived.



At some point she was dimly aware that he'd entered the room and settled into the bed beside her. He'd come to apologize after all. He'd realized that he'd been wrong.

He reached for her. His touch was cold. Had he been outside? She wanted to ask him, but she couldn't speak. She was incapable of movement.

His frigid hand pulled her shoulder, hard.

Elise knew, then: The door was still locked. It wasn't Ray.

She struggled against whatever force held her, but it was immovable. Weight settled around her. The bed springs creaked.

*No.*

She wouldn't let this happen.

Elise gathered every ounce of will power she possessed, forced her mouth open...and screamed.

The power holding her evaporated. She was alone in the bed.

She leapt from it and stumbled up. She heard Ray outside, running to her door, calling her name. She reached the lock, twisted it. The door flew open and Ray stumbled in. "Elise—!"

"Ray." She embraced him, the fight forgotten. She didn't know if they could save their marriage, but right then she knew he was human and real and that she wanted to try.

She hung onto him, looking over his shoulder, wondering if Joe even knew he'd lost, or who exactly had defeated him. Elise didn't believe—*couldn't* believe—that *The Christmas Spirit* had come to her by happenstance.

"Thank you, Jane," she whispered to the woman who had just given her the best Christmas gift of her life.

## DADDY'S GIRL

It was already dark when Janny finally left the office, weary and weighed down with her yearly Christmas depression. She slid behind the wheel of her twelve-year-old Toyota, turned the key, and winced as a bubbly carol erupted from the radio.

*Holly jolly Christmas. Yeah, right,* she thought as she negotiated her way out of the parking structure.

She hit the street, surprised at the lack of rush-hour traffic until she remembered it was Christmas Eve. Most folks were already home with their families, released hours ago by bosses who still had a shred of compassion. Most wives were probably already setting out lovely dinners before smiling faces, not wondering if they'd find their husbands already drunk (again) when they got home. Janny hoped that Tris had at least stayed sober enough to take care of the baby. Yesterday when she'd arrived home, she'd found her five-year-old daughter Nessa trying to open a jar of baby food for the bawling little Marcus because Daddy had already passed out on the living room couch.

*All I want for Christmas is peace and quiet.*

For Janny, Christmas brought its own burden of bad memories: Daddy showing up late and drunk from parties with the other guys at the factory, presenting her with gifts that he told her she didn't deserve. Now her present life had caught up with the past. Tris unemployed for two years...thirty days away from losing their two-bedroom house, nowhere else to go...Janny's own failed dreams and the degree in PoliSci that she'd once thought would bring her an exciting career in the State Department, not a dead-end secretarial position in a law office...

And her father never missed an opportunity to remind her that she was a failure and a disappointment. No wonder Mother had died years ago; she'd simply been worn down by the man.

Janny pulled onto her own avenue, trying to feel cheered by the twinkling lights and glittery yard decorations. At the end of the block, the Bryants had really gone all out this year: Their yard included a giant animatronic Snoopy in Santa costume, and an eight-foot inflatable snowball, featuring a perpetual fall of white flakes.

*At least I got our nativity scene out,* Janny thought, already slowing as she approached her home.

Janny frowned as she realized hers was the only dark house on the block; it was, in fact, *completely* dark, without even interior lights gleaming through the windows.

"Damn it, Tris," she cursed under her breath, feeling her adrenaline start to match her growing anger.

She parked the Camry in the driveway, took her purse and got out, slamming the door. The house was completely unlit, silent –

*Where's Toto? That dog always barks up a storm when I get home.*

Had Tris left the house, taken the dog and kids somewhere? She couldn't imagine where he would have gone—his family lived on the other side of the country, and hers wouldn't have him. They hated Tris; even when he'd been working, Janny's father had called him a loser and blamed him for holding her back.

Janny picked her way up the front walk by instinct, listening for any noise, but all she heard was the distant remnants of Christmas music and the creak of the wooden manger, set on a bale of hay she'd bought at the crafts store, surrounded by cheap plastic statues of Joseph and Mary and various animals. Nessa loved the lamb, and Janny had let her place it carefully nestled up against the hay bale. The manger creaked again, even though there was no breeze.

Something was wrong.

Intuition prickled the back of Janny's neck as she juggled her keys, fingers suddenly jittery with nerves. She reached the front door, tried the knob, found it unlocked.

"Tris?" she called as she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Still no Toto. No blare of the television, no baby squawl.

Janny shut the door, then reached for the entryway light. She'd wondered if their power might be out (*maybe that's why Tris left with the kids*), but was both relieved and unnerved when light flooded the entry.

She moved cautiously, trying to ignore the knot growing in her stomach. From somewhere down the block she heard the echo of "Silent Night" played over speakers, and she tried to tune it out as she reached for the living room lights.

She flipped both switches, and the living room was abruptly bathed in the multicolored hue of the Christmas tree lights, as well as the usual overhead fixture.

Janny saw instantly that something had changed.

The tree caught her attention first: There were the decorations she and Nessa had put up last week (while Marcus had played with a little stuffed reindeer), the angel on top and the silver tinsel garland looped around...

The packages at the base of the tree. She'd placed most of them there just two nights ago, but now they'd been rearranged carelessly, some overturned, and there was a large one that she'd never seen. It was the size of a banker's box and had cheap paper taped around it, a red-and-green tree print that was crinkled and even torn in places.

Janny's eyes moved from the tree to the rest of the room. Something had been spilled on the beige carpet near the faux gas fireplace. Janny felt her temper flare again.

*Goddamnit, Tris, we can't afford to have that cleaned...*

Then her eyes moved up, past the imitation log in the imitation hearth, to the mantelpiece...and her breath caught.

There was something placed there, hanging from the mantel where she usually put the Christmas stockings, sneaking carefully down the stairs after everyone was asleep to leave gaudy knit decorations stuffed with candy and toys...

This wasn't a stocking. It was black, skinny, fur-covered –bleeding.

It was one of Toto's legs. It had been severed near the hip and then nailed to the mantelpiece. The stain on the carpet was the dog's blood.

Janny gasped for air, stared in shock, didn't even know that she'd taken a step to the side until her foot hit something slippery and she nearly went down. She looked and saw that it was more blood, pooled thickly; her foot had just slipped in it and impressed a crimson print in the pale living room carpet.

"Nessa," she shrieked, without thinking.

She heard a closet door crash open and a shout from the kitchen. "Mommy!"

Janny ran through the dark until her daughter was in her arms, sobbing and clutching at her. "Baby, are you alright?"

The little girl could barely get words out between choked sobs. “Mommy, he—chased me, and—Toto, and I—hid—”

Janny tried to stroke her daughter’s hair and shush her; she had to get them out of here, but her need to protect Nessa collided with anger that had spiraled into fury:

*Tris.*

She realized: Two years of unemployment/her father’s derision/a man’s pride/holiday stress/alcohol had combined into a vicious brew.

“Toto...” Nessa said between softer sobs.

“Shh, baby, we can’t save Toto now. We gotta get us out of here.”

Janny was shaking and could smell blood and couldn’t remember where she’d dropped her purse with the cell phone. But she knew she couldn’t stay in the house long enough to make a call; she needed to get Nessa and Marcus out. They could go next door to Mrs. Windell; she was elderly and alone, but she liked the kids and she’d keep them safe until police could come.

Then Janny heard a rustling in the hallway. Someone was coming toward the kitchen.

With her escape cut off, she thought frantically: Can’t run, can’t get to Marcus, must protect Nessa. She wrenched a drawer open, the one where she kept her cooking utensils, and her fingers closed around the hilt of a butcher knife.

She’d kill Tris if he threatened their daughter.

“Get behind me, Nessa.”

The little girl bit off her cries and did as instructed.

A dark form appeared in the kitchen entry, silhouetted by the light from the living room.

“Tris, get out of my way.”

Even as she said it, Janny knew something was wrong; it wasn’t Tris. It was too tall, too slim, slightly bent with age...

The figure laughed, a deep rumble. “You need to open your eyes, girl.”

*Daddy.*

Janny’s fingers closed tighter on the knife handle, even as she tried to keep her hands from trembling. “Daddy...what’s...?”

He reached in and turned on the lights, and Janny saw that he carried a hatchet in one hand; she recognized it from childhood, from all the times Daddy had dragged her out into the December woods to chop down that year’s Christmas tree. Except now the hatchet—and Daddy’s arms, chest, and face—were splattered crimson.

He held Marcus in his other arm, the baby cradled against his chest. Daddy grinned; even his teeth were bloodied.

Janny took a step forward before she reminded herself that Daddy was good with that hatchet. “Marcus! What did you do -?”

He jostled the baby, who uttered a tiny giggle. “The baby’s got my blood in him, Janny. You don’t think I’d hurt my own kin, do you?”

“Then let me take him.”

“Oh, not this time, no. I’m going to raise this boy *right*. Just look at how happy he is, Janny. I even think he looks like me—don’t you?”

Janny couldn’t answer. It was the first time she’d ever wanted Marcus to cry, to shriek, to squirm and fight. Instead, the baby betrayed her, chewing a chubby knuckle as he kicked a foot in delight.

Daddy smiled at his grandson, then looked up at Janny. “But Christmas shouldn’t be just for the little ones, should it? I decided to give *you* the best Christmas present of all this year, Janny. Come see.”

He stepped aside, motioning her out of the kitchen. Janny didn’t move, just held the knife before her.

Daddy mock-frowned, and Janny saw a vicious gleam behind the milky cataracts starting to cover his eyes. “Now, now, it’s Christmas—aren’t you going to let me play Santa Claus? It’s all for you.”

Janny weighed the options: His hatchet, his size, against her knife, her weakness...all with her son in his arms, her daughter behind her. She made her choice instantly. “Stay here, sweetie,” she whispered back over her shoulder, and felt her girl squeeze her hand in acquiescence.

She prayed Nessa would run if she got the chance. If Janny could give her the chance.

Lowering the knife, Janny stepped forward. “All right, daddy.”

“Good girl.”

He waited, never turning his back, as she walked past him. “The living room,” he directed her.

*The big box under the tree.*

She walked on leaden feet, dread nearly causing her to drop the knife. At one point she had a chance to make a run, out the front door, screaming—but that would leave Nessa and Marcus behind. She couldn’t do that.

So she walked, numb, into the living room. To the tree, and the merrily wrapped gifts that surrounded it.

Daddy followed behind her. “Never did like that yappy little mutt of yours. Figured he worked better hung over the chimney with care.”

Janny didn’t look. She felt hot tears on her cheeks. They’d gotten Toto for Nessa’s third birthday, and that dog had been her daughter’s best friend.

“Now, that box right there—you open that. It’s from your Daddy.”

She couldn’t move. She stared at the box, and saw now that what she’d thought was just a badly-rendered holiday design was partly red handprints and crimson splotches.

“Open it, Janny.”

The tone was demanding, and Janny couldn’t disobey, just as she’d never been able to. She dropped to her knees and tore at the paper, tossing it aside. Underneath was a cardboard box, the top flaps sealed with scotch tape.

“C’mon, now, don’t keep Daddy waiting.”

There was a terrible smell wafting up from the box, and Janny knew. She sagged, openly crying, drained by the knowledge. “Why...” was all her lips could form; even as she said it, she hated the obviousness of it.

“He took my little girl’s life away. Nothin’ but a loser. He didn’t deserve you, and you’re better off without him. My Christmas gift to you.”

Janny’s mind flashed back: Daddy slaps mommy/daddy kills a neighbor’s cat/daddy gets arrested for beating on a kid who jaywalked, a kid he didn’t even know/the look in Daddy’s eyes sometimes...and she saw the madness that had always hidden in Daddy—that she’d *let* be hidden, because to acknowledge it would be to accept that this man was part of her. His blood was hers.

In that second, she accepted it. She'd be mad, then, just for as long as it took to protect Nessa and Marcus. She'd save them as she'd never been saved, and they'd have the life she hadn't had.

She lunged up, the knife held before her, coming in low from where she'd knelt by the box, coming below the arm that held the baby, and Daddy hadn't expected it. He made a *chuff* sound as the knife was buried up to the hilt in his chest. The arm holding Marcus fell, but Janny was there, ready. Marcus dropped into her arms and began to howl. Janny stepped back, clutching her son protectively as Daddy stared in disbelief at the knife, at the blood—*his* blood now—and at Janny.

"Baby..." he said once, before he toppled. One arm tangled in the foil garland, and the tree went down with him, the sound of his final breath lost in the bruised tinkling of shattering glass ornaments. The tree's lights were extinguished, leaving the room lit only by the normal yellowish glow of the overhead fixture.

"Mommy...?"

Janny looked up to see Nessa in the doorway, her eyes wide and fearful.

She meant to say, "It's okay, baby, we're safe now. We're safe." She wanted to believe that Daddy's madness had been his alone, that she had inherited no more than his sandy hair and long nose.

Instead, when she opened her mouth what came out was a wild, ferocious howl, a terrible sound that was hoarse around the edges but rose and rose, gaining power and pitch.

The silent night was shattered.

## THE HAUNTED HOUSE

“Take, for example, a haunted house... wherein some one room is the scene of a ghostly representation of some long past tragedy. On a psychometric hypothesis the original tragedy has been literally photographed on its material surroundings...”

Sir Oliver Lodge, *Man and the Universe* (1908)

*The Donegan house had stood on its hill in Angelino Heights since 1888. It had been added to, divided, remodeled, forgotten, and refurbished during its long life. It had withstood time, rain, sun, earthquakes, and smog; it had sheltered young couples, families, singles, grandparents, and boarders. In its time, it had seen one natural death (second owner Millie Chautauqua, who'd died in her bed at the age of 93), one suicide (a young boarder named Charles Pace whose fiancée had jilted him, and so he'd hung himself from the extravagant overhead light fixture in his room), and two messy divorces. But it had also held laughter, whispers of love, exclamations of delight, congenial gatherings, squeals of playful children, purring cats, and the sound of canine tails thumping excitedly against its door and walls.*

*The house was empty now and so it slept, until that time when it would once again partner in pursuit of a great dream.*



An hour before sunset, two vans pulled up into the driveway of the Donegan house, just northwest of downtown Los Angeles. The vans bore the striking logo of a television show called *Ghostmasters*.

Men with cameras stepped out of the rear vehicle, then the doors on the front van flew back dramatically and the three “Ghostmasters” leapt out, lining up to pose between the cameras and the house. The trio wore jackets emblazoned with the series logo, as well as backpacks and utility belts full of equipment. As they waited before the house in the late afternoon weak winter sunlight, tinged gold from the Los Angeles smog, the cameras captured the “For Sale” signs and panned across peeling paint and cracked paving stones. After a few seconds, a well-dressed middle-aged woman stepped out of the house and greeted them.

“Hi,” she said, shaking hands, “I’m Eleanor Baker, the real estate agent handling the Donegan house.”

The men introduced themselves: Martin Jones was a tall, dark-haired man with the sort of gaunt features that somehow translated as handsome to a television camera; David Pulaski was stocky, with thinning blonde hair and a short beard; and Johnny Romano was barely twenty, with pierced ears and a perpetual baseball cap.

“So,” Martin said, “we understand the house has been on the market for a while.”

“About a year,” answered Eleanor.

Martin knew the real reason was that the house was expensive and needed a huge amount of work, but the producers had spoken to Eleanor beforehand and briefed her on the answers they were looking for.

Eleanor complied. “There have been reports from previous owners and potential buyers of some—disturbing activity, and that seems to be making the house a tough sell.”

“It’s a beautiful house,” Johnny said, gazing up.

“Yes, it is. It was built in 1888 by Benjamin Donegan, who’d made a fortune in the insurance business back east and moved to Los Angeles for health reasons. Mr. Donegan and his wife ended up dying tragically in a train accident a few years later, and the house was taken over by an elderly aunt, Millie. Millie died here in 1910, and at that point the property passed through a number of owners.”

David pointed to a room on the second floor. The window was curtainless, and the interior of the room, away from the sun, peered out like a dark eye. “There was a suicide here, in that room right up there...”

Eleanor nodded. “In 1938, the house was acquired by a couple who rented rooms to boarders. In 1940, a young man named Charles Pace was abandoned by his girlfriend, and he hung himself in that room.”

Martin, ever mindful that the show was in its fifth season and ratings had been slipping, asked, “And there have been reports ever since of creaking sounds from that room, right?”

“Yes. In fact, one buyer was scared away when she claimed to see the figure of a man with a bent neck reflected in a mirror in that room.”

“Full-body apparition,” Johnny murmured. David nodded in agreement. Martin silently applauded.

“What else?” Martin asked.

“Well, we’ve had reports of a cold spot in the rear downstairs bedroom —”

David cut her off. “— where Millie was found dead?”

“Right.”

“And wasn’t there a rumor of a tenant who was a witch?”

Eleanor smiled. “There was once a renter named Martha Joosten who dabbled in some odd things.”

“Okay. Let’s go in.” Martin held out an arm, and Eleanor turned to lead the way, the cameras following.



*The house stirred as it was entered, but this was no potential new owner hoping to fall in love, nor even a casual admirer. These men sought other rewards.*

*The house had felt Charles Pace’s agonized final moments, and knew that his grief had been so all-consuming it had left nothing of the young man behind. It had watched as ancient little Millie Chautauqua dreamed a last dream, smiling, before her heart stopped. It knew the lie of Martha Joosten, who had made herb teas for sick friends, nothing more.*

*The house, however, kept its silence and hoped the intruders would leave soon, allowing it to return to serenity.*



After night fell, the *Ghostmasters* crew set up their cameras and their sound recorders and their thermometers throughout the house. At 10 p.m., they turned out the lights and entered, followed by their cameramen. They used small flashlights to find their way through the spacious, three-story abode.



They started on the ground floor, at the base of the large main staircase that rose to the upper levels.

Martin shone his light around, knowing that it would paint the house in broad swaths of high contrast black-and-white that would look appropriately stark and unsettling on high-definition televisions. “We’re going to head into the rear bedroom first, since that’s on the ground floor and there have been reports of a cold spot there.”

The trio and the cameramen walked to the bedroom at the rear of the house. In the darkness, they passed a kitchen that loomed with shadows of cupboards and a center island, but they ignored it; they had no interest in a space that had harbored warmth and the pleasure of food. They reached the rear bedroom—large and barren—and David and Martin roamed the interior with handheld digital thermometers while Johnny held out a small sound recorder.

“If anyone’s here,” Johnny called out, “we’re friends who just want to visit. We’re not here to alarm you or anger you, we’d just like to talk. If you’re listening, just let us know; make a sound and we’ll know.”

Overhead, the ancient floorboards creaked.

“Did you hear that?” Martin called out in hushed, urgent tones, uttered with the ease of a natural actor.

“Yeah,” both Johnny and David muttered. Johnny allowed a suspenseful few beats and then added, “do it again so we know it’s definitely you.”

The creak came again.

“We’ve got contact!” Johnny said, his eyes wide.

“Yeah,” David answered, somewhat breathlessly.

“And guys, check this out...” Martin waved his thermometer in a circle near the ceiling. “Sixty-eight degrees...sixty-seven...sixty-five...sixty-four...we’ve definitely got some activity going on right here.”

David nodded, said, “Let’s head upstairs to the suicide’s room.”

The others followed him out.



*The house was angry.*

*Its boards were its bones; they were old and they often creaked. It knew of the cold place in the bedroom, where a space between a window and a wall, created by a small quake, had never been repaired properly. But now the house cursed its own infirmities, and waited, biding, hoping for this intrusion to end quickly.*



On the way up the stairs, Martin planned.

He knew he couldn’t go too far—he couldn’t claim to actually see the ghost of Charles Pace, for example, or viewers would feel cheated because they hadn’t witnessed the sighting. He could cry out that something had touched him; that was always guaranteed to incite a stab of music and a chill in viewers at home. He’d need to make it good, though, because otherwise *Ghostmasters* would be canceled at the end of the season and Martin had no interest in returning to his previous life as a welder. He liked the money, the fame, the women.

They reached the second floor landing and David led the way down a long hall. But he hadn’t gone ten feet before he stopped, holding out his hands to halt the others.

“Did you hear that?”

Martin stopped, listening. He heard nothing but a car passing outside.

David continued. “Sounds like music.”

Martin knew any music was likely to be emanating from the car, but he nonetheless nodded. “It *does* sound like music. Like...something old, from the ‘20s or even earlier...”

They listened for a few beats, allowing the cameramen to capture their raised faces and tense postures. David finally shrugged. “It’s gone now.”

They continued on down the hall until they reached the last doorway on the left. The room was similar to the one they’d visited below—empty, with dingy paint and old wooden floorboards.

“This is it.” David looked around. “This is where Charles Pace hung himself.”

Martin gestured at the lighting fixture in the center of the room. It was obviously no more than twenty years old and couldn’t possibly have supported the weight of a body, but that didn’t matter when there were ratings to consider. “From that lighting fixture.”

The two cameramen both swung their cameras around and zoomed in for a close-up. Martin stifled a grin.

Johnny stepped into the center of the room and looked up. “Charles Pace, if you’re here, we’d just like to talk to you, that’s all. We’re friendly and we’d like to listen to you. We know what happened to you, and you can tell us all about it.”

Martin remembered the plan he’d made on the stairs, and he suddenly ran his hand over his face. “Is something on me? A bug or something?”

The cameras both swung his direction as David and Johnny examined him. “No, nothing,” David said. “Did you feel something?”

“Yeah, I did...like...something light, brushing my face.”

Johnny gestured at a digital camera set up in the corner of the room. “Let’s see if we got anything else...” He pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt and thumbed the control, calling Marcus, the tech guy, out in the second van. “Marcus, you got anything in the upstairs bedroom?”

A voice crackled from the device’s tinny speaker. “Not that I can see, but something might show up later on.”

Martin stepped forward, letting the cameras linger on his sober expression as he said, “Guys, I think this house is very, *very* haunted.”

He knew that would be a perfect commercial break.



*The house was haunted. But it was haunted not by the dead spirits of those who had once dwelt there; rather, it was plagued by the living, who had exploited it and who now applied a label that it hadn’t earned and didn’t want. It only desired to rest or provide a home, not be the object of desperate and deluded men.*

*The house was no longer patient.*



“So,” Martin said, as he ran an EMF detector along the walls of the bedroom, “if the theory is that old houses act like recorders for everything that happens in them, and a suicide is a pretty big happening...then we should get something in this room.”

“Oh, wait a minute...” That was David, scanning an opposite wall with his own gauge. “Yeah, I’m getting some spikes here.” The cameramen descended on David, one punching in for a close-up on his EMF reading, the other pulling back for a wide shot.

Johnny joined him. “Wow, look at those readings! This is very serious evidence.”

Martin half-smiled. “Hope Ms. Baker can find somebody who likes ghosts to buy this house.”



*No.*

*The house would no longer tolerate the presence of these caustic intruders. It wanted to feel the satisfaction of a job well done, to share in the contentedness of those living within it, and these men were jeopardizing its chances.*

*It fought back the only way it could.*



Martin staggered and clutched at a wall for support.

His mind had suddenly filled with images that had come unbidden, but which he knew to be true: Images of happier times, tableaux of bliss, pictures of comfort. He saw an old woman who he knew was Millie Chautauqua laugh as a grandchild rolled an old-fashioned ball to her. He saw Martha Joosten receive the gratitude of a friend who’d been helped by her teas. And he saw Charles Pace seated in a parlor room, his face alight with adoration as he gazed at a pretty young woman who batted her eyelashes at him.

He gasped as he realized these weren’t his memories, but could only belong to the house itself.

“Hey, Martin, are you okay?” That was one of the cameramen, who had turned his lens on Martin.

“No. Wait...turn the cameras off.”

The two cameramen looked at each uncertainly.

David stepped up and put a hand on Martin’s shoulder, spoke in low tones. “What’s going on, bro? Are you in pain, or...?”

“Turn the goddamn cameras off!”

The two cameramen hesitated before lowering their equipment.

Johnny joined his two companions. “What’s going on?”

“This house...this fucking house...” The images had ceased unreeling in Martin’s head, but the memories lingered—and they infuriated him. There’d been nothing there he could exploit. He couldn’t sell a show on fucking pictures of grandmas playing ball or suckers like Charlie Pace drooling in love. For the first time ever, he’d experienced an actual paranormal happening, and it was useless to him.

“What about the house?” David asked, perplexed.

“There’s nothing here. We’re wasting our time. We’re not going to get anything here.”

David and Johnny looked from each other to Martin. “But...you said something touched you...” Johnny said.

Martin shouted his response. “I always say that, you stupid kid. You say it, David says it...so fucking what?! We’re not being touched by anything but the occasional spider or fleck of dust, and we all fucking know it.”

Before anyone could respond, Martin tore off his *Ghostmasters* jacket and then reached for the plain white t-shirt he wore underneath, yanking it over his head.

David watched warily. "What are you doing?"

Martin dangled the shirt, which nearly glowed in the dim light, and stepped just out of the room. "I'm going to step out of the room where you can't see me, and then throw this across the doorway while you guys all video it."

Johnny frowned. "You mean..."

"Fucking right, Johnny. By the time they play it back, it's gonna look like the best goddamn ghost we've ever seen."

"We can't do that, Martin," said David, jaws tightening, "that would be...well, fraudulent. That's not what we're about."

"Oh, bullshit. We're about giving the rubes a little thrill at the same time every week. They need to believe in this shit to give their lives meaning, so they tune into us. See? Look at it that way, and we're doing a good thing." Martin stepped out of the room and called from the hall: "We gonna do this?"

One of the cameramen shrugged and raised his camera. "I'm good." His co-worker followed suit.

"Okay, here we go, on the count of three...one...two...three."

Martin tossed the shirt. It fluttered in the darkness and was gone.

"Got it," said one of the cameramen.

"You might want to punch it up a little in post, but it should work," said the other.

"I quit," Johnny said, as he started out of the room past Martin.

Martin called after him, "Fine. Then there'll be a lot of people hearing about how much meth you do to get through these night shoots."

Johnny hesitated, his shoulders drooped, and Martin knew he'd won.

"Now let's get the fuck out of this stupid fucking house." Martin pulled his shirt and jacket back on, led the way down the stairs and out the front door.

Eleanor Baker waited for them outside. "Well?"

"Oh, boy, Ms. Baker," Martin said with false enthusiasm, "you've got a severely fucked-up house on your hands here. Good luck with that sale." He turned and left the real estate woman gaping.

After the *Ghostmasters* vans had driven away, Eleanor turned and looked again at the house, which somehow always made her feel welcomed and warm, and she decided to see if the owners would accept her offer. She knew the house was worth more, but perhaps she could persuade them that it would be a tough sell once the *Ghostmasters* show aired.

She loved the house and wanted to take care of it.



*The house had just experienced its worst memories ever. But it refused to let them imprint on its sensitive walls. It wouldn't force those scenes on anyone else, no matter how long it stood. It would leave those bad images for others to replay.*

*The house returned to slumber, and its dreams were good.*

## THE END OF THE SEASON

Damon walked into the shopping mall and shuddered. He couldn't take one more Christmas carol.

He stepped back out into the cold December night, letting other shoppers stream in around him as he pulled out his phone, pulled up his "Thrashed Holiday" playlist, put the phone into his t-shirt pocket, shoved the buds into his ears, and let the crashing drums and frantic guitars take him. Head nodding in time to the rhythm, Damon now felt comfortable entering the mall.

It was just after 3 p.m. on December 24<sup>th</sup>, and the mall was a madhouse. Last-minute shoppers scurried around Damon, clutching bags and packages. Some held the hands of small children or pushed packed strollers; seniors maneuvered carefully with canes.

Even though it was cold outside, the sky already dark with distended clouds, Damon instantly regretted stepping into the over-heated interior, with its mobs and constant din of holiday music. He and Christmas had never been on friendly terms. As a child, Christmas had been that special time of year when Mom and Dad fought the most; Christmas morning often started with Damon and his sister Melanie creeping out in their threadbare pajamas, picking their way through empty liquor bottles and battered thrift store toys that hadn't even been wrapped.

As an adult (or at least a twenty-year-old who'd moved away from home three years ago), Christmas hadn't been much better. Damon worked in a garage, repairing cars, working for a guy everybody called "Stingy Steve". For Christmas, Steve had given each of his mechanics a six-pack of Bud and the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> off. Merry Fucking Christmas.

Each December, Damon bought exactly two gifts: One for his sister, and one for his niece. This year, Mel had asked for a new microwave, which Damon had picked up on sale a week ago. But six-year-old Ashley wanted gourmet chocolate. It was a brand Damon had never heard of; Mel had written it down for him ("Goddess"), smiling. Damon had looked at the name and said to Mel, "What, Hershey's not good enough for her?"

"Apparently not."

"Fuck, Mel, the kid is *six*. What six-year-old wants gourmet *anything*?"

But the truth was, Damon was nuts about Ashley. If she'd told him she wanted a whole cacao tree, he would've done his best to get it for her. She was little and cute and laughed a lot and wore pink t-shirts with kitten graphics, and he doted on her. Ashley's father had split when she was a year old, and Damon had become the closest thing she'd had since to a father.

Ashley was the only reason he would've braved these crowds on Christmas Eve. He'd tried other stores for her Goddess chocolate, but they'd all said they didn't carry it. He'd gone online and found a candy store in this mall that had some; he'd even phoned ahead and asked to hold all they had.

The clerk on the phone had told him they had six bars left...at fifteen dollars a bar. "Please hold them all," Damon had said, before ending the call and shaking his head in disbelief. Nearly a hundred bucks for six fucking candy bars.

But Ashley was worth it. He couldn't wait to see her rip open the first bar and bite in, giggling as the gooey chocolate smeared her mouth.

So now he pushed through the shoppers, Overkill and Sepultura on his playlist giving him some small measure of relief from the forced Christmas cheer. He moved past clothing stores and gift shops and a cinema multiplex, looking in vain for the candy store. He knew he could stop and check his phone to find it, but he was afraid he'd be buffeted by the constant stream of consumers.

Damon saw a long line of people winding through the middle of the mall, waiting. Curious, he followed the line for what seemed like hundreds of feet, wondering where it led. He saw that it eventually filed into an enclosed cardboard structure painted to look like snow-covered logs; overhead, a colorful sign rounded in twinkling lights read "Santa's Workshop". A smaller notice in an easel below read, "Have your picture taken with Santa!" and gave hours; a short picket fence surrounded the area. Two men dressed as elves stood on either side of the entrance, ushering the next patron into Santa's lair.

The scene brought another unpleasant holiday memory roaring up into Damon's head: His mother, drunk as always, forcing the five-year-old version of himself to perch on Santa's knee, screeching at him to "smile for the camera" until, terrified, he'd relieved himself all over the Jolly Old Elf's red-fur-clad knee.

Damon turned the music up louder to drown out the recollection. After a few seconds, he realized he was staring at the serpentine line waiting to meet Santa, something poking at his consciousness for attention. He looked more closely at the people before him and realized what it was: None of them were smiling. No happy faces anticipating a joyful visit with Santa Claus; in fact, many of those queued didn't even have children. They all stared dully ahead, holding bags.

They were probably just zoning out from the holiday stress, waiting for a photo to take home to show little Billy or Suzie, so they could continue the Great Christmas Lie and say, "Look, honey, Santa is *real!*"

Damon turned away, disgusted with them, disgusted with the holiday, disgusted with himself. Maybe, he thought, they didn't grow up in households where a magical gift-giver was a fucking joke. Maybe they liked the idea enough that it was worth standing in line for.

After a few more minutes of wandering, he spotted the store he'd come here for. He entered, waited in line, and as he reached the front desk he pulled the ear buds out. "Hi, my name's Damon, and I've got six bars of Goddess on hold."

The clerk was a twentysomething woman with dark eyes and voluptuous curves who Damon would have flirted with, except she seemed disinterested. Beyond "disinterested", in fact, and well into "will never, ever be interested." She turned away without another word to find Damon's order.

He waited. With the earbuds dangling from his pocket, the ubiquitous Christmas songs insinuated themselves into his ears.

*"...all is calm, all is bright..."*

*"...the stars are bright and shining..."*

*"...O star of wonder, star of night..."*

Damon abruptly blinked and looked around the store. Nothing had changed—the line still wound behind him, the clerk was still going through a hold area looking for his Goddess bars—but he felt as if time had rushed past him. How many songs had he heard? The lyrics had all meshed in his mind into one great cacophony of cheer and starry brightness. He felt something warm on his face, and reached up to find a small trickle running from a corner of his mouth. He was *drooling?*

Wiping the spit away, Damon glanced around. No one noticed. In fact, all the other shoppers in the candy store had the same vacant, glassy-eyed expression that those in line for Santa had possessed.

Damon's heart began to hammer. Something was seriously fucked up with these people, this place. He nearly turned and ran from the store, but he remembered Ashley, how much she wanted this candy. How much he wanted to make her happy. How much he loved her.

His hands seemed to be weighted down with stones. He struggled to move them just enough to find the earbuds, to raise them to his ears, plant the buds –

Reality rushed back in, borne on the shoulders of guitar riffs and drum beats. Damon sucked in air, his heart pounding, fingers shaking. What the fuck had just happened?

His head jerked around, seeking some source of explanation, or even just something to ground him.

Everyone in the store was staring at him. The clerk stood behind the counter, holding his chocolate bars. She stared at him, the stony, vapid look now burdened with accusation. Her mouth was moving, and Damon realized she was talking to him, but he couldn't hear her over the metal thundering against his eardrums.

Dazed, he held out his debit card. She took it, sullenly. A few seconds later, she slid a pinpad across the counter top. Damon's fingers were still quivering, but he punched in his PIN. The register spit out a receipt, the clerk bagged his bars, and slid them across the counter. He took the bag, not bothering to smile or thank her, and turned.

The crowd behind him didn't move. They formed a solid wall between Damon and the exit from the store.

He couldn't hear himself say, "Excuse me," but he felt their reluctance when he pushed against them. They gave way, barely—it was like pushing through close-packed mannequins. Damon half expected to see them reach for him, to feel their hands close around his wrists, his neck...

He reached the exit and staggered out into the mall, his grip sweaty on his plastic bag full of overpriced candy. He had to restrain an urge to run, wildly, ramming his way through the masses of late shoppers, heading for whatever way led out to the parking lot and the real world.

Instead he walked, carefully, the metal blasting in his 'buds, his throat dry. He didn't know what was wrong in this place, but he sensed that he had barely escaped its grasp and it would be unforgiving if it caught him again –

Something clamped onto Damon's shoulder. He stopped, tensing.

A large man in a security guard's uniform stepped in front of Damon. The man's mouth moved. Damon couldn't hear him. The guard reached up and plucked the earbuds out. He wrapped them around a bulky fist and yanked; Damon's phone flew from his shirt pocket and hit the tiled floor.

*"...the stars in the sky look down..."*

*"...save us all from Satan's power..."*

*"...join the chorus..."*

Damon's will retreated to a small, dark corner of his consciousness. From there he observed, helpless, as the guard led his body to the end of the long line for Santa.

*No! Don't get in line. RUN!*

But Damon no longer owned his flesh. He saw through the eyes, heard through the ears, lived through all the other senses, but he could command none of it.

Like all the others, he realized. Something had happened to all of them. *All of US.*

The bag of candy still dangled from his fingers as the line crawled slowly forward. At some point, he wondered how long he'd been here, waiting. It seemed like hours, but he'd lost awareness of time along with everything else that had been taken from him.

A step...another step...now he was within sight of the building, the gaudy façade labeled "Santa's Workshop". Fresh dread descended, covering the last of his self like a shroud.

Whatever had done this to him was in that ridiculous cardboard shed, with its faux snow and oversized elfin sentries. He tried not to imagine being five again, Mother shrieking ("Smile, Damon—SMILE!") as a huge, white-bearded face loomed over him, filling him with terror.

Only four were in front of him now. A young mother holding the hand of her taciturn child was led in...a business man in an overcoat, carrying a gift wrapped in foil and velvet ribbon...a teenage girl lugging a large bag bearing the name of a trendy clothing store...

Damon waited at the knee-high picket fence surrounding the shed. He heard nothing from within the cardboard shack, no barrel-chested laughs nor words. Nothing. From this vantage, he saw only part of the wall inside –

The "elves" stepped aside, and Damon's feet carried him forward, into "Santa's Workshop."

The interior seemed impossibly bigger than it could have been; it was the size of a garage, with two steps leading up to a dais at one end. A huge, old-fashioned wingback chair, throne-like in its proportions and design, rested atop the dais. And what rested atop the chair...

It wasn't human, and Damon couldn't even have called it animal. It seemed to be made of ice, with cloudy parts and clear parts, catching gleams of light that it reflected back in an eye-piercing bluish gleam. Spikes (icicles?) radiated from a central core, all moving independently.

It was more like a glistening star than anything living.

Damon abruptly felt it in his skull, as if it stood next to him in a small room; he knew, instinctively, that it would never leave. It communicated to him without words, making him understand that it had come from somewhere else, a place so alien to his world that to see it even for a second would drive Damon mad. That place—so outside of everything known, everything *sane*—was failing, not so much dying as disintegrating. The things—like this one—that had abided there had fled, to different parts of the multiverse, and this one had arrived here. It needed energy—the energy of warm, living creatures—energy that would make it expand, grow, until it would fill everything with itself.

Part of Damon shrieked and flailed, but it was a part buried so far down that it could never rise again. The crystalline, ancient *thing* had taken control of the mall's guests via the music, and now they would be its emissaries into the outer world. Damon stepped helplessly forward, his hands lifting the bag of chocolate to the ice-thing, to the *master*. It reached out and tapped the bag, filling the contents with itself. Damon, like all the others, would carry its essence forth, spreading the gospel of domination throughout the world. A coat, blessed by *it*, would be put on along with *its* essence. A book would place alien words in the reader's mind. A game would play those who received it.

Damon's time was done. He left through a door at the rear of the cardboard house; behind him, he was dimly aware that the next carrier had already entered.

He strode through the mall, no longer minding the crowds or the music. What shared his mind now had driven out the fear, the individual anxiety, and replaced it with calm conformity. Damon exited the mall, walking through the parking lot, not noticing that it was full night now. He didn't feel the cold, even when the snow began to fall.



He thought only of how, soon, Ashley would eat her Goddess chocolate and join them.

## BLIND STAMPED

“Blind stamped: Impressions in the bindings of books which are not colored... “  
*Book Collecting: A Comprehensive Guide* by Allen Ahearn

Nathaniel Watson didn't believe in ghosts before he met Rick Herson. Then Rick died.



Grendel's Bookshop was two-and-a-half years old when Rick Herson began frequenting it.

Nathaniel knew him as a buyer first; it wasn't until much later that he began selling his books. His tastes were wide-ranging and unpredictable; it wasn't unusual for him to spend several hundred dollars in an afternoon, the box he eventually carried out the door containing everything from 19th-century worm-eaten histories to signed modern fiction first editions. Nathaniel would have been happy to hold books for one of his best customers, to give him the initial chance at new arrivals, but there was simply no predicting the man's interests.

Nathaniel - although he was Nate to his friends, he secretly preferred the more literary full name - depended on customers such as Rick Herson for his very survival. He had opened his used bookstore with nothing but a love of books, some knowledge of carpentry, and five thousand used volumes bought cheaply from a firm that specialized in cleaning out delinquent storage units. He'd bided his time, working for other booksellers, until he'd found an ideal space, one that offered both the possibility for growth and high visibility. He'd used his woodworking skills on shelving, fixtures and his own living space, located in a walled-off corner of his store. He worked seven days a week; when he was closed on Mondays, he was out scouting thrift stores, estate sales and other shops. On good days he made \$300; fortunately he lived cheaply, falling onto his futon mattress in a state of happy exhaustion most nights.

But by the beginning of his second year, he was beginning to grow anxious about his business. His profits hadn't blossomed the way he'd hoped and planned for; some weeks his internet sales kept him from closing, and he began to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake in opening a retail storefront. He knew other booksellers who had closed their shops and gone entirely electronic.

Nathaniel, however, believed in something he could only describe as the sanctity of the bookseller. He'd always thought there were two kinds of business that truly served a community as a meeting place, and he wasn't interested in being a bartender. That left only bookselling, and he loved books. He loved all

kinds of books, and not just for the marvels contained within them (although he had named his bookshop after the villain in his favorite epic poem, as well as the anti-hero in a John Gardner novel). He loved the feel of their bindings, whether plain cloth or embossed leather; he

loved their pages, the way text stood out on yellowing paper; he loved their scent, a sweet aroma redolent with age and poignant decay. He'd often wished he could write, to offer up his own visions and secret knowledge; but his few attempts had been pathetic, and he realized it. If he couldn't sell a book as a writer, he could as a bookseller.

So he had chosen to exchange one dream for another, but now that dream was fading. Even his interest in the books themselves was dying; he struggled against thinking of them as mere product, as nothing more than tomorrow's lunch or next month's rent. And it wasn't just the lack of increasing profits that made him despair; it was also the barrage of requests for insipid bestsellers and used textbooks and computer manuals.

Rick Herson never asked for any of those things. In fact, he rarely spoke at all during his afternoons inside Grendel's; he quietly roamed from section to section, occasionally adding another book to his growing stack on the front counter. When he was finished, he paid in cash, nodded as Nathaniel handed

over his box of purchases, and then left. Even so, Nathaniel looked forward to his visits, not only for the sales he would garner but, more simply, to see whether his customer was purchasing Aristotle, Arthur Rackham or Le Fanu on that particular afternoon.

After a year, though, Rick Herson stopped coming in. It took Nathaniel a while to realize it. Late one night, sprawled on his futon going over his spreadsheets, he tried to figure out why business was down from the same time last year. He looked at his daily logs, and saw that there were none of the three-digit sales provided by the man who, at that point, was still nameless to him. He wondered how much longer he could stay in business; many nights he simply couldn't sleep, and even a good book wouldn't hold his interest. He'd stay up all night, staring at a soundless television set, brooding.

Then a few weeks later Rick Herson reappeared, except this time he was carrying a box into the store.

Nathaniel almost told him how good it was to see him again, but then he looked at Rick Herson more closely and couldn't lie: The man was plainly very ill. His hair had thinned considerably, his skin had taken on the color and texture of old vellum, his cheeks were sunken.

He had a small box of books that first time, no more than fifteen or twenty. He said he needed cash. Nathaniel didn't question; he looked over the books, slightly disappointed over the fairly-common titles. He made a small offer, which Herson accepted with no argument. He had Herson fill out a receipt, and paid him. He saw that the man walked now with a leaden quality, as if it was difficult for him to lift his feet. Nathaniel also noticed the way he forced his eyes to the front, refusing to allow himself the distraction of glancing at the aisles of books on either side of him.

After Herson left, Nathaniel studied the slip, making out the name and then rolling it slowly over on his tongue. Now his mystery man had a name... and Nathaniel couldn't quite understand why he felt so saddened to learn it.



Rick Herson sold more books over the next few months, sometimes bringing two boxes, although usually his stamina didn't seem to allow for more than one. The books seemed to get slightly better, but Rick didn't. Sometime about his fifth or sixth load, Nathaniel began to smell him - a scent of mixed physical ruin and astringent chemicals. He finally understood: The man was dying.

He wanted to ask why. If there was any hope. If he could help. But somehow the relationship they had defined long before didn't allow for such informalities.

Nathaniel hadn't had much experience dealing with death, at least not actual experience gained from something other than a book. His parents (who had never forgiven him for dropping out of college when he'd become bored with his business classes) were still alive; his grandparents had either died when he was very young or before he was born. He'd had one friend in high school who had shot himself, but Nathaniel had never seen the body and to this day - ten years later - he didn't quite believe his friend was really dead. Nathaniel had no siblings and few friends; he'd been too involved with his fledgling career to have time for socializing.

So Rick Herson - who he couldn't even say he really knew - was the first person he'd seen who was actually dying, who was approaching death rapidly. Nathaniel still looked forward to his visits, but now he feared them as well; he feared seeing what new horror had been wrought on Herson's weakening frame.

When Rick went completely bald, Nathaniel guessed it was some sort of cancer. When he could no longer lift a box from the trunk of his car, Nathaniel guessed the chemotherapy wasn't working.

Ironically, as Rick Herson died a little more, his books became fuller and richer. One trip might provide a first edition of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the next, a printing of *Treasure Island* with color plate illustrations by N. C. Wyeth.

Nathaniel paid him well for the books; truthfully, he paid more than he should have, because the books were not in fine condition. In fact, every single book had small, neat, handwritten notes on the rear endpapers. Sometimes the pencilled notations were brief biographies of the author or bibliographies of other works; but sometimes they were commentaries on the work, which Nathaniel found fascinating. James Blake Bailey's early 19th-century account of bodysnatching in London, *Diary of a Resurrectionist*

*1811-1812*, held a short essay on how conditions in pre-Victorian Britain rendered corpse-selling not only undetectable but even desirable. A biography of the brilliant American filmmaker Preston Sturges contained only the wry comment that Sturges and his comic peers probably did as much to get the U.S. out of the Depression as FDR did. Nathaniel knew he could easily have taken an eraser to the damaging writings, but somehow the metaphor of rubbing out a man's thoughts was too cruel, so he took the slight loss and sold each book "as is".

Herson's last box was small - evidently he couldn't lift more than five or six books now - but extraordinary: A first edition of Baum's *The Road to Oz*, with color plates; an 18th-century travelogue distinguished by its fore-edge painting, a tiny landscape visible only when the pages were fanned in a certain way; a huge leatherbound family bible from 1888, with decorated covers and brass hinges and ornate clasp; an early hardback printing of Kenneth Patchen's poetry; and a signed first in dust jacket of Ray Bradbury's *Dark Carnival*.

But it wasn't the box of books that initially drew Nathaniel's attention - it was Rick himself. He was walking with a cane, and his hands were covered with needle marks. His skin looked brittle, like pages from a musty-smelling pulp paperback.

Nathaniel didn't believe he could live very long.

He was right; Rick Herson died two weeks later.



Of course Nathaniel didn't know that at first. Every day that Rick failed to appear advanced his suspicion, but he'd always felt melancholy when he realized that this man would simply fail to appear in his shop again. Nathaniel would never attend a funeral or meet his loved ones, he'd never have the chance to discuss Rick's books with him, to ask him about some of the curious annotations he'd scribbled.

Then came the afternoon when he received the phone call. The voice belonged to an annoyed-sounding middle-aged woman with a slight, unplaceable accent; she said she managed an apartment building where a tenant had just died, and he'd left nothing behind but books. The books had to be cleared out immediately; she'd called him because she found his store's bookmarks in some of the books.

They set up an appointment, she told him where to come. After he hung up, he dug out one of Rick Herson's receipts, and felt dread clutch his spine when he saw the addresses matched.

He closed the store for the afternoon, loaded his van with boxes, and drove to the apartment building. It was nearby, a small two-story building with a courtyard in the middle that the management believed had earned them the right to call the units "garden apartments". Rick Herson lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the lower level. Nathaniel was glad the man hadn't had to endure the additional struggle of climbing stairs, towards the end.

He met the obese, middle-aged landlady near the front, and she took him to the apartment, complaining about how quickly she must clean the unit out. Then she unlocked the door to the apartment - #4 - and Nathaniel stepped inside.

The first thing that occupied his senses was the odor - it was that miasma of sickness and chemicals that had surrounded Rick Herson for the last month, only amplified. Then he realized what he was looking at, and forgot the smell or the droning sound of the landlady's voice.

The apartment was filled with books. Literally filled, with just narrow pathways between towering walls of books. He thought 10,000 might be a conservative guess.

He turned to the stack nearest him, scanned a few titles - and felt his heart skip a beat. Even though the books were stacked in a way that virtually guaranteed damage, even though he knew that each book held the previous owner's penciled thoughts... he knew he was looking at the most astonishing private collection of books he would ever see.

He reached to the top of the nearest stack, and pulled down a 1717 folio edition of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Below it was an 1820 edition of Poe's *Tamarlane and Minor Poems*. A few books down he saw a copy of *The Hobbit* that he guessed to be the 1937 British first edition.

At some point he realized the landlady was asking him a question, and he forced himself to focus on her voice. Were all of these old books actually worth anything?, she wondered. A rambling diatribe against crazy dying old men who filled their apartments with books followed the query.

Nathaniel assured her the collection was worth something, and he ventured further in. There was Tacitus' *The Description of Germanie* in a 1604 folio; there was a 1649 octavo by Rene Descartes; there was a first American edition of Philip K. Dick's *Ubik*.

Nathaniel knew this collection was completely out of his league; it belonged with a major auction house, or a high-end dealer in rare books. He asked the landlady when she needed the books gone. She replied, By tomorrow.

He knew it was impossible. He also knew he had to have the collection.

Going through the books one by one in the apartment was out of the question. Was there any family?, he asked, hoping to find someone other than the scornful landlady to deal with; but the tenant had no kin, leaving the apartment owners to dispose of his goods. Nathaniel told the landlady he could write her a check for a thousand right now, as a sort of down payment on a consignment deal. Her only response was to ask if he meant a thousand *dollars*?

He wrote the check, and then began filling boxes. He filled his truck eight times, and the books took up every spare inch of his store, including the attic.

On his last trip, free from the doleful presence of the landlady, he gave in to curiosity and toured the rest of the apartment. There wasn't much to see; behind the towers of books there were a few pieces of old, badly scarred furniture. No television. A fifteen-year old compact stereo with plastic speakers. The landlady had already cleaned out the kitchen and the bedroom closets. He asked the landlady where the tenant had died, for some reason expecting the bedroom, but of course the man had been comatose in a hospital bed when he'd passed away.

Finally Nathaniel finished hauling his boxes out, and he told the landlady he would call her when the books sold; she didn't seem to care, and Nathaniel realized he wouldn't call. He didn't think Rick Herson would have wanted that woman or the faceless corporation that owned the building to have any of the proceeds from the books.

They simply didn't deserve to profit from the last vestiges of Rick's life.



Nathaniel indulged in a bottle of champagne that night. He was aching from moving the books, and was both wary and exhilarated by their presence now in his store. He opened the champagne, toasted the books, and drank right from the bottle, a deep pull that immediately melted the rough corners of his anxieties.

He plucked a book at random, took it back to his living area, flopped down on the futon and saw he had a 1944 limited edition of Aleister Crowley's *The Book of Thoth*. It was halfbound in morocco leather, and would bring an outrageous price, even worn as this copy was. He opened the back cover, and saw Herson's neat, cramped writing. It covered not just the endpapers but the blanks at the rear of the book as well, giving a brief biography of Crowley and ending with a story about how he had once calmly bitten a beautiful girl, whom he did not know, in public.

Nathaniel finished the bottle and was asleep five minutes later, the book sprawled on the floor beside him, his small reading light still on.

Something woke him up. He didn't know how much later it was; his head was spinning from the alcohol, but at some point he had turned the light off. He lay there for a moment, listening. And heard very clearly the sound of a book being closed, from somewhere out in the main room of the store.

He sat up abruptly, tasting bile in the back of his throat, but it was now inspired by fear, not liquor. His first thought was that he had forgotten to lock up, but then he clearly recalled checking the front doors when he had left for the apartment. He thought it was possible he might have forgotten to lock the back door, however, so he rose as carefully as he could. He stood in the darkness for a moment, straining, listening, but there was no other sound.

He kept a baseball bat - an old-fashioned solid wooden bat, not one of the new aluminum ones - by the front counter, and he headed that way now, tiptoeing in stocking feet. As he reached the doorway to the main room, he edged carefully around the stacks, found the bat and felt its reassuring heft in his hand. Then he stepped more boldly into the aisles, and walked to the main lightswitch.

He flipped it on, and squinted, his eyes working frantically to adjust.

The room was empty.

He walked through the aisles carefully, checking in the bathroom and under the counter, but there was no one. The doors were all locked.

There was a book on the front counter, though, that he didn't remember putting there.

Of course there were books stacked on the counter, just as there were books stacked everywhere else in this store. But one book lay by itself, open to the rear endpapers. Nathaniel had no memory of having left the book there. He closed it and turned it to see the title: *True and Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Years Between Dr. John Dee and Some Spirits*. It was an extravagantly bound reprint that still smelled slightly of sickness.

In fact, Nathaniel noticed the scent strongly now, all around him. When he shivered, he realized it was also cold in the room. Of course it was after 4 a.m., and he was about to suffer a considerable hangover... But he'd been drunk in his store late at night before, and this felt different.

He opened the book again, to the rear endpapers. This inscription was different, only one word long, phrasing a single question:

*True?*

He finally returned to his bed, but passed the rest of the evening with the lights on.



He spent the next week trying to decide how to handle the collection. He thought about passing the whole thing over to an auction house, but at last decided to catalogue it himself. He knew it would take months, possibly years of work, but it was work that would keep him alive, perhaps even allow him to finally see some black in his ledger.

And so he began, scrutinizing each book, researching values, verifying editions and dates, noting condition and defects. On a good day he could work through no more than 50 titles; on busy days - which he began to see more of - he was lucky to manage 10. In the meantime, there were no more strange sounds or misplaced books, and he forgot about the first occurrence... especially when the books began to sell.

The first order was for the 1934 limited edition of *Lysistrata*, signed by its illustrator, Picasso. Even though he knew the book was well worth it, actually seeing the amount written out on an invoice astonished him. He packed the book carefully, sealing it inside layers of cardboard and paper, and finally closed up late. He was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

What woke him up this night was nothing as gentle as the soft thump of a book cover closing. It was, rather, the sounds of violent ripping and tearing.

He sat bolt upright, his heart triphammering as he listened. He didn't have to strain to hear these noises, of paper being shredded, and the distinctive shrill pitch of packing tape torn apart.

It went on for perhaps seven or eight seconds - which felt like years to Nathaniel - then stopped.

The silence was just as ominous as the sound. Nathaniel waited, expecting more, but nothing came. After a frozen moment, he forced himself up, not even bothering with clothes. In nothing but sweatpants he slowly opened the door leading into the shop. He hesitated there, listening for voices or footfalls, but nothing came.

He debated calling 911, but decided against it when he realized he didn't know what to tell them. If they instructed him to get out of the store, he'd have to pass through the front room anyway.

He stepped into that room, and was struck immediately by the cold and the scent, stronger now than he'd ever smelled it, even when Rick Herson was alive. He moved stealthily through the dark stacks, finding his way by heart and fingertip, breath held in anticipation of bumping against a crouching body... but there was no one. Finally he flipped on the lightswitch.

Nothing was out of place. There was no human intruder, no evidence, no mangled books.

He searched for fifteen minutes, but - aside from the cold and the scent, which seemed to be fading now - there was nothing. He finished and leaned against the front counter, and his arm bumped something.

It was the box holding the sold copy of *Lysistrata*, waiting to be mailed in the morning.

The box was impossibly cold to the touch, almost freezing.

He picked the box up, ignoring the way his fingertips almost burned from the chill. He turned the box over carefully, but saw his neat packing job was completely intact. Still, he had heard the sounds of packing tape tearing, of paper padding being ripped...

That was the first time Nathaniel Watson seriously began to consider the possibility of ghosts.



Over the next six weeks, there were three more "disturbances". Once, while still up and working late, Nathaniel heard footsteps in the attic. When he climbed up to look, there was, of course, no one there. Another time, he and a friend actually saw a book float three inches into the air, then set gently back down. The weirdest and last involved a pile of books he'd been cataloguing; when he awoke the next day, he saw that the books had all been moved back into the towering stack from which he'd pulled them. On these occasions, the room was cold and suffused with the acrid scent of Rick Herson.

Nathaniel was neither a superstitious man, nor a gullible one. In his mind he mocked patrons who bought from his New Age and Occult sections, and who sometimes espoused their personal beliefs at length. If asked for his opinion, he derided everything from UFO's to belief in an omnipotent being.

But there was simply no rational explanation for what was happening in his store. If the first night had been some sort of alcohol-fueled hallucination, the other incidents had been observed under sober conditions, and in one instance corroborated by a witness.

Nathaniel began to dread his store.

Before purchasing Herson's collection, Nathaniel had considered closing his shop because business was down and showed no signs of improving. Now his business was healthier than it had ever been, and he was considering closing the shop because it was... well, haunted.



He knew he could just sell the Herson collection, that Grendel's could go back to the way it had been before... but somehow he didn't think that the - *happenings* would cease just because the books were dispersed.

More importantly... his store wasn't the only thing that was haunted.

Nathaniel devoured every book in his store that made mention of ghosts, apparitions, poltergeists, life after death, parapsychologists and supernatural forces. He read (or reread) *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Haunting of Hill House*. The novels did their job superbly, and left him even more unnerved.

Finally he dug out a copy of his lease, and resolved to call the landlord in the morning; he knew he would be heavily penalized for breaking his five-year lease two years early, but he thought he could afford it now, ironically due to Rick Herson.

Sleep wouldn't come that night, and Rick opened the bottle of tequila he touched once every few months. After a few shots his thoughts grew pleasantly unfocused, and he finally drifted off.

What woke him this time was no sound, but the vapor-producing chill, the stench, and the overwhelming presence of something. Nathaniel was still drunk, and was glad - the alcohol was a slight shield. He sat up and looked out towards the store; he'd left the door open, and could see a faint light coming from the main room, a mild phosphorescence.

His stomach tightened and Nathaniel was suddenly leaning over, the tequila burning its way back up his throat to spill out in a steaming froth. When it was over and he could breathe again, he staggered to his feet. Now he was drunk, he was sick, he was scared - and he was angry. He wanted to act on that most primitive of impulses, to lash out violently. He heard a hoarse, incoherent shout issue from his lips, and then was surprised to find that his feet were carrying him towards the main room. Where he had left the lease, lying on the front counter.

He entered the main room, and couldn't immediately see anything, his view blocked by columns of books; but the sensations were stronger here, the glimmer in the air brighter, and even in his drunkenness he was beginning to regret his actions. He could still turn around, go back to his little cubicle and close the door, turn on all the lights, call his landlord in the morning...

Or he could face his demons, figuratively and literally.

So he inched forward, slowly, stealthily, as though one could creep up, unseen, on an unreal dead thing. He shivered as he moved inch by inch, his breath vaporizing, his bitter stomach clenching on nothingness.

Then he was around a corner, and staring at the impossible.

Rick Herson stood in his store, calmly reading one of his books, even though there was no other light. At first Nathaniel was surprised at how solid Rick looked, then he realized that Rick was transparent, the stacks vaguely visible behind him. The apparition took no notice of him, intent upon its reading.

Rick stood there in shock for a moment; then his heart found its pace again, as he sensed that the spirit was completely disinterested in him. He also realized something else:

The ghost of Rick Herson was beautiful.

This was neither the man who had been dying of a pathetically degenerative disease, nor was it the small, soundless customer who would have disappeared in a crowd. This Rick Herson - and it was undeniably him - was somehow fuller, even healthier. The glow seemed to pour from him as if he simply couldn't contain his own great energies. When his hand moved to turn

a page, he shimmered, and Nathaniel had to look away for a moment. When he looked back, Rick was still there, engrossed.

Nathaniel watched the ghost for nearly ten minutes. Finally the shade put down the book and walked into the stacks of his library, vanishing. The cold, the smell, and the charge in the air disappeared with him.

Nathaniel stood for a long time, knowing that the ghost was unlikely to return this night, but unwilling to move yet. He was sober now, not from fear but from what he could only think of as wonder.

When he could move, he turned on the lights and did two things: The second was to file the lease back in its manila folder inside his cabinet. The first was to pick up the book Herson had been reading. He expected something ethereal, Edgar Cayce or Israel Regardie or even F. Marion Crawford.

Instead it was Lewis Carroll - *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Nathaniel laughed when he saw the title. Herson had returned from the dead not to study or be enlightened, but to be entertained. Nathaniel flipped excitedly to the back of the book, and was at first disappointed to see the blank endpapers. Then he thought more about it, and finally decided that Rick Herson simply wasn't done yet.

This time Nathaniel didn't mind the idea that Rick would be back.



He never saw Rick again, not with the clarity of that one vision, at least. He still occasionally heard the footsteps, found the misplaced books, put on an extra blanket to ward off the cold. But he found these happenings soothing now, and wondered why he'd ever found them terrifying.

He used the profits from the Herson collection to expand his store and hire real employees. He considered moving into his own apartment or house, but he didn't want to leave the books. Not yet.

Nathaniel never did catalogue the volumes that had blank rear endpapers. He had a special case built for them, and they waited in his store, untouched, pristine. Sometimes hungry collectors inquired about them; he politely declined all offers. He didn't bother to try to explain why.

The one other witness to the haunting of Grendel's Bookshop - the friend who had once viewed a book levitation - spent one long dinner trying to convince Nathaniel to write his own book about ghosts. He could make Grendel's famous, the friend argued.

Nathaniel heard him out, but finally declined the suggestion. He didn't tell his friend that he was afraid no one would believe him, because he didn't really care; he didn't even say that he didn't want to have his secret revealed, although that would have been partly true.

He finally smiled slowly, and told his friend that he didn't have any interest in writing a book, because of one very simple thing he'd learned from Rick Herson:

What a writer brought to a book didn't matter as much as what the reader contributed.

Grendel's Bookshop enjoyed a long and successful life.

## SILVER NITRATE BLUES

*It's cold tonight. Appropriate for the last night of this year,* Peter thinks as he leads her to the converted warehouse. Steam rises from vents in the manhole covers. The air overhead is thick, dully reflecting the light of the city. He thinks he hears thunder rumble somewhere far off, probably over the suburbs. He tries to stifle another shiver and pulls his thick, quilted jacket tighter around him. He glances at her filthy sweatshirt and wonders how she can stay warm with just that on.

His building is twelve stories high, an ancient structure which has housed, in the past, sweatshops, bookie dens, insurance salesmen, a pen factory, and storage for offices in newer buildings; now it holds artists' lofts, including his own. The city declared this whole dingy area to be under "community redevelopment" a decade ago, but somehow most of the proposed funds remained only proposed. The redevelopment closed most of the businesses and then brought in no one but artists struggling too hard to be able to afford anything better. And, of course, the homeless and the streetpeople.

Still, Peter likes to think the building has "character". There are brick archways above the outer entrances. Gargoyles peer into the night, spaced every three floors. During rainstorms they actually perform their function, siphoning water away from the building, spewing it down to the streets through their stone mouths.

There's an old freight elevator that occasionally works, but Peter lives on the third floor and prefers the stairs. He asks her if she minds the climb. She just starts up the stairs. He takes that for a "no".

He leads her down a dimly-lit corridor past scratched wooden doors and a rickety fire-escape (probably more treacherous than a burning building). He's already apologizing, nervous, as he unlocks his own door.

"It's a loft, you know, they designated the whole building for artists a few years ago. It's got lots of space, but it's a little short on some of the—uh—luxuries..."

He reaches in for the light switch and then steps aside to let her enter. She does and stops just inside, looking around.

Peter shuts the door and walks past her, still babbling. "See, I—uh—live here, too. I'm not quite well-known enough yet to be able to pay for both a place to live and a studio."

He follows her gaze, seeing the usual melange of battered furniture, empty food cartons, crumpled clothing, and the real stuff of his life: The Hasselblads, Nikons, work station computers, lenses, strobe lights, tripods, umbrellas, backdrops, slave units. There are proof prints and head shots taped to the walls. A bulky printer balanced on a scarred, hand-built table hums softly, waiting.

He looks at her in the light for the first time.

He sees now that he underestimated the warmth of her clothing—there are layers and layers, the outermost obviously far too big for her. The clothes are so stained and ragged it's hard to tell what their original shade might have been. Her face is smudged, her hair stringy... and yet there beneath the outer shell is what attracted him to her on the street, a radiance about her, a beauty that makes both his anxious chatter and his breath momentarily cease. Beneath the dark hair her skin is like cream. Porcelain. *No*, he thinks, *the perfect smoke of an exquisite incense.*

Peter smiles at his own little poetry before remembering why he brought her here.  
“Please, make yourself at—“

He catches himself—releasing the next word would have been wildly inappropriate given her circumstances. She doesn’t seem to have noticed; is, rather, examining a series of shots Peter took last summer of a young dancer.

“I mean, relax. Can I get you something? I don’t have much to eat, you’re probably hungry -”

“I’m not.”

It’s the first thing he’s heard her say. He was beginning to wonder if she was mute. When he’d initially explained his interest in her and asked if she would sit for him, she had only risen from the sidewalk and indicated a willingness to follow him. His mind had half-constructed an elaborate background for her: Deaf-mute child, in and out of foster homes, ignored by the state, finally left as an adult to fend for herself on the street... Now his fantasies are made largely ridiculous by a voice as pale and smooth as her skin. It startles him for a moment, that voice.

“Oh.” Then he recovers and goes on. “A drink? Coffee, tea—”

“Thank you, no.”

Her circumspection continues on to the portraits of the famous tagger that were printed in the paper’s supplementary Sunday magazine several years ago.

*My god, she’s beautiful.*

When he finds himself lost in that single thought, he moves to place a stool carefully before a softly-shaded backdrop. He switches on the power pack, adjusts the lights and the shades, turns on the Nikon.

“So, have you ever been photographed? I mean, professionally.”

“I’m not sure...”

Peter glances up at that as he finishes with the camera, examining readings on the LCD screen. “You’d remember if you’d been in a studio like this one, wouldn’t you?”

“I haven’t.”

“Really? That almost surprises me.”

Now she turns to look at him and he loses his train of thought, sinking into her eyes. They don’t match the face or voice—they’re black, no color at all, just black pools that could lead anywhere, and Peter is in them and they lead to—

“Why?”

The question pulls him back out, jarring him. “Why... well, you know—the way you look.”

“How do you mean?”

Peter avoids those eyes, busying himself with finding his light meter. “When I saw you there on the corner, your face lit by the overhead street lamp, the blanket pulled up under your chin, I thought you looked like—well, an angel.”

He feels his face flush at the admission.

She smiles slightly, amused. “Me? An angel?”

Peter doesn’t want her to be amused, damn it, he meant it. “Yes. If there could be such a thing as a New Year sidewalk angel... it’s why I had to shoot you. For my blog.”

His fingers deftly manipulate a mouse, a new screen comes on the main monitor, he shows her. At the top of the screen is a header that reads *Silver Nitrate Blues*; contained in its slideshow are portraits of shop owners and street vendors, cops and criminals, drunks and

politicians, gangbangers and valedictorians, movie stars and matrons, doctors and accident victims.

She takes control of the mouse, flipping through the gallery; he takes her interest in the work for approval. "It's getting good traffic."

She stops at a picture of a tiny blond girl holding a wriggling baby snake. "I met an angel once. She gave me this necklace because I told her I thought it was pretty."

She releases the mouse and digs under the sweatshirt to produce a string of beads unlike any Peter has ever seen. That's why he imagines they're some sort of cheap synthetics.

She peers at the necklace herself, remembering. "At least I think it was an angel..."

Peter laughs nervously. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"Maybe you've just never seen one before."

Peter looks into the achingly-lovely face, can see only honesty there, but then reminds himself: *She's homeless. Possibly deranged or drugged...*

"Yeah, uh... might as well get set up."

He moves to snap his favorite portraiture lens onto the Nikon and she watches, curious. "That looks like an expensive camera."

Peter, proud of his equipment, answers, "It is."

Then he circles back to his last thought about her and amends, "I mean, it wouldn't fetch much in resale, though, not since the new Nikon series—"

"I'm not going to steal it."

Peter feigns surprise. "Oh, I didn't mean—"

"Yes you did." She locks that bottomless stare on him and advances one step. "You don't trust me, do you?"

Peter considers another small lie, but realizes she'd see through that, too. "No, I suppose I don't."

"I won't steal from you." She turns away from him; then, idly, "I might kill you, though."

Peter's heart skips a warning beat. "You're kidding."

"You don't know me. All you know is that you picked me up on a street corner on New Year's Eve."

"I did not pick you up."

She turns that same critical eye on him that she formerly used on his work. "Are you straight?"

"I'm a photographer—"

"So you're gay?"

Peter almost responds in anger, but senses her deliberation, that she's provoking him. "I really just want to take your picture."

"And then you really just want me to leave."

He reaches for his wallet. "I'm going to pay you for this, you know."

He shoves five twenties at her. She pushes his hand aside in disinterest. "I don't need your money."

"My money? You were on the street begging. What's the difference between my money and anyone else's?"

"Maybe I'm here for another reason."

The chill racing down Peter's spine has nothing to do with the December night. "What reason?"

She gestures at the Nikon. “Go ahead, finish setting up your camera.”

She seats herself on the stool and waits patiently. Peter moves quickly, finishing with lens and hood and then waving his light meter in the air near her face, a magician making magickal passes.

Except this magician stops and frowns, the magick evidently askew. “Shit... “

“What?” she asks.

“Light meter must be fucked up.”

He adjusts the lights, tries again. “Damn it.”

“Maybe it’s not your light meter,” she offers.

Peter is bringing two additional lights to bear. “No, I just need more light.”

He tries the meter reading on himself. “Okay, meter’s working.” Then he moves the meter over her again. This time the results make him stare at her and back away. “I can’t get enough light on you. It’s impossible, as if you’re absorbing it... “

“Like a black hole.”

“A black hole?”

Her tone is teacher with young, stubborn child. “A rip in the universe. A hole in reality.”

Peter gapes openly. “And that’s you?”

Matter-of-factly: “Yes.”

Peter barks one sharp laugh before asking, “And why is that?”

“Because I shouldn’t be here.”

He is beginning to agree. “In my studio?”

“In your world.”

Junkies, overcrowded mental facilities dumping their excess psychotics... Peter snaps the camera off. “Maybe this was a bad idea. Take the money anyway... “

He tries the bills again. She ignores them completely this time, gesturing at his computer. “What about your blog?”

“I’m having a problem with my meter anyway. I’m sorry I took up your time, just take the money and go—”

She cuts him off. “You can’t send me away, Peter.”

“When did I tell you my name?”

“It was on your blog.”

He nods, feeling like a sucker in a three-shell game. He shoves the money back into his wallet, wallet back into pocket. “What is it, you need some place to spend the night?”

“I do... and this is it.”

Peter’s had enough, what with everything that’s already happened today. He strides angrily across the room to the door. “That’s it, I want you out of here.”

She doesn’t move, just gazes at him, cool, sardonic. “Go ahead, Peter. Be manly and throw me out.”

He considers, finally takes the challenge. He goes to her, reaches for her arm—

—and draws his fingers back in sharp alarm when they encounter such absolute chill they feel burned. He looks from his stung hand to her, shocked. “What the hell was that?!”

“Simple, Peter: I’m dead.”

He forgets his fingers, forgets the one hand still clutching the other. “You’re dead. Like a ghost?”

“Yes.”

He retreats. This can't be real. It's a bad dream, a bad joke... "You're a ghost. Sure you are. Casper the Homeless Ghost."

She appraises him from the stool. "Try Marley. Or Christmas Future."

*This is ridiculous. I'm being had by a street crazy.* "Okay, Marley, do something. Float in the air or fade out or rattle chains."

"Oh, I can rattle much more than chains." Now she steps down from her perch and saunters over to his battered, paint-splattered chest-of-drawers. "Let's talk about the gun in the top drawer. How you were going to see out the old year."

It takes a moment for this to register in Peter's stunned brain; next, he's racing across the room to the chest, wrenching the drawer out, withdrawing the neat little .38 pistol within. He whirls and points the gun at her, all instinctive animal response to threat—and terror.

She rolls her eyes. "Oh Peter, that's so passe."

Peter's hands are shaking; so is his voice. "Look, lady, I'm not fucking around here—!"

She opens her arms wide, offering herself to him. "Good, neither am I. Pull the trigger."

He screams, "I'm warning you—"

She doesn't move.

He has to make her understand—this is his home. She's homeless. They'll side with him, the ones who come to investigate. "I can claim you were an intruder, I'll get off on self-defense—"

She cuts him short, her tone abruptly wicked, inciting. "You already get off on it. Go on, you stupid fucking wimp, pull the trigger if you've got the balls."

"I will—"

Her shriek could shatter iron. "DO IT!!"

She charges him. He stumbles back, but that icy grip is around his gun hand, squeezing his trigger finger. The gun fires twice. A lamp is hit and blows out, showering sparks across a wall of black-and-white faces. Recoil throws his hands almost up to his face. He smells acrid gunpowder. He hears the other bullet thud into drywall.

She hasn't even blinked.

Peter drops the gun. His heart is pounding, flooding his veins with icewater. "It's true. Christ almighty, it's true, you really are..."

And then the wonder hits him. It's better than getting a real UFO, Bigfoot, Nessie. "Now I've got to photograph you."

Her laughter cuts his frantic actions short. "Oh Peter, get real—your meter couldn't find me, could it? I'm not going to show up on your film, either. You'll have to take somebody else's picture."

Peter turns on the Nikon and points it at her. He fires three shots. She waits while he looks through playback, seeing not black but washes of pure, blinding white. He lowers the useless camera and falls onto the couch, spent. "Then what are you doing here?"

"Perfect. When I'm not useful to you any longer, you get pissed off. That's the way it's always been, isn't that right?"

"Fine. What do you want?"

She circles until she's before him again. "This is an unusual situation, Peter. You should take full advantage of it."

"Okay. What's it like, then?"

"What?"

"You know. The other side. Death."

She's angry, her eyes twin black blazes. "Why don't you want to learn what my life was like? Do you think my death was more interesting than my life, you smug asshole?"

Peter is embarrassed, stammering again. "No, I..."

He trails off, finds himself watching her feet, wondering if they move under the long dirty skirts or just glide along the surface. He is mildly disconcerted to realize he can't tell.

"You haven't even asked my name, have you?" she demands.

He starts to answer, but she goes on, behind him now. "You never would have. You would have walked right by me on that sidewalk a thousand times and never asked my name. Because I don't really exist for you, do I? Not me, or any of the ones like me. Millions of us. You don't really notice that any of us are there, do you?"

"There are millions like you?"

He can't tell where her voice is coming from, somewhere behind him. "More every day. On every street, in every city. We didn't have any place in life and the big cosmic joke on us is that there's no place in death for us either. So here we are, on the same corners and alleys where we led our lives, and still no one sees us."

Peter twists around to look for her. "That's not fair. I saw you tonight."

She's lost in the shadows on the far side of the single room, but she comes forward now. "Yes, you did. And we both know why, don't we?"

Peter picks up the gun. He looks at it, sets it next to him on the couch. "It was just a photograph..."

"Oh, hardly 'just' a photograph. It was to be your coda, wasn't it, Peter? Your epitaph. To go with the suicide note. Proof of your great talent, your final gift to the world that never fully appreciated you. My face."

She takes her place on the stool again. "I suppose I should be flattered."

Peter gazes at her longingly. "You should. You're beautiful."

Her control falters. It's her turn to look away, her voice barely above a whisper. "I had a lover once who told me that. We were young and we thought we'd have everything. A house, car, kids, maybe an expensive camera."

She leans down and picks up the forgotten Nikon, caressing it. "A life together... do you find that hard to believe?"

Peter feels ashamed, melancholy. "No, I don't."

"He was beautiful, too."

Peter starts forward, wanting to touch her, take her hand—but he remembers he can't. "You deserve it. All of it."

"But I won't have it now. There's no love in the afterlife. Just... terrible longing."

Peter kneels below her, imploring. "What can I do? Are you supposed to help me somehow?"

The reminder of her purpose draws her back. She looks down at him. "You could say that. I'll lead you."

She rises and waits. "Now."

Peter gets to his feet, trembling. "Lead me?"

"To the other side. After..."

She nods at the couch. At what rests on the couch.

Waiting.

"Where will you lead me?"

"I can't tell you that yet."



Peter's mind is racing through scenarios, flashes, alternatives. This isn't set in stone—or pixels—is it? “What if... what if I don't do it tonight after all?”

Is that a new respect he sees flash through her black eyes for a second? “It's your choice, of course. Although your reason wasn't necessarily a bad one.”

“Of course. Of course you would know that.”

She only nods. They don't need words. Don't need to talk about what the doctors found yesterday on his spine. The nightmare he thought he'd beaten. “Remission” seems like a silly, hollow word now. “Two years,” Peter begins, his voice catching, “or you could say three years, because I went through a year of chemo and radiation and surgery before they said I was clear. I actually thought that I might be one of the lucky ones, that I might stay healthy, but then they found it yesterday, and now... oh god, now I swear I can feel it in me.”

He gazes at the computer screen, at the blog header lettered *Silver Nitrate Blues*. “Such a stupid name. I thought it was postmodern ironic—I mean, nobody shoots film anymore. But that doesn't change the work. All the work I was going to do, all the art in me that no one else will ever see now.”

“Art.” She pauses to pick up the gun. “That's hardly a reason for this.”

Peter's knees give way. He's crying now, he gives himself over to the wracking sobs. “I don't want to go through it. I know I won't survive it this time, that'll eat at me and torture me and the pain will whittle me down bit by bit until I die as something less than human...”

She actually sets the gun down and comforts him. He forgets that her touch should burn; instead it soothes. “I know. The other side is crowded with them. But... I'm something *much* less than human. At least your friends fought. So did I. But I can't now.”

Peter dries his eyes, without shame, to look at her. “How did you die?”

“Pneumonia. I didn't even live as long as you already have, Peter. I won't lie and tell you I was sorry to die. I was glad. There's no pain now.”

“That's good.” Peter leans against the sofa, smiling at her. “You never even told me your name.”

The smile she returns is grateful. “Ellen.”

Peter accepts the gift, savoring. “Ellen.”

They simply stay that way for a long time, sharing their understanding, each bathed in the bond the other has given.

Then, finally, Peter asks, “What happens now?”

Without words, Ellen takes the gun and proffers it to him.

He turns it over in his hands once, admiring its glossy black sheen, its aura of power and intent. Then he opens his mouth and rests the barrel on the edge of his lower teeth. He slides it in, another half-inch, gauging, testing... and makes his decision.

He lowers the gun, unfired.

“Ellen, I—”

He leaps to his feet, anxious to share his sudden overwhelming release with her... but she's gone.

“Ellen?”

He doesn't have to search the loft; he knows he won't find her.

He sets the gun aside and picks up the Nikon instead. He attaches it to a tripod, chooses exposure and f-stop, and then does something he hasn't done before:

He sets the camera's self-timer.

He walks to the stool and sits. He looks into the camera's lens, his own eyes steady and clear and strong. Slowly his smile broadens.

*Ellen... I will see you next time...*

In the distance he hears whoops of joy, loud pops of firecrackers. He glances at a clock. It's 12:01 a.m. The new year has arrived.

He has ten seconds until the strobes fire, but it's enough.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Morton is a screenwriter, author of non-fiction books, award-winning prose writer, and Halloween expert whose work was described by the American Library Association's *Readers' Advisory Guide to Horror* as "consistently dark, unsettling, and frightening". Her books include *Trick or Treat: A History of Halloween*, *The Samhanach and Other Halloween Treats*, *Calling the Spirits: A History of Seances*, and *The Art of the Zombie Movie*. Lisa lives in Los Angeles and online at [www.lisamorton.com](http://www.lisamorton.com).