



THE ENGLISH FACULTY PRESENTS THE

KS4 Dickensian SHOWCASE

2025



The Marlborough
Science Academy
'shaping futures'

'Coal For The Fire'

By Zach Wilson

It was a crisp, cold night — as most were during this time — fell upon the streets, frost clawing over the windows, breath freezing as soon as it left the warm comfort of a mouth. In stark contrast, the houses inside burned with flickering shadows, fleeting between cold and warmth. Somehow, somewhere, this contrasting battle was deemed “jolly,” even “festive.” How? I don't quite understand, yet people seem to push through the cold and the heat. That's the thing with people — they always seem to make the best of bad situations.

Enough about the depressing cold and overwhelming heat; we're here to focus on a man. Like most, he was tall, adorned in a neat suit and a scowl that could freeze Jack Frost himself. Ironically, he was called Colden — Colden Winters, to be specific. Colden was misery in human form. Everywhere he went, people quietened; one word out of place and you might find your coal for winter gone. Nobody dared to take that risk.

In great opposition stood one cheery worker, who also happened to be his nephew. He did not abide by these silent laws. Instead, he remained joyous and encouraging — but it had no effect other than to anger the dead-inside man.

“Uncle!” he would call out. “Merry Christmas!”

The miser would stop in his tracks, turning slowly. “Merry? Merry?! What on this freezing, half-dead, poor planet do I have to be merry about?!” he would retort.

Somehow, the poor nephew couldn't pick up on the clear SCRAM sign Winters had put out, so he replied, “Why? It's Christmas! What isn't there to be merry about?”

“The only good thing about Christmas is coal sales rising,” he spat bitterly.

“But... what about family? Opening presents on Christmas Day with me, Mother, and Father?”

“You? You are nothing but coal for my fire,” he sneered, eyes cold and soulless.

The nephew bowed his head in sorrow, finally realising the miser his uncle truly was.

“Okay, Uncle Colden.”

With that, he left.

Winters sighed, muttering something about an ungrateful little — Suddenly, his room lit up. The fire blazed high — higher than a few coals could possibly manage. Glowing orange and red, the shadows were erased from the room as flickering tendrils of flame reached out as if to grab him.

Then, all of a sudden:

“COLDEN WINTERS!!” a bellowing voice rang out.

'Coal For The Fire'
By Zach Wilson

“Where are you?! Who are you?! Why are you here?!” he squealed, his cold demeanour melting in the face of danger.

Slowly, the fire twisted, forming a single face — a skeletal thing, eyes floating in their sockets. Their pupils stared straight through Colden.

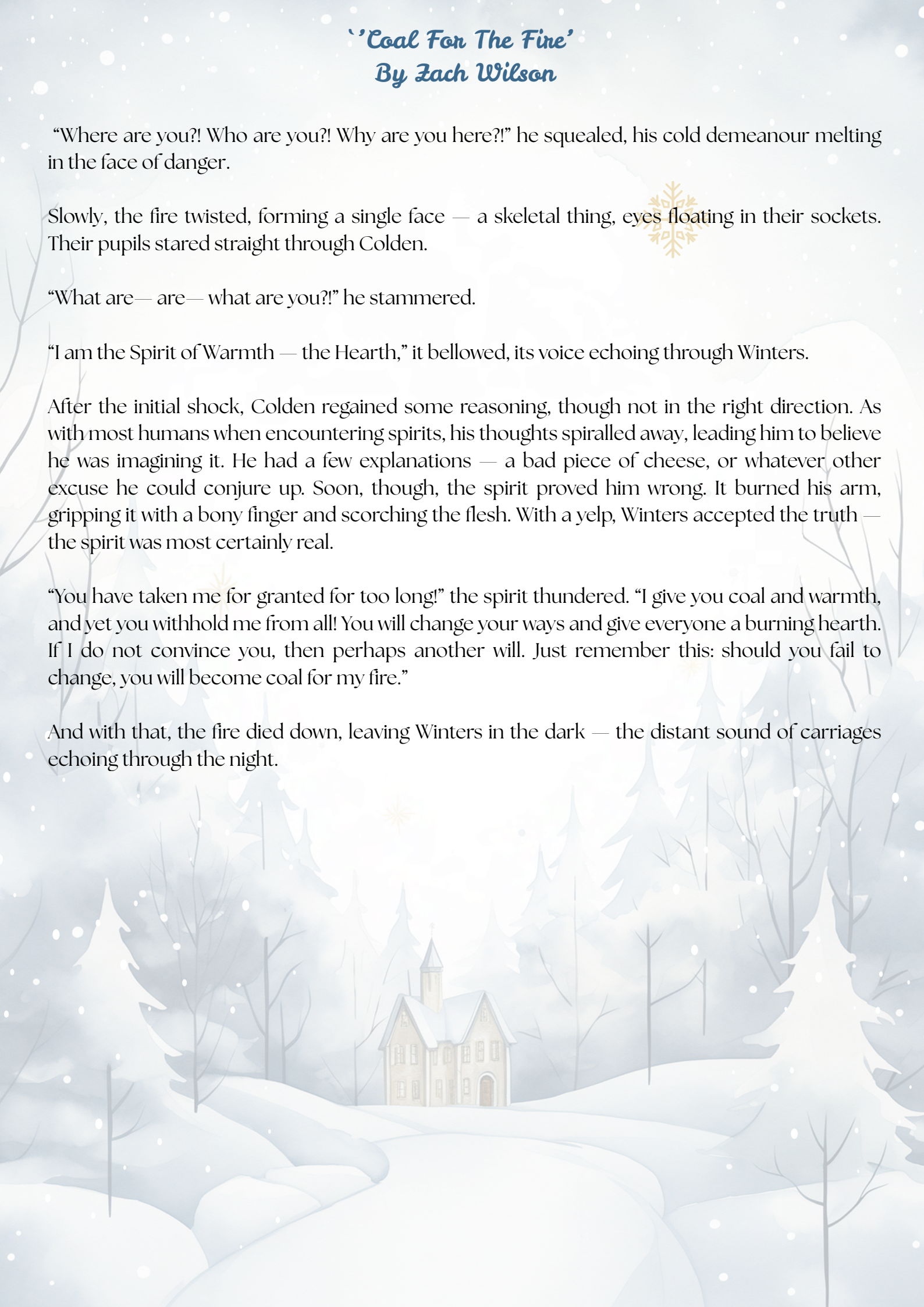
“What are — are — what are you?!” he stammered.

“I am the Spirit of Warmth — the Hearth,” it bellowed, its voice echoing through Winters.

After the initial shock, Colden regained some reasoning, though not in the right direction. As with most humans when encountering spirits, his thoughts spiralled away, leading him to believe he was imagining it. He had a few explanations — a bad piece of cheese, or whatever other excuse he could conjure up. Soon, though, the spirit proved him wrong. It burned his arm, gripping it with a bony finger and scorching the flesh. With a yelp, Winters accepted the truth — the spirit was most certainly real.

“You have taken me for granted for too long!” the spirit thundered. “I give you coal and warmth, and yet you withhold me from all! You will change your ways and give everyone a burning hearth. If I do not convince you, then perhaps another will. Just remember this: should you fail to change, you will become coal for my fire.”

And with that, the fire died down, leaving Winters in the dark — the distant sound of carriages echoing through the night.



'You Can't Escape A Merry Christmas'

By Indya-Panayia Boulter

The lights, the cheer, the Christmas spirit... the pain... it was all too much.

The cobbled street was plagued with snow as Ellwood Foster walked through the limited amount of darkness that was still left untouched by joy, narrowly avoiding eye contact with his delightful neighbours who praised his name as if he deserved to be happy. His tall, lean figure was cloaked in a dark coat smeared with a dark red substance, yet no one seemed to notice.

The street lamps cast a warm glow over most of the roads, with the occasional alleyway attempting to corrupt the festivities. Although one could never truly dampen the exultation that comes with Christmas — many had tried before, yet all had failed drastically.

Ellwood continued his walk; however, he had to stop as a choir obstructed his path, singing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” At that, he pulled down his top hat to obscure his facial features in shadow. His attempt went disastrously, as he was spotted by none other than Paula Heriot.

“Evening, Ellwood! How are ya?” she exclaimed in her overly enthusiastic voice.

Paula Heriot was quite a stout woman with long, blonde, corkscrewed curls. She was older than Ellwood by a lot — though that’s not to say she was old; more that Ellwood was young... too young.

“I’m sorry, Paula, I can’t speak right now,” Ellwood muttered in a grim, low voice, trying to hide the red on his cloak by turning away.

Paula’s voice and facial expression could only be described as those of someone taken aback, since she had never been spoken to like that — especially by Ellwood Foster.

Ellwood pushed past the choir and Paula, dashing as fast as his feet could carry him through the thick snow. Of course, Paula had to make a scene.

“What’s gotten into you, lad?” she called out, but Ellwood ignored her and kept striding. Everyone had their eyes on him.

Eventually, he made it to his house. There was nothing special about it; it had the same brickwork and build as any other Victorian home. However, this year his house lacked the usual Christmas decorations that once covered it in festive cheer... just not this year.

As he entered, a sense of relief washed over him. He shut and locked the door before taking off his cloak and bringing it to the washbasin, along with a small candle whose flame illuminated his stressed and exhausted face. He scrubbed frantically until the red from his dark coat poisoned the water. He couldn’t get rid of it.

'You Can't Escape A Merry Christmas'
By Indya-Panayia Boulten

Suddenly, the candle went out.

A chill spread up his spine.

He paused.

Knock, knock, knock.

One knock at the door, one at the wall, and one at the ceiling.

Then came a voice — a voice so eerie it made Ellwood's blood run cold. He recognised it instantly: his latest victim.

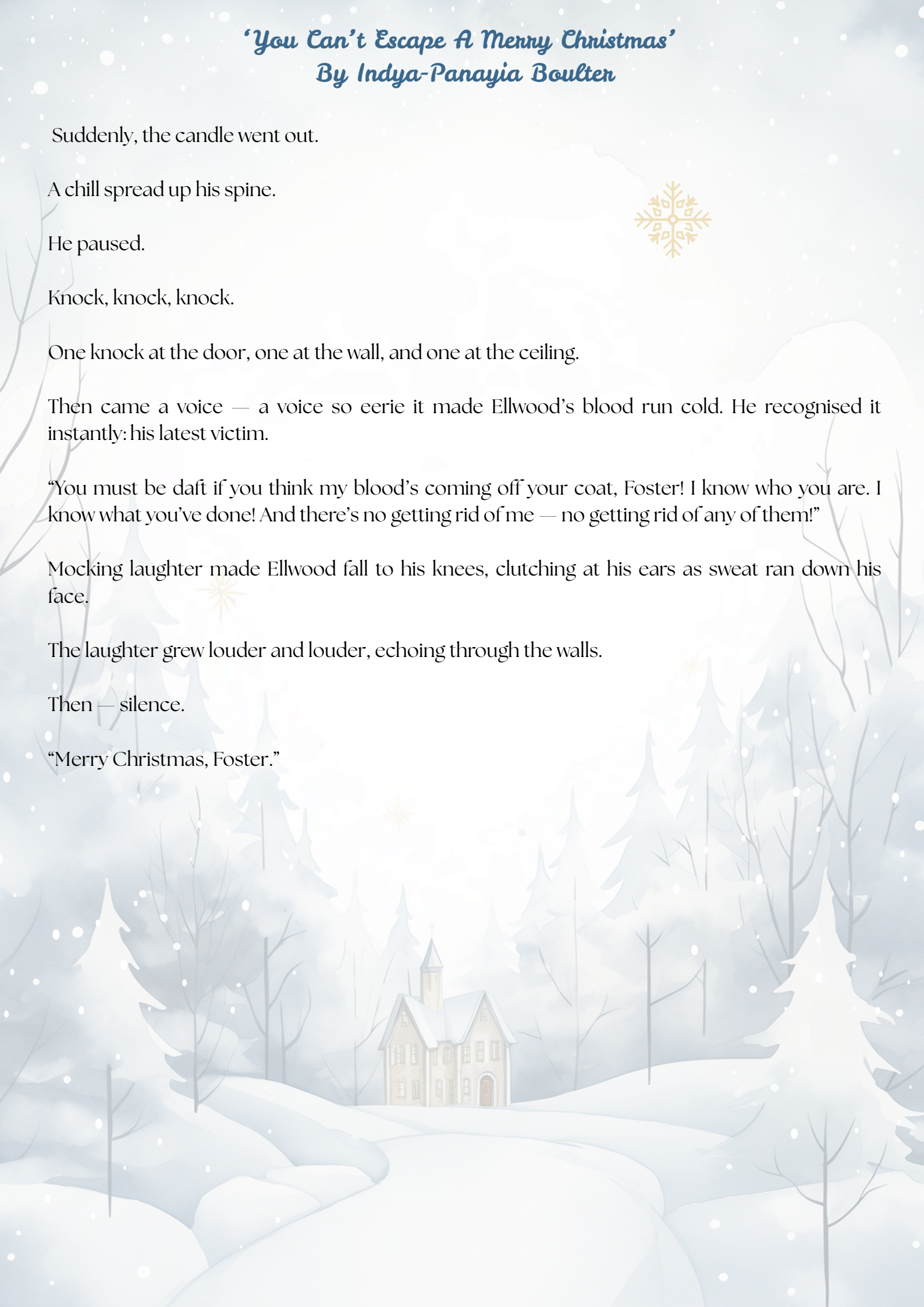
"You must be daft if you think my blood's coming off your coat, Foster! I know who you are. I know what you've done! And there's no getting rid of me — no getting rid of any of them!"

Mocking laughter made Ellwood fall to his knees, clutching at his ears as sweat ran down his face.

The laughter grew louder and louder, echoing through the walls.

Then — silence.

"Merry Christmas, Foster."



'The Stars'

By Samantha Mullinex

The stars were wild, wicked things,
Flashing fangs as they smirked and smiled.
The moon was all fading promises,
Falling and breaking into the sky.
But gaping like torn flesh and pain,
A slice, a shard of mirror on the ground,
The stench of winter leaves and blood
In the cobbled streets of old London town.



In a road that was made of nothing but tears,
In a city built on nothing but sin,
It was no wonder a lesson would soon come
To a lace-black house, and the man within.
For on this night, in the midnight gloom,
Too dark to see the monochrome streets.
Even when the oil lamps flickered in the wind,
An echoing face lingered to be seen.

It entered the accursed, shadowed house
Creaked up the wooden stairs
It seeped through the key hole and into the room
Where a man slept, peaceful and unaware.
Fleshless hands, white bone, reached out -
Tugging and clawing at the sheets.
The man awoke, and upon seeing the ghost
Cried out so sudden, a half-blinding scream...

He had turned 25 but months ago,
Though through the fleeting of his brief life
He'd little he'd done and little to show,
Yet he was far too well-acquainted with his pride.
"Why should I care?" he asked his father,
"Why should I work?" he said to his mother.
"Care for yourself," said his brother,
"Work for us both," begged his lover.

Those words rippled across the waves of time
To that doomed and fateful night
And as the spirit appeared to him
It uttered parodic imitations of his life;
"If you cannot care and you cannot work,
If you cannot spare a thought for anyone -
Then of course your life is all for you,
Of course all you can be is wild and fun."

'The Stars'

By Samantha Mullinex

"I'd rather be fun and wild", he laughed
"I'd rather be careless than far too cold,
I'd rather feel warm in the winter
Than calculate the price of each lump of coal."
The sceptre nodded, for this she knew
But still she approached the fool.
She said, "Come will me and soon you'll see
Why I mean to warn you of it all."



She walked him through the Christmas parties
To the cooks slaving in the kitchens beneath
Through the shops, the stores, the factories
Seeing how every worker plays their piece
And soon he saw how the puzzle fitted
Together, spilling over the painted frame
Like fingers intertwining or cards being dealt
A risk and a gamble, an unplayable game.

The homeless finding refuge at the Church,
The frostbitten children finding joy in the snow,
The grey-white sky of December's worst
And streets tiled with holly and streamers below.
Homes of broken glass and washing lines of rags,
The ones who had no coal to count.
For even on bitter Christmas morning,
For some, no harsh warmth could be found.

The spirit did not speak a word
Nor did she have to explain a thing
For the man saw the suffering he had caused
And all the pain his frivolity would bring.
"No more!" he cried, "I've seen enough!
I know what you mean in coming to me here.
I know what you want, and I will I promise -
I'll work for these people at Christmas and in all the year."

The spectre smiled, and in a flash,
They were safe in his room once more.
The troubled man fell to his knees,
Ready to plead, prepared to implore.
And the ghost then knew he's learned his lesson
He was ready to live for the better
As he scrambled up his bedposts,
Clutching trembling hands together.

'The Stars'
By Samantha Mullinex

When he awoke on Christmas Eve then,
The man walked 'cross London to his office-house
Christmas would be time for rest
But the day before meant working his life out.
But what no one could attempt to know
Was that carelessness and wild could overcorrect
And maybe a lesson can be too well learned...
As Jacob Marley sat down at his desk.



'The Candles'

By Eve Kilcast

She shut the door with a thud.

Christmas Eve, and the sitting room had turned over onto its front and gone into hibernation. The candles Augusta lit at dinner had burned down into shapeless masses of skin-toned wax, weak tendrils of flame shuddering against the stomach-lining of night. The tree sat hunched in the corner, permeating the pungent miasma of long-lost wild dreams, wolves darting like stray arrows through ancient woods; the red satin bows tied round its branches almost, in the half-light, like blood-soaked strips of mammoth flesh between molars. Opposite it, the remnants of a coal fire lay indifferently dormant.

She let out a long sigh and glanced back once at the door to her eldest's bedroom. Her husband still wasn't back yet. At work, was all she was told; thus, "at work" was all that existed within her shadowed corner of reality. Still — he wasn't usually gone this long. She went to turn around, to stare into the impenetrable barrier between her world and his, considerably larger, one. Someone else stared back at her.

You're all on your own, aren't you?

She looked no older than five; she was short and very thin, protruding cheekbones cleaving lines of shadow down her face. She took a step towards Augusta and reached an arm out to her side. Something lay on the table which hadn't been there before. Carefully, one small hand coiled itself around a knife, glinting starkly in the half-light. Her eyes locked with Augusta's; Augusta stiffened and felt, acutely, the distinct absence of a heartbeat. The knife was raised slowly, slowly towards her — and then the girl yanked at her sleeve, tearing the fabric in half, and ever so gently she felt the blade slide beneath her skin.

Softly, the girl pressed the knife against the wool, where it spilled out in loose clumps from the cut. She lifted her eyes again to meet Augusta's, black and shiny in the darkness, thick and suffocating where it gathered around them.

I will swallow you. I will kill the thing that fawns and flails inside your head and eat it, and throw it up into the gutter. Then, I will climb inside the cavern of your waiting mouth and enter you, but not before I have ground your mind into a fine pulp between my teeth and dissolved the glass ball of your heart in my stomach. All of you will disappear inside of me. Then, I will take your place. Maybe I will be a good wife, a good mother. You will never know. You will not wake up tomorrow in bed, your children's beaming smiles flashing in your tired eyes. None of this will be yours again.

The candles hissed as the last of their flame was snuffed out. Almost midnight on Christmas Eve, and the sitting room turned over onto its front and suffocated, left to rot inside the damp hole it tried to hide itself in. Midnight on Christmas Day, and something else wakes.

'A Cautionary Tale'

By Allie Reed

Children around a fire,
Faces curled up with glee,
But the calls I hear are dire,
As this soul was not yet free.



I could tell you a Christmas story,
One that we've all told before,
But then children would not come crying,
Shaking as they needed to know more.

So instead I will tell you this tale.
Don't get me wrong — it's not page-turning,
But like a cold winter gale,
Bitter and full of years of yearning.

It starts on a cobbled pathway,
With mud streaks, dung, and hay,
And now a man of old money,
Whom time has turned weathered and grey.

You can watch him make his way down
The path of this old rusted town,
Boots tapping on the floor,
As he glides from door to door.

His shirt is pristine,
Yet his smear is not mean,
Just one of a man waiting
For a new way to be seen.

He knocks against the plain glass screen.
No one is home;
His house is a tomb,
Waiting as his body steps in it,

Because only then can his life finish.
As he lays down to rest,
He knows that he hasn't tried his best.
There's no one here he still holds dear,

Even now he does not shed a tear.
From here to the end,
I will no longer pretend
That this man lived satisfied.
Here is why.

'A Cautionary Tale'

By Allie Reed

He fell in love young,
So when she died it stung,
Like the bitter taste of lead in the pipes.
He watched as death swung her scythe.



She had no children to bear;
He was left to hide in despair.
All would come clear,
With another pint or a beer.

Fear was all that stopped him from shedding a tear.
This man dug his grave,
Yet was too afraid to stave off the demons that pushed him in.
No courage lay within.

And you wonder why he does not breathe in?



'A Lesson for Wrinkledgeezer'

By Josh Gritman

It was a Christmas Eve like any other. A joyous time, the cobblestone streets flooding with smiling children in their warmest coats, and parents rushing to purchase last-minute gifts. There was a sense of comfort carried by the nipping wind. It was truly a happy day.



The only thing bad about it was Wrinkledgeezer Stooze.

The man was thoroughly unpleasant. He was tall, skeletal, extremely wrinkled, and covered in warts that no one could stand the sight of for long. He looked long overdue for the death everyone prayed for, but Stooze, unfortunately for all, still lingered.

On his way home, he felt the temperature suddenly and noticeably drop, the wind picking up, and his spine shivering violently. That was normal, he thought. It was winter.

Then the streetlamps blew out — all at once, in an instant. It was just the wind, he thought.

As he approached his door, he felt something... strange. He couldn't quite describe it; it was unlike anything he had felt. It was terrifying. Eerie. Cold.

He figured he should get inside quickly. The night was playing tricks on him.

He went inside and lit a candle.

It wouldn't light.

He was left in the cold, dark room.

Suddenly, all the candles in his house lit at once, startling Wrinkledgeezer so much that he fell back onto the floor. Shivering, he managed to stand back up.

And there it was — the ghost of a young boy, floating before his eyes.

"Wrinkledgeezer Stooze," it said to him. The man was too shocked to speak, or scream, or even react at all. He just stood there, mouth agape.

"You killed me." Those words took Stooze by surprise.

"What?" Wrinkledgeezer could barely muster that one word.

"You took bread from me on the street. You called the police, saying I was harassing you, and they arrested me. I was starving — I hadn't eaten in days. And that afternoon, I died because of you."

"I didn't kill you, you little urchin. It was your choice to starve on the street instead of going to a poorhouse." The boy looked sad and disappointed. He shook his head and sighed, then Stooze continued rambling.

'A Lesson for Wrinkledgeezer'

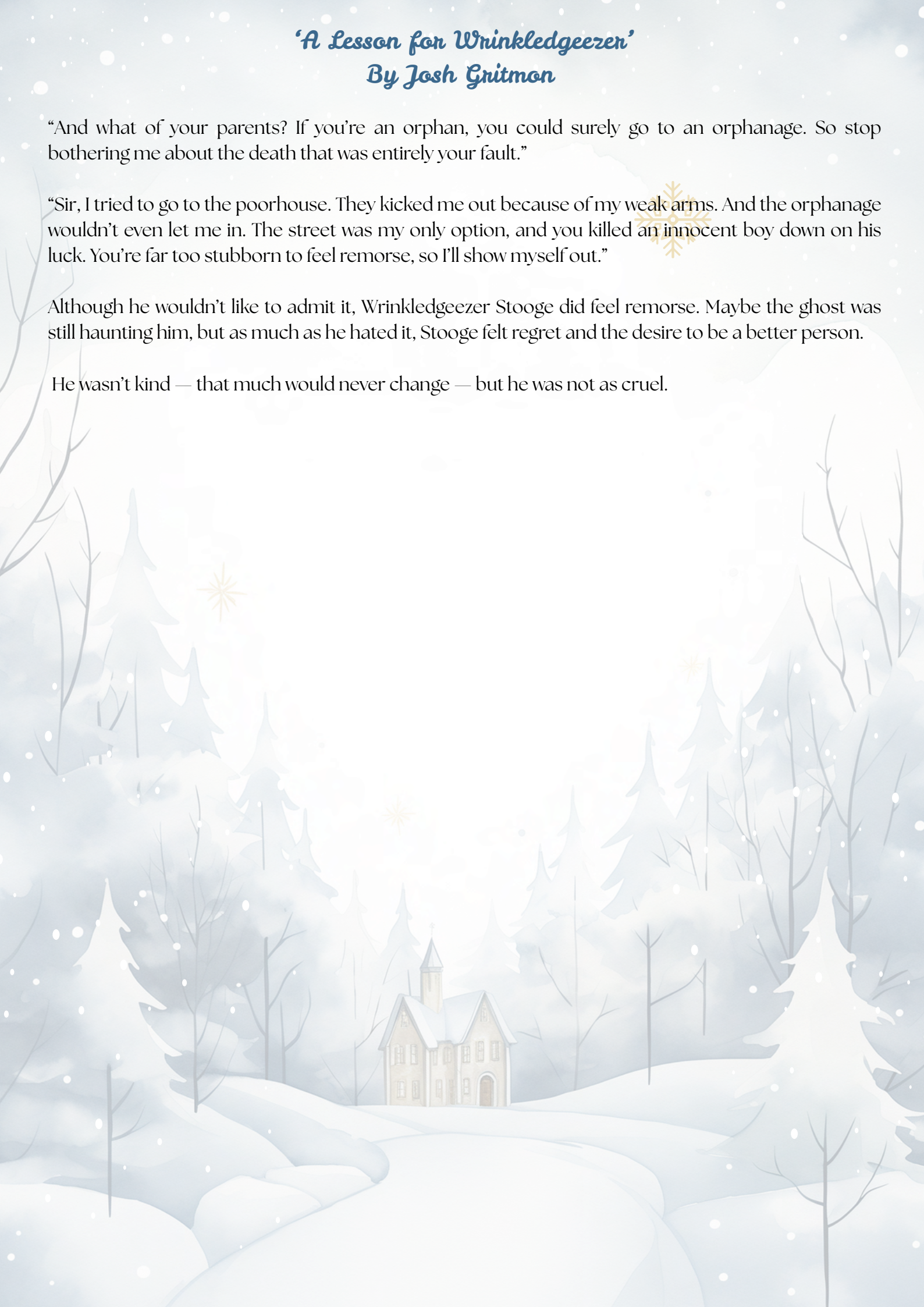
By Josh Gritmon

“And what of your parents? If you’re an orphan, you could surely go to an orphanage. So stop bothering me about the death that was entirely your fault.”

“Sir, I tried to go to the poorhouse. They kicked me out because of my weak arms. And the orphanage wouldn’t even let me in. The street was my only option, and you killed an innocent boy down on his luck. You’re far too stubborn to feel remorse, so I’ll show myself out.”

Although he wouldn’t like to admit it, Wrinkledgeezer Stooze did feel remorse. Maybe the ghost was still haunting him, but as much as he hated it, Stooze felt regret and the desire to be a better person.

He wasn’t kind — that much would never change — but he was not as cruel.



'The Weight of Blood'

By Tavor Lifshitz

"Oh Arthur, I've had enough of your madness," announced Silas. With all the force in his arms, Silas shoved Arthur, with no madness intended, but he had underestimated what he had done. Arthur fell into the closed window sill, cracking his head open. He could only etch one word: "Brother."

One minute — one minute it took Silas to realise what he had done. He cradled Arthur in his arms as his corpse poured blood. He turned around, noticing his wife standing bewildered. Salis was surprised but quickly informed her to leave. Every word he spoke to her, a tear fought its way out just to be shot between the eyes.

"Yes, honey," and she was gone. Salis fell to the floor weeping like a baby. His eyes emptied years of withheld sadness. It seemed never-ending, as if he would lay there forever. But that wasn't the case. With a soaked face, he stood, remembering what happened as if he had forgotten why he started crying in the first place.

That happened five weeks ago, in Salis' home. Shortly after, Arthur's funeral was held, but it was more of a burial than an actual commemoration of his life. There was no priest and no people, just two gravediggers and Salis by himself.

By now, Salis had forgotten his brother, as his troubles were overpowering, eating him up. But Arthur didn't forget — every day he thought about that moment, knowing that he shouldn't be in hell at the age of 22. That day, he left his room and walked into the chamber, the chamber of transition. As the transition came, he felt immense pain, enough to kill one hundred men. Yet nothing — nothing could stop him now.

Now it was 1876, the 25th of December. Salis was celebrating Christmas, with the tree covering the moldy walls, the gifts wrapped in dirty wrapping paper, and old expired food out on the table. He and his family were singing, with his children sitting in their chairs looking oddly at the food on their plates. That was when it came, just at the end of "Jingle Bells."

It took Salis by his side, like a knife piercing his aging skin. But hours later, his body ached tremendously, like a man on the stake burning to death. Arthur floated beside him, grinning ear-to-ear, feeling extreme satisfaction. However, something felt off, like a thought fighting its way to his body, hoping to see another day. As he looked at Salis, hugging himself in pain and rolling side-to-side, this feeling grew stronger and stronger.

It had been hours at this point. Arthur's smile had been wiped off his face; now he watched him with melancholy in his eyes. He'd realised his mistake, but now there was nothing he could do. He couldn't reverse it. He scanned his mind, hoping for a way out...

But there was nothing to do. He punished a man for an accident he'd never intended, ruining a life he'd ached for losing. Was it really worth it?

'Coins of the Past'

By Ruby Smith

The soft glow of the gas lamps illuminated the streets and homes. It crept into Mr. Hartley's home through the large windows. The cold air was blocked by the warmth of the coal fire, the crackling soothing all who could hear it. Carolers paraded through the street – singing Christmas songs that brought light to all the hearts in the village. All except Mr. Hartley, who sat at his desk, counting coins. This task was something he'd grown quite fond of. He had no time for Christmas. Not that he minded. In fact, he thought it was a waste – amongst other things.

Tonight was different. As each coin clinked onto the wooden desk, a sense of uneasiness flooded through Mr. Hartley. The fire flickered more than usual. The room was colder. He decided to stop what he was doing to investigate, but as soon as he did, the fire went out, and the sound of coins echoed through the large home. He was stunned and confused. What could that sound be? He'd already put the coins down.

Slowly opening the door, he leapt back in shock and fear. A real ghost stood before him in the doorway. Coins bound his limbs like chains, weighing him down. A wave of recognition went through Mr. Hartley.

"I am a ghost. I'm sure you know of me, right, Edwin?" The ghost's familiar voice echoed through the room. A voice he knew.

"Mr. Finch."

"Indeed. It is I, the partner whom you betrayed."

"You died? Whatever happened?"

"The day you left me to fend for myself, I lost it all. All of the money we made together. And on Christmas Eve, I met my demise."

Mr. Hartley was shocked. He never expected to see this man again. After betraying him and greedily taking the company to himself, he'd almost completely forgotten about the man.

"You must listen to me, Mr. Hartley. I come with a warning."

He felt uneasy. Why should he believe the ghost of the man he had betrayed all those years ago? A man he'd forgotten existed, all because he was so engrossed in his own pride?

"Very soon, your wealth will not be able to support you anymore. You will be left cashless and alone. You will die the same way I did — cold, alone," the ghost said. This scared Mr. Hartley.

"You have no idea what you're talking about! You're a fake! A mere fragment of my imagination!" he yelled, breaking the peaceful silence of the night. He wanted to believe that this was not real. He stormed out of his study, covering his ears and rushing to the bedroom. It was scarcely lit and freezing cold. He did not care. All he did was lie down and try to sleep the burden of the ghost away.

'Coins of the Past'

By Ruby Smith

He checked the entire home for a ghost the next morning. It was nowhere in sight. He thought that surely he had made the whole thing up. He went to get his morning tea, just to find coins on the floor. Old coins. He picked them up just to find them weighing more than anything he'd held before — a weight, the weight that was pulling him down, just like the ghost that had come to visit.

He ran outside into the fog of the early morning and knocked on each door, inviting them over for a Christmas dinner in his large home. Everybody was shocked but agreed anyway. He spent money on chefs, candles, and things to make it just that bit more homely — a thing that used to be completely foreign to him. Yet, even though he hadn't planned on this Christmas going this way, once all of the families piled into his dining room, he felt a sense of warmth and happiness for the first time in years. A feeling that money could not fulfil on its own.



'A Whitechapel Refection'

By Lucas Harrison

December 25th, 1899

On that fateful night, I found myself walking through the smog-covered alleyways of Whitechapel when I noticed a strange figure lurking just at the end of the alley. Space was distorting as my mind started to wander into the oily abyss of nihilism. Suddenly, my eyes flickered toward the gas light as I came back from that terrible place to the only slightly brighter morning. But I was not in the alleyway—no, it seemed that I had woken up in an unknown bedroom.

December 25th, 1899

I walked. I rode. I worked. I was ripped out of the slaughterhouse the day after and told that my job was redundant and that some kind of machine had replaced me. Needless to say, I visited the alehouse until much later that night. Once again, I walked into another alleyway and realised that it was named Whitechapel. I saw something that I shouldn't have seen then. I saw it.

December 25th, 1899

What was I doing yesterday? Did it work? No, I was unemployed. What did I do except work anyway? What could I do? What am I? What did I do yesterday? Who am I? What is my name? What happened? How did this happen? How did I end up like this? I need help. I need a job. I need to remember what happened yesterday. Why am I breathing when so many others die every day? I won't amount to anything. All I will do is return to the oily abyss below. The oily abyss? Yes, I remember now—yesterday I walked into the abyss. No, I walked into the alleyway. I need to tell people before I forget again. I ran towards the people in the street and told them the truth. It was then I realised a bottle was planted in my hand. They dismissed my words as a drunkard's instead of a truly sane man's. Slip. Slipped on a glass piece. Dead.

December 25th, 1899

Where am I? What is happening to me? Why do I always fail at any job I am given? Why am I a failure? Why am I crumbling away like a dandelion seed blowing away in the wind? Why am I failing to cope with my endless death? It is only natural to die, after all. Where had I been yesterday? I was in the gutter. I was failing to survive for even a few minutes. How could my life be valuable when it is so short? How could someone so pathetic mean anything when they can't even remember their past and progress to the future? I must run—run away from civilisation to save my pathetic skin. Before I could do that, I was apprehended by the police for the suspected murder of young women in Whitechapel. They said that I was the Ripper, a notorious murderer who had killed many innocents. But I remembered—they didn't believe me, and my meaningless life was cut short.

'The Advent Candle'. By Florence Redfern

December had finally fallen on Anna Smith's doorstep. The snow would begin to paint the streets with its white beauty. Carol singers would knock on doors and blissfully sing their Christmas songs. The streets would be filled with laughter, and joy would be spread.



At least, that would be in the wealthy part of town.

The dirty slump of the streets always said that they hated the winter seasons. No one knew quite why, as this month was the season of gifts and marvelous food for Christmas lunches, with desserts that delicately dissolved in your stomach. There was nothing better than Christmas time. Everyone was happy, everyone was warm.

Anna's father had been working hard at the factory for the last few months. He was making sure all his workers were putting in as many hours as they could. However, all those long, hard hours weren't for him. It was all for Anna. He'd bought her something she'd never seen before, something that was mesmerising to look at—something that illuminated the unknown.

A candle.

It wasn't a candle used to cast away spirits or fight away the darkness. It was one of the first advent candles. Anna had heard about them in school, but she didn't think her father would ever get one. It was beautiful. She couldn't take her eyes away from it. She had to light it.

Father had said that each day it would be lit and the ritual would continue all the way to Christmas Eve. It warmed Anna's heart with its gentle flame. Each day, she would watch as the wax melted down, continuing the countdown to the merry season. She adored it, and each night she would light the candle. She continued this tradition until Christmas Eve was only two weeks away.

However, the evening Anna had placed the candle on the table, her eyes wandered to the family portrait beside it. She was with her father, but she looked different. She looked pale, like the light from the candle had changed her slightly. She comforted herself, saying that it was all in her head, but every night, it got worse. The photo kept changing; the longer the candle burned, the thinner she became. After what felt like days, her smile had vanished from the photograph.

Anna tried to tell her mother and father what she had seen in the table's photo, but when she opened her mouth, the words never came. Her voice was also fading. Anna's mother didn't think anything was wrong—Anna was usually a quiet girl anyway. Father would have noticed the fear in her eyes; however, he was still at the factory working. No one could hear Anna screaming on the inside.

On Christmas Eve, the candle's flame had become small. Anna sat beside it, watching the wax melt into nothing. When the light finally died, she felt herself getting lighter, as if she were part of the smoke that went out into the night. She looked at her cold, pale hands, and she thought she was glowing slightly, just like the candle.

'The Advent Candle'.

By Florence Redfenn

Her father woke up early the next morning to find the house quiet. The candle was gone, and when he looked at his favourite photo of him and his daughter, he was the only one there. It was the right photograph; nobody had ever moved it from the spot on the table. Several times, he called Anna's name, begging for his daughter to come down.

Only the snow answered.



'The Weeping Angel'

By Anchen Smith

The old, varnished door slowly creaked closed as the last of Ambrose's guests left. The soft specks of snow fell through the lofty door, landing upon his perfectly styled hair and suit. He was dressed this way as he had just hosted a housewarming Christmas Eve dinner with all of his friends, family, and associates. He walked back towards the grand entrance, walking up the stairs onto the second floor. As he walked along the carpet, Ambrose felt the atmosphere darken around him. Through the long halls, he felt his spine shiver as if something was lurking behind him. He turned—nothing. He exhaled in relief, realising nothing was there, and continued down the endless halls before him.

Eventually, he made his way up another flight of stairs, though this time they were in an elegant spiral. The wooden floors beneath him flickered in the candlelight coming from the lantern Ambrose was holding as he made his way towards the master bedroom. As he looked at the intricate carvings on the door, he grabbed the copper handle, cautiously opening the room, as a flood of dread and frigid air spewed out. As Ambrose walked further in, the moonlight shone through the stained-glass window—the one which convinced him to buy the house. The intricate panels, forming the shape of a weeping angel covered in fear, spread coloured light throughout the room.

The fireplace was a large, elaborate masterpiece with intricately carved brick and hand-moulded adjunct pieces. It suddenly lit ablaze. Startled, Ambrose jolted back, landing upon his bed, its soft cushioning supporting his fall. He stared into the flickering light of the fire. The bed beneath him rattled; he shuffled backwards, further onto the mattress as the posts started to lift. In terror, Ambrose heard the constant chiming of his late grandfather's clock, and the door that he had only opened a few moments ago started to open and close with such force that it was practically off its hinges. The fire suddenly started to rage as if it had been fuelled with hatred and evil, and smoke poured into the room. As the bed lowered once more, Ambrose slowly arose and moved to the window to let out the smoke. Unfortunately, he was not safe.

Before him stood the stained-glass window. As Ambrose crept closer, he felt trepidation—a looming feeling of distress hung over him as he looked upon the angel.

At first, he did not notice, but as the chimes, the blaze, and the bed made a cacophony of sound, the angel looked up from its palms, eyes crying what seemed to be blood, slowly encroaching out of the window, arms stretched, attempting to reach for Ambrose. As soon as he noticed, he screamed, frozen in horror as the angel slowly walked out of the glass and towards him. By the time he had snapped out of his trance, he had already been picked up by this being and taken to the balcony outside. Slowly, the angel walked, steps echoing despite the happenings of the rest of the room, and as they got closer, it was evident to Ambrose that he was going to die.

As he was lifted over the balcony, he wondered why this was happening to him—but he never found that answer, for he was dropped by this “angel” upon the cement ground as the cracking of bones echoed throughout the house. He was found, in the morning, dead.

'Winter is coming'
By Elsie O' Sullivan

On a cold Christmas Eve, on the dark, cobbled streets of Victorian London, the lanes were blanketed in a thick, icy skin. The unrelenting wind whipped at the nearest tavern's sign, the incessant banging echoing off the walls. A jolly tune and the sound of revelry drifted from inside the tavern.

A man, huddled against the cold, paused before he pushed open the wooden door. A small pang of guilt pierced his cold heart as he recalled what his wife had told him before he departed for the accounting house earlier that day. He remembered that he had promised her he would return hastily from work so that he might ready the fire for his infant son.

"It's getting colder, darling. Winter's coming," she had told him.

He quickly dismissed the thought of them and stepped fully through the door, being met with a warm gust of air against his shivering body.

With a beer in his hand, his eyes lit up as he spotted an empty booth in the corner of the bar, next to the glowing coal fire. He wound his way through the masses of men towards the free seat, anxious that someone might reach it before him. His mouth broke into a grin, happy with the small victory when he seated himself. Warming his hands with the crackling fire, he stared longingly at the flames, all thoughts of his family tucked neatly away in his mind.

However, his train of thought swerved off track when a fit of coughing broke out beside him. He flinched away from the sound, not recalling seeing anyone take the seat next to him. Turning his head towards the commotion, his eyes widened to see a small urchin boy, his eyes sunken into his dusty head, his skin taut across sharp cheekbones. A small gasp escaped the man's lips as the boy stopped coughing and turned slowly towards him. He was alarmed to see that the boy's skin was ghastly pale and his gaze devoid of warmth.

"Are you quite alright?" the man grumbled, still confused as to what such a young boy was doing sitting next to him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Dawson. I didn't mean to startle you." His small voice came out as a whisper, yet the man heard him loud and clear.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?" Mr. Dawson asked.

"I suppose you shouldn't know me, but you will," the small boy stated matter-of-factly.

Mr. Dawson squirmed a little under the boy's scrutiny, his blood turning to ice despite the warmth of the room.

"I once had a father like you," the boy continued. "Full of false promises, who only concerned himself with what was best for him." His voice grew quieter still. "I'm gone because of him. Because he was warm, spending all our pennies on beer, whilst I grew colder and colder."

Mr. Dawson was shaking now, realisation flooding his body as he thought of his son at home.

"Hurry home, sir," the boy mumbled as he stood silently, retreating into the crowd. "Winter's coming."

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'The Cost of Theft'

By Rosie Gooden

It was a cold winter night. Much like every other night in London at the time, Christmas was just around the corner. In fact, it was a week before Christmas Eve. Christmas cards had just been invented, and they were flying off the shelves—beautiful cards decorated with mistletoe, holly, and elegant calligraphy. They were always my favourites. It pained me to see them being stolen—always by the same group of boys.

I knew they had something going on. They were always stealing, and it seemed to be around Christmas time, actually. I used to follow them home sometimes, listening to their problems: not enough money, no food—much like the rest of London at the time. That was before we met. As soon as one of them saw me, everything blew up.

There was a lot of screaming, pillows and old, rotten blankets being thrown at me. They all obviously went right through my body, but that wasn't the point.

“What are you?”

“Why are you here?”

All stuff I had heard before. I looked around the room, seeing all of the stolen items: wallets, purses, and the odd miscellaneous toy. They were presents, all wrapped in pieces of oddly coloured hessian with nametags. It was quite endearing. Then I finally remembered the child screaming at me.

“What are you doing here?! What do you want?” he said, holding up a fireside tool in defence. I didn't say anything back. The rest of the children ran inside—they couldn't see me. It was just him. He looked the oldest, with long, unkempt brown hair. His clothes were stretched out and obviously didn't fit him; they were covered in mud and soot as well. He looked like a true street urchin.

I put my hand out to him. He wouldn't take it at first, but I left it there until he did. We started to float, causing him to curse lightly. Then we were transported a few hours back to before he stole a man's wallet. Of course, he wouldn't have known it, but that man was a husband, with a loving wife and two young children—a boy and a girl. The man was just about to pay for his children's Christmas presents: a beautiful porcelain doll with skin as white as snow for his daughter, and a toy soldier with a crimson jacket and a stance that would've scared any French soldier away for his son. You should've seen his face when he realised his wallet was stolen—an entire family's Christmas ruined, an angry wife, two disappointed children, and a guilty father.

I showed him another family, less fortunate. He had stolen a woman's purse—her last shillings for a Christmas dinner. She went home to her family with nothing.

I showed him family after family, demonstrating how many lives he affected just to save his own. He knew he should change, but he didn't. He kept trying to save his family. Eventually, he got caught. His family was left with nobody to care for them, and he was sent to prison, picking oakum.

'A Christmas Reunion'

By Faye Holt

Snow fell in spiralling sheets onto the cobbled path. The clacking of horse hooves grew fainter, and the distant singing of cheery carollers was just audible over the harsh wind that shook the night. The light in the streetlamps threatened to blow out as a particularly strong gust of wind blew through Wilmer Avenue, whistling as it went.



A young woman peered out of the frosted window of No. 87 Wilmer Avenue. Dimly, she could make out two sisters sitting in front of a crackling fire, in the warm surroundings of No. 86. She felt a pang—of jealousy? Of sorrow? She did not know. Despite everything, Emmeline missed her dearly, with all her heart. All she did know was that this was not how she intended to spend Christmas Eve. Just an hour ago, she had been supposed to sit down for a tremendous meal of roast chicken with her best friend, but instead—well, she prepared the meal, sat down, and realized she hadn't an appetite. So she packed up the food and set it aside for later, when she supposed she would be a bit peckish.

Emmeline Fisher had auburn hair and eyes to match. Her warm skin was dusted lightly with freckles that complemented her face nicely when she was happy and smiling. As for right now, her face was firmly stuck in an unreadable expression, as if it were a door bolted shut with many locks. She was a devastatingly pretty girl, even when upset. Wrapped tightly in her black cotton shawl, Emmeline sat on her battered cream sofa, staring into the depths of a fire that reflected her gloomy spirit, black and low.

Somewhere in the distance, a bell chimed midnight—12 echoing calls, as if it were arousing the long gone. On the 12th ring, Emmeline seemed to come to herself. She had been sitting there for hours, just staring blankly at the fire, which was almost out. What remained glowed half-heartedly in the almost pitch darkness. Realising the time, Emmeline supposed she should go to bed. Lighting a candle, she slouched out of the front room and up the creaky stairs to her lonely room. Sighing slightly, she set the candle down on her bedside table. Pulling back the greying sheets of her hangings, Emmeline clambered onto her bed. Just as she was about to get under the sheets, something glinted in the faint moonlight.

Turning around, she saw what had caught the light. An ornate ring, encrusted with one small diamond, sat pristine on the dark oak of her bedside table. Emmeline leaned forward and picked it up. Tears filled her eyes. Why did she have to go? Why now? Taking a deep breath, she put the ring back down and got into bed. There was no more pain left to feel.

A gust of wind blew the hangings up, even though all the windows were closed. Feeling the chill, Emmeline started awaking. She squinted around the room. Another gust. The curtains flew around. Suddenly the echoing toll of a bell chimed again—once, twice, three times. It was 3 a.m. Footsteps, dull and meaningful, were coming slowly but surely toward Emmeline. Beside her, the flame on the candle was growing weaker. It flickered one more time before going out.

Glancing around, Emmeline realized that there was a pearly glow coming from outside her room, and it seemed to be advancing on her. Cowering, she pulled the covers tighter against herself.

'A Christmas Reunion'

By Faye Holt

"Emmeline," a voice called out. It sounded distant, but Emmeline was certain it was coming from the pearly glow. It came a little closer. That's when she made out a face—a face she knew so well—the face of the person she went to the funeral of yesterday.



"No—no, this can't be real," Emmeline thought desperately.

"Emmeline?" the voice called out again. It sounded enquiring this time.

"Audrey?" Emmeline asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"It's me!" Audrey whispered faintly.

"W-wh h-how? I don't understand," Emmeline stuttered. "How are you here?"

Audrey took a deep breath. She seemed hesitant to explain. "Do you forgive me?" she asked meekly.

Emmeline stared at her. "Of course I do," she replied.

Audrey smiled. "When I died, I couldn't move on. I was stuck somewhere—halfway between death and life. That's when I saw this shining light. It was beckoning me, drawing me back to Earth, begging me to come back. Then there was a whisper: 'apologise,' it said," the two sisters stared intently at each other.

"I shouldn't have done it—not just because it resulted in my death, but because I know it hurt you."

"You knew it was my most prized necklace, but you still took it," Emmeline said, staring fixedly at her hands.

"I know, and I'm so sorry. I was being stupid," Audrey replied. "I wish I could take it all back."

"Me too," the girls looked at each other. "The thing I'm most sad about is that you're gone, and at Christmas too!" Tears ran silently, but meaningfully, down Emmeline's cheeks. She gazed at her sister.

"Audrey?"

"I love you!" Audrey said sadly. Her transparent figure slowly grew more and more wispy. She held out her ring finger on her right hand. On it sat a golden version of the one Emmeline had. Sliding it back on her matching finger, she reached out, and they touched. Emmeline had a fleeting vision of Audrey before there was nothing left to see, and Emmeline was left, finger stretched out half-heartedly, alone in the darkness.

The next day, when Emmeline got up, it was Christmas! She felt happier, as if something had been lifted off her shoulders, even though the spirit of her dearly loved sister now sat there, comforting and protecting her as she went about her day.



'Charles – The Person Who Despised Christmas'

By Jack Benniman

The year was 1847; a bone-chilling Christmas set upon the citizens of Rockdale. Snow covered the cobbles, and the distant neigh of horses echoed around the paint-deprived brick walls. But inside one particular house, everything seemed normal.

The house in question was the mayor's. A cruel, savage, brutal man, the owner hated to see joy on the faces of his citizens. The name he went by was Charles—Charles Williams.

Christmas was a very unusual time at his house. No decorations, no celebrations, no singing carols around the warm, soothing fire. Charles loathed Christmas. He always had; ever since he was a young boy.

You may wonder why. It was back when he was twelve, on a snowy Christmas. Charles went to bed, knowing that Father Christmas was going to arrive, bringing him presents. He dreamed of the wonderful toys he was going to get.

In the morning, he rushed down the stairs and opened his stocking. A black, filthy piece of charcoal rested inside. Charles threw his stocking across the room, cursing Father Christmas as he stormed back up to his bedroom.

Now, in the present day, Charles lived alone in his run-down stately home. The musty smell of rotten wood from the creaky floorboards lingered in the air. Barely a flicker from the candle was brave enough to light the obscured room. Only the embers of the coal fire warmed the frost-bitten space. While his neighbours dug into a huge Christmas dinner, laughing and joking, Charles sat alone, the darkness his only friend. Or so he thought...

In the eerie silence of his house, Charles used the whimpering candle to read the daily newspaper. Outside, the clapping of hooves against the rough cobbles rang out, echoing across the tightly packed buildings. The distant singing of carollers could just about be heard.

More cursing from him commenced.

But as he muttered the final word, a strange gust of wind burst through the open window. It felt colder, as if delivering a warning. Then another gust came from a window across the paint-stripped walls. A certain unease settled in Charles' mind.

Then he felt something brush past him. In fact, it felt like a shoulder-charge to the frail, aggravated man. Again, he felt one from the other side. He wanted to scream, but no one would hear him, as everyone else was engrossed in their turkey and stuffing. Why was it him? he thought. An answer arose.

"This is what you deserve after what you have said to me all those years!" a loud, angry voice exclaimed. Bang. Charles was gone—vanished into thin air. No one would know, however, as everyone was enjoying their Christmas, completely oblivious to what had just happened.

This is what the power of Father Christmas can achieve.

'Shadows of Christmas Past'

By Bess Fitzpatrick

The cobblestone streets were blanketed in pure white snow, waiting for a footprint to be stamped in it. Streetlights flickered frantically through the evening fog, casting warm shadows across the ground. The city, hectic and busy, had the sound of only horse-drawn carriages echoing through the still night. Windows and doors were shut, with simmering candles on the windowsills. It was the night before Christmas, December 24th.



Far, far away, there was a house no one dared to lay eyes upon. Inside lived two cats, an old man, and a man consumed by greed. He was as greedy as a child at a birthday party taking a second slice of cake. Frowns and anger froze on his face, and never would you see a smile stumble across it—only if money was involved. Money shone with golden, radiant glows of greed. His name was Thorne—Thorne Luther.

His house was filled with cold air that haunted every corner. A pile of neglected furniture had been torn up and thrown with the slightest care. Plants outside his house were a dark grey, with flakes of petals slowly falling off, pleading for a drop of water.

Knock. Knock. An echo from downstairs rippled toward Thorne. He did not get many knocks, so a shocked expression met his face. A poor beggar, barely able to stand, hobbled to the door. He had not eaten in probably three days, yet he sang a calm melody. A Christmas carol was beautifully sung, for even the beggar thought everyone—even the lonely and unhappy—deserved a Christmas miracle.

Thorne's skin turned pale, and his stomach twisted uncomfortably. For once, someone looked at him not with disgust and hatred, but with happiness and purity. For a second, Thorne almost let a smile slip onto his face.

"Snap out of it," he murmured under his breath. "He probably just wants my money."

"GET OFF MY PROPERTY, YOU GREEDY BEGGAR!" he shouted with no remorse.

A tear slid down the beggar's face, yet a smile remained strong, and a small, delicate sound stuttered out: "Merry Christmas, sir."

While children laid letters and mince pies out for Santa, jumping into bed with smiles gleaming from ear to ear, praying they would sleep through the night, and feeling the pit of guilt for not being their best all year, Thorne lay in bed without regret or shame. "I don't care who gets paid less, as long as I get paid more," he thought. Evil plans ran through his mind like a Monday morning, thinking how he could benefit the most. He didn't care who he hurt, as long as he profited.

As soon as his eyes shut, waves of thuds echoed through his house. What was that noise? Bang. His bedroom door erupted open.

"I am here! I am here as a warning for you!"

Was this a dream? He heard voices from every direction, yet no face appeared.

"Once you dig your hole of greed, there is no ladder to climb back up. Please make good choices."

'Shadows of Christmas Past'

By Bess Fitzpatrick

Silence boomed through the frantic atmosphere. What had just happened?

The sun rose, and so did Thorne. For the first time, he awoke with a clear mind and a smile beaming on his face. It was a Christmas miracle.



'The Chimney Sweep'

By Ted Himsworth

Henry began to climb up the chimney, tools in hand. This had been his fifth chimney he'd swept today, and he was exhausted. His parents and sister were at home for Christmas Eve, but he was the only one working tonight. He was by far the most profitable member of the family due to his parents' unemployment, although he had only turned eleven last week. Henry felt a broom push at his feet — it was Mrs Johnson instructing him to get a move on.

The sound of Mrs Johnson muttering to herself slowly drowned out as Henry began to clean. He scraped a couple of litres of soot from the walls of the chimney until it was almost spotless. He steadily slid down the chimney onto the living room floor, brushing some of the grime off his shoulder as he walked into the kitchen, where Mrs Johnson had been preparing a turkey.

He explained to her that he was finished with his work and was ready to receive his payment. Mrs Johnson looked at him sceptically and brushed past back into the living room. She stood under the chimney and took a short look inside. She looked unimpressed and told him that the chimney was still filthy. Henry, surprised, explained that there was little to no soot left. Mrs Johnson was still not satisfied and threatened to cancel her business with him if he didn't continue cleaning the chimney. Reluctantly, Henry climbed back into the chimney and began scrubbing the already clean walls.

After repeating his work, he once again asked Mrs Johnson for payment. She examined the chimney to check for Henry's mistakes but found herself mildly satisfied with his performance. She handed him four shillings and beckoned him to leave. Henry exclaimed his discomfort with Mrs Johnson. She explained to him that her money was quite tight now, in a rather unconvincing tone. Henry, however, was not in the mood to argue and reluctantly thanked her.

Abruptly, a rumbling noise started coming from the chimney. Mrs Johnson stood up, glanced at Henry, and then slowly walked towards it. Her cabinets began to shake, and her sofa cushions wobbled. After a couple of seconds of furniture movement, soot and coal flew out of every surface in the living room. Black dust swirled across the room like a smoky veil. Both Henry and Mrs Johnson started to look like shadows. Henry wasted no time staying and bolted toward the door, while Mrs Johnson was trapped in the tornado of smoke. He noticed a couple of gold sovereigns on her console table and quickly snatched them off the counter.

Henry ran out, slammed the door, and could only hear the muffled cries of Mrs Johnson. He didn't stay long after and ran home. It was one of the most eventful Christmases of Henry's life.



'The Mourning Ghost'

By Isaac Stinnat

Sam walked along the stone-paved path as carollers ambushed him with their Christmas lyrics. Chariots were pulled along by tall, towering horses, and the rich people inside laughed and pointed at the stragglers on the streets. The sky was ash grey, but warmth seeped through the gaps in the clouds. It was a mild evening, yet everyone still had their massive coats wrapped around them like sausage rolls.

The festive season was Sam's least favourite time of year, as it marked the anniversary of his wife Sandra's death. It had happened in a local public house on Christmas Eve. They had strolled in together, looking for a table, but it was full. Seeing some poor-looking old men in the corner, Sam—being an appallingly arrogant rich man—used his wealth to have them removed. The look on Sandra's face was pure disgust. The men complained, but Sam paid the staff to remove them. Sandra begged Sam to leave them alone and find another table, but he sniggered and ignored her.

Later that night, as they were walking home, the three men came out of a dark, scummy alleyway. They held Sam back and forced him to watch as they stabbed Sandra to death, leaving him distraught and heartbroken in the road. Being Sam with his horrible arrogance, the thought that it was his fault never even crossed his mind.

Sam was heading to the church where a Christmas celebration was being held in the graveyard. He had visited every year since Sandra's death to feel closer to her. The priest began his usual long talk, repeating the same words he said every Christmas Eve. Sam had no intention of listening and headed to the other side of the church, where he found what he was looking for. Sandra's grave was covered in dark green moss and looked as if it had been there for decades.

He had almost finished paying his tributes when a loud scream echoed all around him. Sam recognized the scream immediately—it had been the last sound to ever leave Sandra's mouth. He shivered as the scene replayed in his mind, falling to his knees with his fingers claspng his head. Suddenly, he heard another noise—a quiet crunching from behind him. Footsteps. He spun around to see Sandra's floating body glaring at him. His mind raced with confusion, and he fell back. The ghost said five words and then disappeared:

“My death was your fault.”

The sentence struck Sam like a bullet. The realisation hit him, sending him into another flood of tears. Later that night, Sam's body was discovered lying on Sandra's grave, a note clutched in his hands.

*'The Ghost of You'.
Isla Caley*

hear your every breath,
I note the ups and downs.
I am with you until your death,
And I hate to see you frown.



I am the ghost of you,
And I should have come sooner.
I have seen your every move,
I know about your love — I know about your Luna.

The house decked with boughs of holly,
The Christmas tree shines brightly,
Stockings hung above the fireplace,
The scene before you so unsightly.

With skin as pale as the snow,
And eyes as blue as ice,
I know what you did to her —
You must pay the ultimate price.

How could you do this to your beloved,
The one you vowed to cherish?
You stabbed her in cold blood,
You left her there to perish.

Her death will play within your mind,
It will drive you slowly to madness.
It will take a toll on your whole life —
Your actions bring me great sadness.

I am no longer the ghost of you,
Just a ghost who saw your last breath.
I am no longer tied down to your soul —
Your sorrow and guilt have brought you to death.



'The Twelfth Chime'

Elina Nowruz

It was December 24th, 1872, the day before Christmas. Arthur Smith was making his way down the ragged cobblestone path, dimly lit by the rusted gas lamps and covered in snow which had been falling all day. The winter air had long settled in, bringing a cold breeze to the evenings. The town was quiet, occasionally interrupted by the sound of horse carriages and the bells tolling in the distance to signify it had hit 10 p.m. Stars twinkled above, watching over.



This wasn't new for Arthur; he had developed a schedule. Every morning, he would wake up and start his day with a hot cup of coffee, head out to grab his newspaper, go to work, and end it with a slow walk around the town until it hit eleven. Some might even call it insanity. Yet, even though our friend had found comfort in the routine, he was clueless about what would happen on this particular winter night.

His trench coat blew behind every step he took, trailing against the back of his leather shoes, echoing in the silence. Most people were tucked away in their warm beds. It was uncommon for somebody to be out so late; in fact, you could consider it to be greedy. Why should you only come out once everybody else had left? However, his thoughts were elsewhere, focusing more on what the future would hold. For example, if he would have to restock his coffee soon. A swift gust of wind brushed past his face, biting at his exposed skin and making him stop in his tracks. Something about it was different... It seemed as if it had happened on purpose, as if there was something trying to warn him. 'No, no, this is silly,' he thought...

Arthur went along his way, hoping to forget about what had happened—another stupid thing to do—when a large cloud covered the moon, dimming the area around him instantly. Fog began to rise, only adding to the sudden uneasiness he felt in his stomach. Nonetheless, he didn't stop. His determination wasn't considered admirable anymore; rather... foolish. He should have just gone home and listened to his gut.

The bell rang again. It always would a certain number of times, based on the hour it had hit, and he would count it. Another habit Arthur had picked up on. Remember, if it was last 10 p.m., the clock should ring eleven times. He began to follow along to the chimes. Eleven? No. Twelve.

But that couldn't be. Had he lost track of time? Arthur scavenged in his coat, pulling out his golden pocket watch. It was, in fact, midnight. It was only now that he finally took in his surroundings with full awareness. The town no longer had any source of illumination; every street lamp had flickered out, the houses were dull, no window had a candle flickering, no boutique had a torch outside.

He glanced around and couldn't believe it when he saw faint, transparent shadows begin to walk the streets. They lit up the place, a distinct glow to each figure around the shape of its long, human-like limbs. Arthur attempted to familiarise himself with his surroundings, realising he had forgotten where he was, as if he had just moved to this place. One of the entities turned towards him. It had no face, no features, yet it saw him. It knew he was there.

"You aren't meant to be here," it spoke in a ghastly voice—hushed and private, not to disturb anything. "...Who are you?" he managed to respond, his voice trembling.

"Learn your place," the figure whispered before placing its hand over Arthur's wide eyes..

'Grace in the fog'

Nicole Rees

Howling, pounding, and obscuring from sight even the red-brick home mere metres from the feeble window, the lethal combination of impenetrable fog and vigorous wind made its presence known — it was unmistakable how tempestuous the weather was beyond the walls in which she sat. Despite this, and how inviting the idea of curling up beside the liling fire was, another moment in her grandmother's home threatened a mince pie recipe or unwanted conversation being forced upon her. How aggravating she found it.

Standing, the girl — who had two braids trailing down her back like teardrops on a mournful face, and a woefully sour expression to match — reached for a coat which lacked any warmth, as well as the ragged, worn scarf slung carelessly over the back of a creaking kitchen stool. With a glance, it was indisputable that her elderly relative was deep in slumber. Nothing could stir her. She would not, nor did she wish to, wake her.

Within mere moments, the girl was combating the calculated swings of the swirling wind, and the house from which she had emerged felt endlessly far.

In spite of the fact that she felt fatally tired, sleep would not overcome her, no matter how many hours were spent with her eyes locked beneath her eyelids — a jail cell behind her lashes. A deep sigh and a deft flick of the wrist later, the candle cast a sombre glow upon the overcast bedroom.

Though her vision was bleary, a swift movement to her left caused the girl to encase herself in one of many threadbare blankets. Once more, she saw it. What could possibly be lurking in her room at this time? Nothing good, that was for sure. Seconds later, when her eyes had adjusted, the young girl was able to make out an almost ethereal, luminescent glow. Scrambling backwards, she cried out in alarm. Its face was not visible beneath a hooded cloak; however, the otherworldly presence was absolutely evident.

Everything appeared to grow louder — the clock tick, tick, ticking, the floorboards creaking, screeching for solitude, and, ultimately, the ominous words which the ghost whispered: "You shall die without love, as you have shown to others, for God has grace."

She nodded. Heart thumping like a timpani, the girl leapt out of her iron-framed bed and scrambled towards her shoes, whilst in a singular sweeping movement she threw on a coat. Christmas festivities from the day prior continued, even as the sun began to cross the horizon, signifying day had begun; yet this was unbeknownst to her as she careered down the frigid cobblestone streets.

Infinite strides later, she stood once more before the building — her grandparents' home. Without even knocking, the girl flew through the maroon front door. Hurling forwards, she stopped before the armchair in which her grandmother sat. Lifeless.

"Grandma Grace," she cried dolefully. Sunlight peeked through the misty windows, but at the centre of the room, once more, stood the ghost, illuminating a cold glimmer throughout the space. Lifting its arm, it brushed off the hood, revealing a familiar face — her grandmother's.

'When The Snow Fell Silently'

Annabel Elmer

Snow covered the worn cobblestone. It was not an unusual sight, but there was a certain chill in the air. She was unsure how to express it; the frost did not encircle her invitingly, as it had before. It cut through her throat like a knife, and her hair follicles shot straight upwards. Carol singers sauntered joyously down the streets. Despite her disgust, she drove her body forwards, attempting to muster enough energy to enjoy the day. It was Christmas, after all.



Not much could compare to walking into a warm, fire-lit room after being gnawed at by the winter cold. She wiped her feet on the matted rug, worn under the endless footsteps which had trodden carelessly over it. Angry thoughts swirled in her head, cursing the celebration. The whole day was pointless, she thought. Calling out, expecting a reply, she scanned the room. The fireplace was roaring, content with its meal and emitting great warmth, which she welcomed. However, the silence echoed the blade of eerie chilliness as she called again. In an effort to comfort herself, she sat down, her spine still tense. All of her hair was on end, despite the heat of the fire licking at her.

Footsteps. One, two, three, four...

They were behind her now — she turned, but there was nothing. Abruptly, she stood up. A voice spoke beside her.

“Sit down again, dear.”

A harrowing scream rose from her lungs as she promptly fell backwards in fright. Temporarily dazed, she hastily pulled herself back up, trying to believe what she saw before her. She stood, frozen once again. Loving eyes stared softly into hers, enticing her with warmth and knowing. The woman's wrinkles, etched into her face by time, rose upwards as she smiled. She knew that smile, yet the memory had been an old book, just collecting dust in the back of her mind's library. The smile was not just a smile.

“Mother?”

A nod.

For the first time since she could remember, she did not feel alone. She was surrounded by understanding and love; she felt it embrace her. Closing her eyes, she allowed the feeling to fill her chest and engulf her. When she opened her eyes, the smile was gone, as were the eyes. The worn chair sat there innocently, as if it had not just experienced the presence she had. Helplessly, she whipped her head around the room, trying to understand. Nothing. She had gone.

Keys turned in the door, and feet trudged into the doorway. This time she did not turn.

“Are you well, dear?”

He walked towards her, but she was unable to speak. Although her mother had gone, the feeling lingered. It still filled the gaps between her sentences as she told him. His eyes looked at her with disbelief. Then they softened into the same as she had just seen — with love, and knowing, and belief.

Perhaps she could learn to love Christmas.

'The Fire's Embrace'

Anjali Monet

A soft gust of wind tickled the draperies hanging from the north-facing window of an old cottage. This "home" had not been inhabited for at least a hundred years by any soul more astute than a rodent. That, however, did not diminish its significance.

A winding road beckoned travellers towards this house, though the snow that usually found itself sprawling across this plateau concealed any trace of cobblestone. On this particular evening, the rain had fallen just enough to allow the snow to glisten atop the roof of the building. One Clara Bithstowe would find herself pulled toward this alleged sanctuary; for she had been in search of refuge far too long to deny this opportunity.

Snow took note of each step she took, studying her every move — perhaps gathering proof that someone had actually found themselves walking towards this residence. She shivered from the icy wind that swirled around her, entering her veins and ensuring she could not escape the cold. It seemed as though the nature around her had made some sort of agreement to captivate Clara and coax her to come towards this cottage. What was different about this young, naïve girl that made the restless wilderness choose to entice her so desperately?

Clara reached out towards the rusted gate, half devoured by snow, and pushed it forward, resulting in an audible groan from its hinges. She hesitated for a moment before stepping through the now-open gate. There was something that compelled her towards that house. She wasn't sure why she kept walking; her legs seemed to have a mind of their own as they propelled her forwards slowly with every step. Her body seemed complicit in the house's plot, obeying a will that was not her own.

At that moment, all Clara desired was heat. Warmth was all she craved; it allured her with a charm no bachelor could match. It was painfully obvious to Clara that this cottage was the only way she could gain any sense of warmth, regardless of her subconscious doubt. She came face to face with the rickety door — it was unnaturally inviting. Clara pressed her fingers against the oak, and it swung open. It had been expecting her. A flood of heat rushed out the door, engulfing Clara in a sensation that was so gratifying it was addictive. Her mind switched off, leaving her under the supervision of her body's desperate thirst for more of this heat.

She walked further into the hallway of the cottage; it seemed warmer and more inviting than before. A fireplace silently raged in the corner of the living room, along with a davenport that seemed to have already moulded itself to the contours of her body. Sheepskin blankets were bundled seductively in a tweed basket. Clara couldn't resist. She was voluntarily walking into whatever scheme this may have been; she wasn't in the mindset to deny this comfort.

She was so desperate she practically ran towards the room. Just as she lowered herself onto the davenport, a figure seemed to crawl out of the fire. Its translucent claws reached for the hearth of the fireplace. It pushed itself out of the flames and revealed its form. Clara was no longer in solace; she had been joined by a spectre sent from someone whose only intention was to feed.

'A Cautionary Tale'

Dylan Jennings

A hum filled the crisp, cool air. It was the rumble of an engine, the thrum of a generator — charging the crowd with Christmas spirit. Cold seeped out of his body as the warming vibrations of the harmony seeped in; the numbness of winter was being replaced with a mellow but noticeable joy.

Performing above excitable children and worn-out parents on a raised, candlelit platform overrun with various greenery — a dangerous combination — the choir transitioned from the soothing embrace of the previous harmony to tales of Christmases past. Whilst they regaled the youth with melodic narratives, Charlie's attention quickly wandered over to his surroundings. Slanted shopfronts faced the square from all sides — shut and soaking in shadows. It was Christmas, after all. A light dusting of fine, brilliant white snow fell ever-constant from the moonless, cloudless, onyx sky — like icing sugar through a sieve onto Christmas cake. It was getting late.

Charlie really should be getting back for dinner.

A shortcut took him through a number of dimly lit alleyways that continued one after another. Charlie had taken this path countless times, so he wasn't scared in the slightest, even though it was late. Why should he be? Shadows contorted into shapes that didn't quite look natural — cast by dying lanterns that hadn't been there the last time Charlie could remember. The snow was gone now, and so was the wind that accompanied it. Charlie's hastening steps splashing through pools of half-melted snow were all that he could hear. Until they weren't.

"D'you know what guilt feels like, my boy?"

The voice tickled his ear. It was the wind brushing past you on a still day. Flames licking up at you from a bonfire. It was fleeting and uncontainable, but unquestionably real. All at once, Charlie twisted around and swung out in one fluid motion, catching nothing but thin, icy air.

"Oh, I'm not like you, you see. I can't play and hug and fight anymore. You can't touch me." Again, Charlie let a wayward fist fly — to no effect.

"Guilt ties you down. Stops you from moving on until you've freed yourself from it. That's what happened to me."

Flight prevailed over fight. Charlie made a mad dash towards the end of the alley. His legs failed him — weighed down by some invisible force. Charlie was stuck.

"This is what I feel like, boy. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to run."

The voice continued its monologue, no longer a murmur but now a booming bellow that felt as though it came from within.

"So I'm trapped here. I can't enjoy Christmas like everyone else can. Just because of one stupid mistake I made thirty years before I died. Guilt stays with you forever. Remember that, boy."

And Charlie did. The memory of the voice never left him. And neither did its warnings.

Guilt stays with you forever.

You can't escape it.

'The Clockmaker's Debt'

Ronia Joshi

The fog had settled thick over the village of Ashbury, wrapping chimneys and cobblestones alike in a damp shroud. Within the dim confines of a narrow shop at the edge of the square, Albert Evans bent over a clock face, his glasses clouded with breath, his fingers blackened with oil and dust.

It had been eleven years since Albert had last spoken to his son, Felix. Eleven years since that silver watch — their family's sacred heirloom — had vanished from its velvet box. Albert was sure it had been Felix, jealous of his father's fortune and success. Harsh words were said, and the next morning the boy had left, taking the watch with him. Eleanor, Albert's gentle wife, had died soon after. He buried the grief for his family in his work — surrounded by time, yet unwilling to face it.

On this Christmas night, with the oil lamps in the street extinguished by storm, Albert worked by candlelight. As midnight neared, a sound rose above the dim ticking: the low, sonorous chime of the grandfather clock in the corner. But that clock had not worked in years.

He turned slowly.

There, beside the clock, stood a figure in black — a woman draped in mourning clothes, pale and still as moonlight.

"Eleanor," Albert whispered, his voice cracking like an old gear.

She nodded once. "I have come because you will not let go, Albert. And neither can he."

Albert trembled, bracing himself against the worktable. "He betrayed me. He stole—"

"No," she said, her voice soft as falling ash, "he sold the watch to pay for my medicine. He could not bear to see me suffer. But he feared your wrath more than death itself."

Silence fell. The clocks around them began to stammer and spin, hands twitching in fevered panic. Albert gritted his teeth as guilt crept in like droplets of rain after a storm. Eleanor's figure grew fainter, and he reached out, but she backed away, solemnly shaking her head.

"Time does not wait, Albert," she said gently, "but it may forgive — if you let it."

And with that, she was gone. Only the soft chime of the grandfather clock remained.

Albert moved as one in a dream. He rummaged through a long-forgotten drawer until he found it: a pawn slip, dated just days before Eleanor's death. The truth, yellowed with time. All these years, he had been wrong, and it had cost him his family.

The next morning, wrapped in an old coat, Albert crossed town to the modest cottage on the hill. He clutched the silver watch in his hand — clean and polished, steadily ticking once more.

The door creaked open. Felix stood before him, older, wary.

'The Clockmaker's Debt'

Ronia Joshi

They stared at each other. Then Albert, voice low and rough, said, "My son, I have been wrong... for a very long time."

Felix's eyes glistened. He stepped aside, and the door remained open.



As Albert entered, the watch in his pocket struck the hour — a clear, forgiving chime.



'The Boy Who Opened Christmas'

Clark Van Huet

Early in the morning, the snow from the night before was falling along the pavements of the moonlit streets, resting on the window ledges of sleeping children. However, not all children were sleeping. One house on North Street was silent through the night; the whole family was asleep except for little Henry, who was stirring in his bed. His mind whirred with excitement for the day ahead. The thoughts of joy and anticipation were affecting him like a full bag of sweets. He rolled and fidgeted but just couldn't rest. Then he came up with the perfect idea — one he'd never tried before.

Bedtime was strict in this house, and so was waking up: you were not to leave your bed until 6:30, strictly. Henry just couldn't keep still, so he decided to hop out of bed and explore.

Henry brought his trusty candle from the window ledge towards his large door. The door was old and creaky — a big risk. His little hand grabbed the golden doorknob and twisted. The click was loud. He swung the door open slowly, using all his might to stop as much creaking as possible. Success! He was now so close to his goal: presents. This was his favourite day of the year — the fun of opening gifts and seeing what was inside, just for him. Candlelight flickered down the corridor, the only light he had.

Tiptoeing towards the living room filled him with excitement. Little Henry was being rebellious against Mother and Father, which made him feel alive — but he knew it was wrong. He didn't care, not yet. As he reached the bottom of the decorated evergreen tree, covered in baubles, he ripped straight into the paper of the gifts labelled as his. He was so happy.

The first gift he opened was a pair of brand-new shoes — sleek and shiny, absolutely perfect for school! He threw them onto his feet and became filled with glee. The next was a pack of pear drops, his absolute favourite. The sweetness and fruity flavour were a delicacy in Henry's mind. Without hesitation, he dug in immediately, gobbling seven of them at once — an incredible show of greed. But he wasn't done yet: he ate them all.

After only ten minutes, all his presents were open. He was finally done. The excitement was over. He could go back to bed... right?

No. Henry wasn't finished. Greed surrounded him. He tore through his sister's presents, then his brother's, then his mother's, and finally his father's. Paper was thrown all over the room, completely covering the floor in shreds. Henry sat there. Absolute silence surrounded him. The pile of gifts haunted him.

He knew what he had done was wrong, and he couldn't undo it. He just stared at what he'd done and how disappointed his family would be. "Their Christmas will be ruined," he thought. His mind swirled — but not like it did in bed. It hurt and made him feel sick. He hated what he had done, and he didn't know what to do.

'The Factory of God'

Shaf Phillips

The year is 1843. The Industrial Revolution is in full effect. Down in the factories of the working class, there's no such thing as Christmas. It's just another day. Hope and happiness do not exist down here in the real world.

It was a clear black night, a clear white moon. The snow raged down upon England like God himself — it was almost as if the Reckoning had just begun. Deep in the depths of this penal institution we call a town, we in the working class are slaving away, bringing joy to those above us. While they party and celebrate, stuffing their mouths with meat and guzzling down the finest port as if it were rain, we're here, bent double. No rights. No justice. What the hell is Christmas anyway?

We grunt and grimace with pain as we work our lives away. My name is Mary Elizabeth. I'm a short, stubby brunette girl — not likely to be married off. I'm like a toy for those in power who do not understand what it's like to live like normal humans, like us. They're too busy playing God. I have no parents, no money, and no sense of how I came to be alive. I'm seventeen years old. I live and work in a workhouse. I have weekends off.

The time is currently 11:45 on Christmas Eve. We get the day off tomorrow — from the workhouse, at least. We usually get cleaned up and sent to a random nightclub to satisfy the major powers that keep us in jobs. Me and the other girls hate it. There's no hope for marriage here. Covered in soot and dirt is no way to sell yourself. We're virtually trapped. With only fifteen minutes to go, we're motivated now more than ever to finish.

It's almost as if the Christmas Spirit is a real thing.

Ten minutes to go — there's a fuzziness in the air. We continue to work as best we can. Five minutes to go — the room is thick with a mystical aroma, and the sweet smell of mince pies from high above us satisfies us to our souls.

The moment arrives. Mr Carnegie descends before bellowing, "Merry Christmas, my girls!" The rest of the ladies cheer. I stare with utter hatred.

"Please, girls, have the rest of today off. I will see you later to assign each of you to a nightclub to celebrate this momentous occasion! However, Miss Elizabeth, I will require you in my office for a lecture after I escort my family off the premises," Carnegie spat in a devious tone, a cheesy grin growing on his face.

Not so soon, I thought. Tiredness had clung to me as much as Christmas spirit had to the others.

The commotion died down. His family left. I began the climb — rising to the heavens. As I used my remaining strength to open the door, I was greeted by Mr Carnegie leaning back in his chair, blood foaming from his mouth, staining the authentic leather.

After the shock had set in, a loud bang went off. The workhouse was engulfed in flames.

'The Factory of God'
Shaf Phillips

I died on the spot.

Merry Christmas. Happy birthday, Jesus. No man is more powerful than God. Believe that — more than you believe in Jesus.



'Her Final Waltz'

Alannah Davies

He kept the balcony doors closed now, though he knew she'd always loved the view.

Victor lay in his cold four-poster bed, chilled to the bone without her warmth beside him. The bed felt too big — just like the rest of his sprawling mansion, no longer filled with her laughter. Staring at the ceiling, he wished he could sleep through the next day, not feeling the festive spirit in his empty heart. A deep ache throbbed in his chest as his mind taunted him with memories of her, now faded with time.

Ever since the accident three years ago, the dark had been his enemy, bringing him guilt-filled nightmares that left him sobbing and shaking — wretched thoughts tumbling through his unworthy mind. As the years had passed, he'd wallowed in self-loathing and sorrow, letting his grief overcome him completely. Nothing was worth it now. Not without her.

A whining wind whipped through the room from the balcony, and Victor revelled in its cool touch as it sucked all the warmth he didn't deserve from the bedroom. The balcony. Bolting upright in bed, his eyes shot to the doors that hadn't been opened in three years, which now swung back and forth, rusted hinges creaking.

The lacy white drapes that hung over the doors floated outwards, twisting and curling like spectral hands beckoning him forward. He reached for the oil lamp on his bedside table, its golden light casting eerie shadows around his room.

A ticking came from his ancient grandfather clock that towered in its dusty corner, distorted and off-beat, and in his peripheral vision a shadow moved. Wind stirred the cream sheets next to him, and his bed creaked as if someone had lain down.

Dread settled in his bones and crawled up his spine as his heart began to race. A soft humming came from outside, and Victor crept towards it. On his balcony, a ghostly figure waltzed alone, lost in its mournful song. Its nightgown was ripped, and dusty mud covered one side, as if it had been sleeping on the hard ground outside.

The trembling melody rose around him — hauntingly beautiful and filled with sorrow — and as the song drew to a close, the figure turned to him, its ethereal face glowing in the moonlight. Victor drew in a strangled breath at the face he saw before him: a face that haunted his every waking moment. The face of his lost love.

It hit him like a physical blow, and suddenly he was back on this very same balcony — dancing, laughing, shouting. Suddenly he was tipsy, his mind fogged by the celebratory liquor, his words slurred. There was his wife, beaming at him as he spun her around their moonlit balcony, waltzing to her favourite song.

There she was again, sobbing, tears streaming down her beautiful face as he screamed at her, drunk out of his mind.

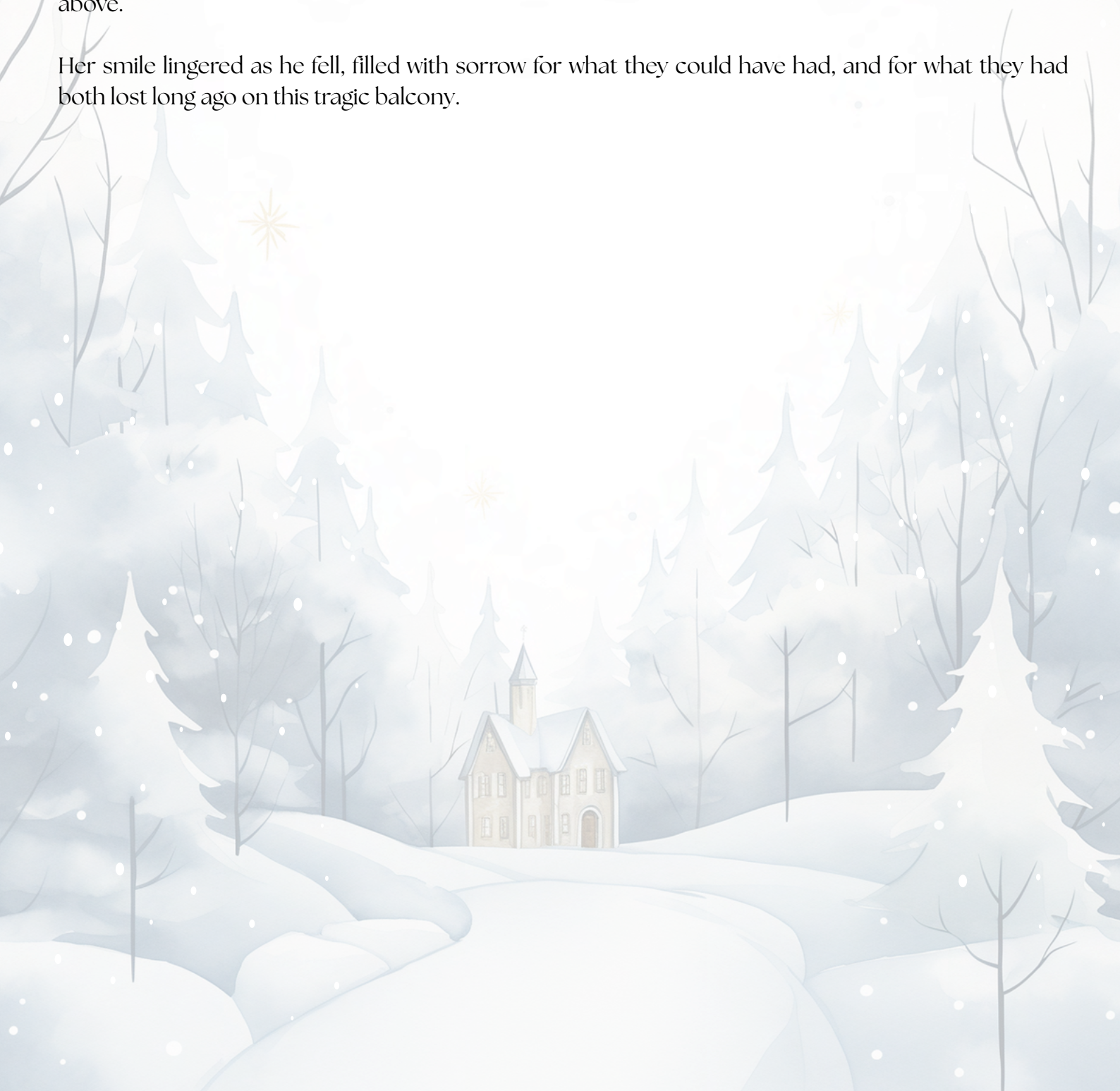
'Her Final Waltz'
Alannah Davies

There was his hand lashing out, striking the face he loved so much — watching in horror as she fell into the railing and it cracked beneath her weight. And then came that heart-wrenching scream as she plummeted to the ground below, his world shattering as the thud echoed up to him.

A guttural scream tore from his throat as he stared up at the face that had haunted him so stunningly, and suddenly he couldn't bear it — couldn't bear to look into those depthless eyes still filled with endless love.

His chest heaved as he gulped down ragged breaths, his mind replaying those scenes again and again like a torturous, never-ending film. His vision blurred and his steps faltered as he slipped on a loose floorboard — suddenly tumbling off, reaching for the angelic figure that smiled down at him from above.

Her smile lingered as he fell, filled with sorrow for what they could have had, and for what they had both lost long ago on this tragic balcony.



'One Strange Ghost'

Alexia Garrilloae

In the days of old, and nights of cold, a small but mighty village, full of cheer and joyous energy, celebrated Christmas like it was their last. They transformed the streets into a magical burst of green, white, and red, making sure that everyone felt the spirit of Christmas. No one across the entire world could do it like them.



This was where a young boy lived — a boy who counted down the days to Christmas, even when it had just ended. Now that time had come around once more. Only ten days remained until young Victor celebrated Christmas just like before.

“Mum, look! Only ten days! Aren’t you excited?” Victor cried out with joy.

“Yes, dear. Only ten more bedtimes until Santa can give you your presents. What did you wish for again?”

“I wished for my own pet. I really want a dog, and I can name it Frankie!”

Mum nodded, as if keeping a mental note. Victor didn’t seem to notice, and went on with his day, watching the village come to life with cheers, songs, and decorations everywhere. Only ten days until true happiness fell upon this village... right?

Christmas was drawing near, and nothing was going wrong. All the decorations were finished now, and the village’s yearly Christmas checklist was being ticked off one by one with ease. They weren’t expecting any visitors until the big day, when family and friends would come by to celebrate along with them.

However, there was a strange breeze. An eerie breeze. It swept over Victor’s village fast, with enough power to drain all the colour from the lights — then silence. A faint, white glow came through the streets.

“A ghost?” Victor whispered, watching the chaos erupt through the village.

“Reveal yourself immediately! Who do you think you are, coming to ruin our joy?” The mayor stood in front of the strange glow, trembling slightly.

No words followed. The ‘ghost’ struck the mayor fast, leaving him... soulless.

And just like that, the joy of Christmas was stripped clean, leaving disorganisation and hopelessness behind. All by one strange, white glow, sucking the colour from the happiest village in the world. One. Strange. ‘Ghost’...

'A Friend For Christmas'

Gabi Vaggas

It was a bleak, wintry evening as a young girl made her way across the slippery cobblestones towards her small grey cottage. Elizabeth lived among the trees on the edge of the woods, as her father was the village woodcutter. Every day he disappeared into the wild, shadowy forest, emerging with wagonfuls of wood for the village to buy. Yet the family descended into poverty as soon as a new woodcutter from a wealthy village began charging a cheaper price in Elizabeth's own village.

Elizabeth was a short girl, her growth stunted by her family's perilous situation. She had long, raven hair and large, chestnut eyes. Her family all had hundreds of freckles dotting their bodies in random placements. She was thirteen years old and had only a year left before she would have to leave school to help her family survive. Elizabeth dreaded the day when she would no longer be able to learn the intriguing things taught at school and would have to labour long and hard to make a living.

As Christmas approached, the entire village was wreathed in festive spirit. Spiny, towering evergreens congregated in the marketplace, and scarlet and emerald decorations were everywhere — from the schoolroom to the blacksmith's. Elizabeth and her little brother and sister wished desperately for something special for Christmas, but Elizabeth knew her family could not afford anything extraordinary, so she did not pester her parents at all.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, in a large, lavish house that loomed above all the others, lived Mr Joseph Bertram. Mr Bertram was a man with a warm, polite exterior, but a cold, miserly interior. Much like its owner, the overshadowing townhouse was cheery and decorated with a Christmas wreath, yet its halls were hung with nothing but gloom and shadows. Many who stepped inside did not wish to return. Mr Bertram had begun supplying the town with cheap wood; however, the wood was rotten and entirely inflammable. This only led the people to buy further wood from him, and Mr Bertram grew rich, alone in his vast house, which rattled with emptiness.

Late that night, Mr Bertram was awoken by a strange whistling sound at the end of his corridor. He lay in bed, clutching his thick duvet and blankets closer around his thin frame. The whistling continued until Mr Bertram stuck his head right down in the bedclothes. It immediately stopped, but when he gingerly ventured into the hallway, he heard the cheery whistling again. Stopping dead in his tracks, he stood frozen in fear. Suddenly, the eerie voice began singing a cold, haunting tune. At that, Mr Bertram darted back to his bedroom as fast as his legs could carry him.

After waiting there for any further sounds of the terrifying voice, he heard none.

"Bah!" Mr Bertram muttered as he drifted back to sleep. "Must have been some halfwit carolers. Coming around at this time, really!"

The next morning was bright and cheery as Elizabeth crawled out from under her threadbare, grey blanket. She grumbled as she got dressed in her brown woollen dress and trudged down the stairs. Suddenly, Elizabeth heard an insistent whistling noise at the front door. It broke out into a loud song as she darted towards the door, so loud that she could hear it as she placed her hand on the doorknob. But as soon as she opened the door, Elizabeth saw no one there. All that was left was a small envelope on the stone doorstep. She picked it up and found that inside was a pile of money, with a note: Merry Christmas! From a friend.

'The Two Gifts'

Brody Chan

It was Christmas morning, only a couple of hours past sunrise. The streets were still deserted; an eerie silence covered the town. The roads were littered with a foot-thick layer of snow — the entire scene seemed tranquil.

Abruptly, the ominous silence was broken by the faint sound of footsteps from afar. Across the snow-covered cobbled street, a strange silhouette appeared. The figure was tall, with a long, unkempt white beard, and wore a striking red robe. He stopped in front of a dilapidated oak doorway belonging to a small apartment. He took a key from his pocket and opened the door. Following a disruptive bang as the door closed, silence fell upon the now desolate street once more.

Inside the house, the man called upstairs, "Margaret!" After a few seconds, a thud was heard from upstairs. Then a young woman appeared on the stairs. She had youthful beauty, but a sinister smile spread across her face upon seeing the man. Approaching him, her grin widened, yet her eyes betrayed something malicious, with evil intent.

The man exclaimed, "Good morning, and a merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," she replied simply.

The flame from a pre-lit fire roared, with warm-coloured lamps scattered across the front room. The slight whistling of wind against the window was all that could be heard.

Suddenly, the man said, "Hey, Margaret, come sit down with me... Merry Christmas! I got you something!" He had weary eyes but tried a caring smile.

"What is it?" The sinister look in her eyes widened as if in excitement.

The man presented an elegant, ornate box, caramel brown in colour. After a moment, Margaret gasped exaggeratedly and snatched the box. Speedily, she opened it, and her smile faded. Inside was a beautiful, beaded necklace. Her eyes lost their excitement; only disdain and discomfort remained. She quickly readjusted, offering a slight smile. "Thank you. It's... gorgeous."

The man's weary eyes now fixated on the floor. After a pause, he looked at her again. "No, I saw that look. That gift was expensive! It took effort to find it, let alone pay for it!" His expression turned cold as he stared at her. "You'd better find some gratitude in your heart. That took serious effort to collect and save that money. After all this time, you never truly appreciated me. I loved you."

The woman was left shocked and without words as he turned and left. A tear rolled down her cheek as she reminisced about every time she had never given a heartfelt thank you. She broke from her thoughts and rushed to the door to chase after him. At the doorstep, the man was gone; the snow remained undisturbed as if no one had been there.

Suddenly, a hand rested on her shoulder. "Merry Christmas," said the same weary-eyed man — this time in scruffy, dirty attire. Despite the grime, his gaze was longing yet kind. "I got something for you," he said, producing a small box.

'The Two Gifts'
Brody Chan

Upon opening it, Margaret found a smaller necklace, with her initials made from glue and paper attached. She gasped and offered a heartfelt "thank you."



'Reflections of the Damned'

Xanthe Silvey

A bitter, icy wind swept through the town, carrying whispers of deadly secrets and mysteries from ghosts of the past. Powdery snow settled upon the wet cobblestone streets, which glistened in the faint, flickering light of the streetlamp, its flame glowing red as blood against the inky black sky. Grand wooden carriages were pulled along by large, ominous black horses, their hooves clomping across the uneven stones, echoing through the desolate streets. Towering, gloomy buildings surrounded the road, immersing it in eerie darkness.

A soft light appeared from a window above — warm and comforting against the frosty air. The room was cosy and inviting, its walls decorated with rich maroon wood panels and adorned with large oil paintings. From the ceiling hung an elegant golden chandelier, its light dappled across the rustic wooden floor. An ornate fireplace stood in the middle of the wall, a vicious roaring fire hissing and dancing within thick grey smoke.

Mr Edwards strode into the room, a tall, dominant man dressed in a pristine black suit, his expression tough and assertive. He sighed as he wandered over to the fireplace, sipping a drink slowly. Upon the mantelpiece lay an old mirror, its dark wooden frame intricately carved and thick with dust. It seemed odd to Mr Edwards, since he had only just moved the mirror there the previous evening. He stared longingly at his reflection, which seemed darker and more ominous than the gentle amber light emitted from the last embers of the fire.

A brisk, icy breeze blew through a gap in the window, flapping the curtains violently. Distant church bells tolled, and ghostly whispers drifted through the air. His focus returned to the mirror — lingering behind him was a sinister figure. Abruptly, he turned in alarm. Nothing. The horrifying figure that had once appeared behind him in the mirror was gone.

Aghast, he stood frozen before the mirror. The heavy stench of death and despair hung around him. The figure towered over him, its grotesque, menacing features becoming clear in the gloomy glass. Its skin was grey and lifeless, and its eyes were concealed in shadows. Sharp, bony fingers reached out, touching the glass as though it were a forbidden passage to the world.

Drawing closer, its eyes became visible through strands of dark, string-like hair. They pierced into his soul — disheartening and chilling. Its knife-like nails etched words across the murky surface of the mirror, which let out a shrill screech. The glass beneath its fingers crackled into dust, revealing the daunting message:

"We have fallen into the curse. You will never escape."

'Reflections of the Damned'

Xanthe Silvey

A bitter, icy wind swept through the town, carrying whispers of deadly secrets and mysteries from ghosts of the past. Powdery snow settled upon the wet cobblestone streets, which glistened in the faint, flickering light of the streetlamp, its flame glowing red as blood against the inky black sky. Grand wooden carriages were pulled along by large, ominous black horses, their hooves clomping across the uneven stones, echoing through the desolate streets. Towering, gloomy buildings surrounded the road, immersing it in eerie darkness.

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'The Cold You Keep'

Luca Junavle

Snow fell thick on the cobblestone street of Ashfield Row, muffling the sound of distant carolers whose voices trembled in the cold. In the parlour of Pembroke House, the coal fire glowed faintly, casting amber light on the brass clock. Its hands crept toward midnight.

Mr Thomas Pembroke, a man with a stern expression and solitary habits, sat in his high-backed chair, staring at the flames as if they might speak. He disliked Christmas and found it wasteful and sentimental. Yet the season had a way of creeping into even the most guarded hearts. A delicate knock sounded at the door, precise and unnerving.

When he opened it, he found not a visitor of flesh and blood but a pale figure robed in frost and mist. Her eyes reflected candlelight like silver.

"Mary," he gasped, for Mary had been his sister, long dead for twenty years.

"I have come," she whispered. "Because the bells will toll for you soon, brother. I cannot rest knowing the cold in which you keep your heart."

She drifted into the parlour, and the fire hissed as if recoiling from her chill. Outside, a horse-drawn carriage passed with dim lamps, the driver a shadow in the swirling snow. Inside, Mary's voice was low but urgent.

"You turned away the Collins family today, leaving them in the street. Yet you have more coal than you can burn and more bread than you can eat. Did you not learn, Thomas, that wealth hoarded is weight to the soul?"

He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. The clock struck twelve; with each chime, her form grew fainter.

"The cold you give will be the cold you keep," she warned, her eyes soft and sorrowful now. "Warm another's Christmas, and your own heart may yet know the fire."

As the final chime faded, Mary was gone, leaving only the faint scent of winter roses and a curious absence of chill. Thomas stood silent for a long moment. Then, as the carolers' song floated closer, he placed his coat on his shoulders and stepped into the snow.

By morning, the Collins family woke to find baskets of bread and coal at their door, along with a note written in a fine Victorian hand: May your Christmas be warm, and may the frost pass swiftly from your days.

In Ashfield Row, people would say Mr Pembroke's eyes shone brighter that winter, as if some secret ember had finally caught fire — not from the flames in his parlour, but from the ghostly counsel of a sister's love.

'Lantern in the Snow'

Bella Kenbey

Silently, the snow fell thick over the streets of London, covering the cobblestones like a white quilt. The lamps glowed dimly through the fog, and the sound of carollers echoed from houses far away.

Thomas Blackwell hurried along the street, clinging onto his trench coat for as much warmth as he could get. He was a young man, desperately trying to earn money, and so he was working late on Christmas Eve. Even though his boots were now soaked with the residue of snow, he could not afford to miss a day's pay, as he knew money meant everything.

As he passed the old church in the town centre, he noticed a flicker of light coming from between the gravestones. To his surprise, a lantern was set on the damp grass, with an old man in a torn coat perched beside it, a strange expression across his wrinkled face. He looked frail and weary, almost transparent in the dim glow of the snowy night. Thomas felt a small wave of pity take over him, but he forced himself to continue walking.

Just when he reached the next corner, something made him glance back. The homeless man had disappeared, but the lantern remained stationary. An unusual unease filled him. Against his better judgement, he turned back to inspect.

As he cautiously approached the light, the flame unexpectedly flared brighter, producing elongated shadows that stretched across the graveyard. The air grew colder, and the atmosphere became almost spooky. Before him appeared the figure of the old man, no longer alive, yet ghostly pale and silent. His expression was sorrowful, almost as if he were pleading.

In the eerie glow, Thomas suddenly understood. The poor old man had died here, perhaps a winter ago, abandoned and forgotten. At that moment, Thomas remembered that he had once walked past this same place, ignoring a beggar's outstretched hand the year before. The feeling of guilt settled heavily in his chest.

The ghost raised the lantern from its spot, letting the light flood the surroundings of the church, revealing many other pale faces half-hidden beneath the snow: the victims of the lost and forgotten, cold and neglected. Their silence affected him more powerfully than any words could.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the lantern's glow began to fade. The figures sank back into the snow, leaving the graveyard empty once again.

When morning came, Thomas was no longer the same man who had hurried home the night before. The memory of the ghostly lantern was engraved into his mind, and its warmth seemed to follow him like a never-ending loop of scenes from a play in which he was trapped.

From then on, Thomas gave what he could each Christmas: a light in the darkness for those left behind on cold nights. And sometimes, on snowy evenings, a lantern's glow could be seen beside him, shining steadily through the frost.

'Be Merry' *Connie Angus*

The station was a remarkable feat of engineering, transforming the space that once held a monastery's dining hall into a bastion of modern technology. The bustling crowd on their daily commute barely caught the echoes of the past still ingrained in the stone, or the whispers of cheerful carols hanging in the frosty air.



Three centuries earlier, Monk Beerwort had been enjoying the festive merriment of the feast after Advent when he heard the chords to his favourite hymn, *Be Merry*, and began to sing—simultaneously reaching for another Brussels sprout. He choked. His untimely demise did not herald the end of his joy, for it is at Christmas that the past comes knocking the loudest.

Snow carpeted the platform in a muffled hush; the distant gas lamps, still burning into the morning, flickered like watchful eyes in the dusk. A wreath of holly hung heavy upon the stationhouse door, but inside, a chill lingered that no heart could warm. Cobwebs clung to the moth-eaten curtains, and frost traced lace-like patterns upon the windowpanes, hiding the world in icy silence.

Weather-worn boots trudged from the doorstep down the platform to await the daily mail train. Christmas Eve was merely another working day for stationmaster Ernest Wethershall—not that he minded. Silence forced him to face his grief and the loss of ambition he once shared with a distant friend, a friend who had employees to delegate to and a family to enjoy the season with.

Laughter and uneven footsteps announced the raucous paperboys, but Ernest's annoyance was halted by the telling sound of a roaring train. After distributing the newspapers singing the joys of Christmas, the boys darted away, barely glancing back at the stationmaster—forever stuck in winter but never Christmas. Such ecstasy scratched at the surface of his icy heart, but nothing shattered, only his temper.

Enveloped in darkness, Ernest awoke from dreamless sleep. The clock on the mantle ticked solemnly, as if marking time for the dead. A bright voice sang unknown words against the dull night. A candle, quickly lit, created shadows on the wallpaper, curled like old skin. Ernest reluctantly rose to bid away the naively happy carollers. Upon opening the door, he was met only by the frigid air, which penetrated the hallway and almost dispelled the odour of earth and mildew.

Frustrated, Ernest made his way along the platform, calling out deterrents but met with nothing but winter. A cold breath whispered against the night, and each step echoed like a warning in the gloom. The wind snuffed out the candle. The station sign screeched. The fog engulfed him.

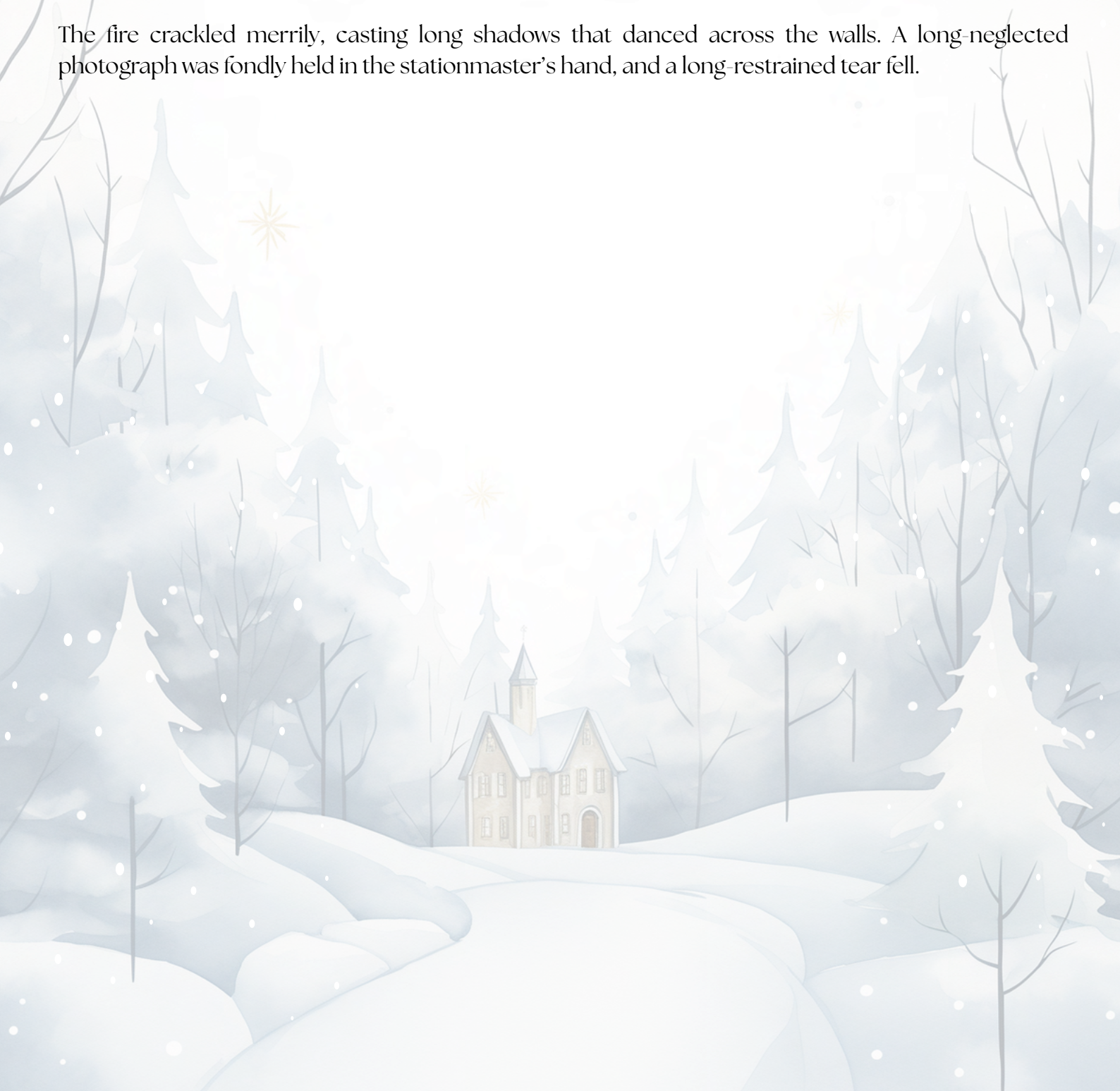
At that instant, he felt it: a presence, ancient and joyful, pressing against the veil of the living, calling out for him to rejoice. Rejoice! A warmth welcomed him and banished the bitter wind. Even so, Ernest's heart leapt and he fled.

'Be Merry'
Connie Angus

Christmas morning arrived not with fanfare but with a hush, as though the world were holding its breath. The stationhouse stood by the platform as always. The stationmaster awaited the mail train, sorting through the letters as he had every morning. His eyes widened as they fell on a parcel addressed to him. Regret clung to him like the snow on his coat—cold, damp, and impossible to shake. His friend had sent a parcel overflowing with Christmas goods: figgy pudding, mince pies, jam, slices of glazed ham, cheese, and oranges.

Suddenly, Ernest lost his balance as a daring snowball hit him. Turning slowly, he opened his mouth to reprimand but then heard a ghostly whisper sing, “Be merry.” He took a deep breath, brushed the snow from his arm, and wished the paperboys a merry Christmas, sending them on their way with an orange each, earning youthful grins in return.

The fire crackled merrily, casting long shadows that danced across the walls. A long-neglected photograph was fondly held in the stationmaster’s hand, and a long-restrained tear fell.



'The Absent Calling Card'

Charlotte Raynes

Fatigued from the endless events of the day, I slumped down comfortably in my homely, well-worn armchair which swallowed me whole, relentlessly rocking my arched spine back and forth, causing my suffocating corset to dig mercilessly into my lower belly. As a way of distracting myself from the aching pain, I turned my stiffened head towards the sash window which revealed a turbulent storm. A crash of foreboding thunder shook the befouled oak floorboards vigorously.

It illuminated the tenebrous drawing room with vivid arms of electricity, turning the unsettling darkness a ghostly silver colour and revealing the morbid shadow of my treadle sewing machine which lay motionless in the far end of the room. The crackling of the radiant fire rushed a transient yet comforting thrill straight through me, causing my tensed upper body to droop and my quickened heart rate subsequently slowed.

As I reclined further back, I rested my ponderous head against the wood and admired the aesthetically pleasing, evergreen foliage that lay delicately along the windowsill. Candles flooded the room with festive light, and I smiled to myself, in anticipation of the Christmas that awaited me.

All at once, an animalistic scratching at the window made me jump in shock as I turned to see a ghastly looking, boney woman standing outside, looking straight at me, wide eyed, her face full of desperation. She was dressed in rags, and her face was pallid, as if she hadn't eaten in days. She was soaking wet from the freezing, falling snow, causing her hunched body to shake uncontrollably while miming something that resembled, "Help me". Rolling my eyes, with the certainty that she would be only asking for money, I turned back round, irritated that she dared to spoil my Christmas Eve. My weary eyes began to shut, and my breathing slowed, as I began to drift off to sleep, ignoring the desperate, freezing lady outside.

When I woke again, during the night, something was off. An eerie chill rushed over my shaking body unhesitantly as my terrified eyes scanned the room. What happened next shook me to the core. One by one, the once cheerful candles blew out of their own accord. Just like that. Something sinister was about to happen. Something ominous. That was when I saw it. That same blasted woman. There she stood in front of me, her figure distorted and unnatural. She looked into my terrified eyes and said in a menacing voice, "Hello, Enid. I am the ghost of Christmas Compassion.

You have shown no willingness to help the desperate poor, and so you will pay the price." I awoke suddenly and realised, to my horror, that I was now lying outside in the freezing, winter air, my shivering body curled in a ball. I had been replaced. A tear streamed down my face, as I desperately pressed my hands up against the frosty glass. The woman inside looked at me with disgust, rolled her eyes, and turned back round.

'The Green Door'

Kobi Dick

The snow fell thick upon the vast wooden doors. Stood like giants, they helplessly watched as snow piled up sealing the entrance tight. Inside, a crackle could be heard from the lounge where a grand fireplace sat while Oscar Thompson sat quietly sewing. A wreath lay upon the mantle. The cherries gleamed red like spilled wine and the pine's strong smell drifted through the house.

"Don't wander past that green door," Aunty Lewis had warned. "Not on Christmas eve."

But Oscar was curious. As the house slept, he crept barefoot past the ticking grandfather clock and along the unlit corridor. His candle began to shiver, almost as if it were trying to run in the opposite direction. The green door loomed at the end. Its brass knob looked untouched and rather decorated. Oscar hesitated and then turned it. Inside was darkness, It was like a void. He lifted his candle and walked inside. There were cobwebs that infested the bed post. An old dressing table stood in the corner of the room with a cold looking mirror with a small crack on top.

There in front of him was a bell dangling from the ceiling. Oscar reached for it.

He pulled the rope and the bell rang out. Then silence. The mirror became frosted, and the candles flickered to life. A small man walked towards Oscar in a tattered white dress with a pale face.

"You rang..." he said softly.

Oscar stepped back and gasped. "Who... who are you?"

"Caden," said the strange man. "I abandoned her. Left and forgotten. I only wanted to come back for Christmas but ended up being locked here for eternity."

Oscar trembled as he asked, "Did you die here?"

Caden nodded with sadness and anger. "I just want to leave this place." he pointed to the green door.

"No one has opened that door for many years."

Oscar glanced back at the door curious and afraid. "I'm sorry you've been here for so long." said Oscar.

"Please... please let me leave the dark place that I have been captured in for all these years."

Oscar guided the ghost to the door without an answer. Caden looked back with a soft smile and walked away, never to return to the infamous room he had been in for so long.



'Christmas Eve'

Rosie Fitzpatrick

It was Christmas Eve 1847, and the snow lay thick on the cobblestone streets of London. The lamplighter had long since finished his rounds and the sweet whisper of 'Holy night' echoed through the city. The excitement of small children buzzed through houses was muffled by the heavy descent of snow and distant church bells. A slender, narrow house overlooked the square, fending away any carollers as if it were written on the door. Mr Edmund sat in his parlour, a single candle placed on his window shelf, overlooking the squalor on the streets below. Beggars ascended from door to door, their frozen limbs aching for warmth. Their cries rang around Mr Edmund's empty heart. Not a sliver of sympathy was cut for them. Their knocks on his door drew slower and slower until only their muffled sobs crawled away.

Mr Edmund rose, the wavering flame casting shadows of his face. The fire soon sank to embers, but Mr Edmund didn't do anything to revive it; warmth, like kindness, had long been a stranger to him. More knocks banged against his door, startling him. "Confound these beggars" he muttered to himself "Time for a fitting lesson for such hearts as theirs". He swung open his door, expecting to shoo away the needy. Instead, silence was found, no soul stood on the step, only the falling snow swirled - lit up by the gentle fire coming from the lamp posts. A lone candle sat on his doorstep, its fire thriving despite the weather.

His mind spiking with curiosity, Mr Edmund picked it up and brought it inside and placed it next to his own. Its flame grew larger and larger until a glowing figure took its place. Mr Edmund's breath caught in his throat.

"Clara...", his late-wife, gone for 10 years, stood in front of him - her eyes which used to be filled with love and laughter now overflowing with sorrow.

"Why sits my husband alone, while all the world rejoices?" Her cold voice cut through him.

"Clara, if this be madness let me not awaken" He fell to his knees.

"Tis not madness, but mercy. Why do you watch your fire sink to ashes, while others shiver in the lanes, with naught but snow for a covering? The poor are perishing in the cold, and yet you linger by your dying hearth."

The room grew cold; the icy wind outside seeped through the cracks in his windowpanes. Clara's body flickered "Help them, my love - and perhaps Heaven will kindle warmth for you as well"

Suddenly, like a flame, a gush of wind blew her out, as if she were never there.

When the first carol passed his window at dawn, their fear of Mr Edmund and his house grew to wonder. His house was lit with life, candlelight shining through the frost. A reef hung on his door and a box of food, water and money sat beside it for anyone to take. From that Christmas forward, an extra flame burned for his wife.

'The Sleepless Eve'

Ayman Shelley

His body was tightly tucked into his covers. Practically sweating, he could not escape the overbearing thoughts of what would come tomorrow.

But it would be okay.

Christmas day was fast approaching, and alongside it, the responsibilities of being an adult in a time of childlike wonder. He had not been acquainted with his childhood, nor any kind of youth for years at this point, and it seemed like his next encounter would be long after he reached his pearly gates.

But it would be okay.

He couldn't seem to hold his eyes close together long enough to drift off. He changed positions countless times but was constantly awoken by the vague jingling of bells or the subtle scent of sweet pie wafting around the atmosphere; so, he momentarily opened his eyes to see what was the fuss.

That was when he first saw it.

To describe it with words would be doing it a disservice, as its true appearance is beyond the confines of our futile reality. It presented itself as the amalgamation of blood, sweat and tears after a lifetime of heaving through work, covered in what seemed to be a thick coating of a gel made from forced smiles and false joy.

Standing at the end of his bed, he could barely make out its movements as faint tears impaired his vision. It was either rapidly growing or darting towards him.

Beating as softly as a blackened heart, the dark spirits inside seemed to be fighting out of its disguise, relentlessly pounding on its border. It was staring him in the eyes, as if attempting to send a message. Registering a clear tone yet lacking any kind of clear structure or purpose.

Raging towards him, it had a personal bone to pick with him. It was getting closer.

His entire body was overpowered. His soul had slipped out of body and left nothing but the spirits of pure sorrow.

Yet as he stiffly turned his head around the room and across his reality, he felt no difference. Everything was the same. What could this mean for his soul?

Was this some twisted insult against his character, a way to suggest that his spirit was devout of meaning, however that thought was full of pessimism. And pessimism hadn't gotten him far.

Perhaps it was a way for him to see who he was, and looking at a mysterious figure standing at the edge of his bed is a way of him looking into his own eyes.

'The Sleepless Eve'
Ayman Shelley

Perhaps a commentary of how his workload never seemed to end at the office, rather it was dragged into the streets, and all the way to his home. Despite the holiday season, he would not be surrounded by family, cheer and joy. He would be surrounded by paperwork, files and sorrow.

Something required a change.



In the midst of the night, he slipped out of his bed and drew open the curtains.

Tomorrow was going to be a new day.

And it would be okay.



'The Candle in the Window'

Milo Sydenham

On Christmas Eve of 1864, snow blanketed Halcombe Street, softening the gaslight and muting the sound of passing carriages. Inside Number Seven, Mr. Edwin Greaves sat alone in a high-backed chair, the coal fire casting a low, flickering glow.

The parlour was silent, the air still. A single beeswax candle burned on the mantel—lit each year in memory of his wife, who had died five winters ago. Outside, carolers sang faintly beneath mufflers and bonnets. Their joy did not touch the house. Mr. Greaves had drawn the curtains tightly, as he had every Christmas since her passing.

At midnight, the church bell tolled twelve. The candle flickered. A board creaked above.

He froze.

The upstairs rooms had been locked for years. The sound came again—soft steps along the corridor, deliberate and slow. He rose and climbed the stairs. The air grew colder. At the end of the hallway, the door to the master bedroom stood open. Moonlight poured in through frosted glass.

And there, beside the window, stood a figure in pale blue.

She was not as he had last seen her—frail and fading—but as she had once been: graceful, with eyes like the December sky. She did not turn, nor speak. She simply looked outward, her presence still and solemn.

Following her gaze, he saw the world beyond: the attic window across the street where a shoeboy sat alone by candlelight; the widow who lit no tree this year; the children who passed his house, eyes wide with hope. And then, quietly, she was gone.

Downstairs, the fire had dimmed, but the candle burned steady. Its flame no longer trembled.

On Christmas morning, neighbours looked on in astonishment as Mr. Greaves appeared in the snow, coat dusted white, basket in hand. He delivered bread, shared his coal, opened his parlour to song. The house, long silent, filled once more with warmth and voices.

That night, the candle remained lit. Its flame did not waver. And though the figure was never seen again, those who passed the house in winters to come would pause, feeling a hush in the air—as though someone watched from behind the curtains, content at last.

'The Christmas Omen'

Lola Maton

It was Christmas Eve of 1852, and James, a working-class man, sat around the dinner table with his wife and son, Michael. It was windy outside, and a storm was brewing, yet inside their small house a fire was lit, and the atmosphere was cosy and homelike. Candles, too, were lit around the room, and a plate of bread, vegetables, and meat lay on each of their plates.



They were talking about James's work and the awful men who ran the factory. All of a sudden, the fire flickered strangely, though no one except James noticed. It looked almost as though air had struck the fire from the side—but that was impossible. James excused himself from the table, walking slowly out of the dining room. His footsteps began to echo through the house once he left the cosy room.

He reached the front door, hearing the wind whistling outside. Pulling on a coat and boots, and taking up a lantern, he paused. His breath was shallow, which wasn't normal for James, as he was a giant, muscular man. He had no reason to be afraid, he thought; he'd never been worried about going out at night before. But tonight was different. The wind felt a little more sinister, the sky a little darker, and the world outside a little quieter.

He took a step beyond the door—his footsteps the only sound in the silence. As he walked to the side of the house toward the shed, something flickered in the corner of his eye. A flash—or perhaps a movement. It couldn't have been a flash, could it? His eyes must have been deceiving him. A murder of crows flew overhead, and he glanced up. Another flash. He couldn't have imagined it now...



'The Transformation'

By Amber Ebsworth

It was a cold, crisp night, but the sound of the carols singing while walking on the snow-covered cobblestone streets from door to door lit up the streets. Still, Agnes complained about them singing. She always complained about anything and everything. She was a harridan and rude to everyone. So, when the carols knocked on her door, she was absolutely livid.



Agnes hated Christmas, she despised Christmas she had a deep loathing for Christmas.

Too much celebration. Too much joy.

On Christmas eve she did the same routine as she usually does. Her routine consisted of complaining to herself; going into the candle lit parlour; blowing out the candles.

Her footsteps echoed around the empty house and the stairs screeched under her feet as she headed to her bedroom. The quiet ticking of the grandfather clock was quickly replaced with the chiming of it ding, ding, ding... ten post meridiem: Agnes's bedtime.

Agnes nestled in for the night, her breathing mixed with the now quiet ticking of the grandfather clock. A few hours of quiet and no complaining. When the grandfather clock hit twelve ante meridiem a ghostly, golden orb started shining brightly with every second by the clock it shone brighter and brighter.

Agnes slowly opened her eyes and sat up - why is it so bright? The ghostly, golden orb was now a haunting figure that looked like a little girl

"I AM THE CHILD OF YULETIDE" it bellowed, "I AM HERE TO SHOW YOU YOUR ACTIONS AND THE CAUSES."

Silence... then: "hold my hand and let me show you what you have done."

Agnes held the child of yuletide's hand, and the child of yuletide led her through a portal-like entrance to the future. The child of yuletide said "this is the future, but your actions seal your fate. in prison. Your nasty attitude made you push a policeman down a flight of stairs because you were caught stealing a typewriter after you complained it was too expensive" the child of yuletide explained, "actions have consequences."

And, some say, Agnes was never the same again.



'The Ghost In The Christmas Candlelight'

By Savvy Moodley

In London town one Christmas Eve,
When frost like lace on panes did weave,
A lamplit street lay still and white,
Beneath the hush of holy night.



The carolers sang by the old church gate,
Their voices soft, their song about fate;
While horse-drawn carriage clattered slow,
Through drifting veils of silent snow.

Within a parlour, small but fair,
Young Thomas sat in a wooden chair.
The hearth was low, the coals burned red,
Yet shadows danced like thoughts unsaid.

For Thomas, though so young and neat,
Had grown through toil and lack of meat;
A miser's son with heart turned cold,
Who'd learned to value naught but gold.

But as the clock struck half past one,
The candle flickered- then was done.
The room grew chill, the fire grew dim,
And something stirred- a spectral hymn.

Through curling mist a figure came,
A weary face, yet much the same.
His father's eyes, both stern and sad,
Looked down on him- yet not with bad.

"My son", the ghostly figure did sigh,
"Your soul grows hollow as years pass by.
I once loved coin more than my kin,
And thus was lost to frost within.

"Beware the greed that blinds your sight,
For hearts grow gold in endless nights.
Share what you have, or soon you'll see,
A christmas grave where warmth shall be."

The room felt still, the bell struck two,
And Thomas wept, his heart anew.
He stoked the fire, its glow returned,
And deep within, compassion burned.

'The Ghost In The Christmas Candlelight'

By Sanavi Moodley

At dawn he walked the cobbled street,
With bread and coal for those in need;
He gave, and smiled through falling snow,
As candlelight from windows glowed.



Yet sometimes, when the year grows late,
And carols drift by the old church gate,
And mist will rise where no wind blows-
And there walks Thomas, with the ghost he knows.

Some say they wander, hand in hand,
To bless the poor across the land.
A tale of warmth from winter's frost-
A soul once saved, and one once lost.



“Someone”
By Mannie Brian

Walking along the snow-covered cobblestones, children ran past me, their laughter ringing in my ears. It was just a distant echo as my thoughts engulfed my soul. Carollers surrounded by gathering listeners, their joyful words filling the atmosphere. I passed all of it. Not stopping for a single moment until I saw my reflection in a shop window. My dress flowed down to my ankles and my coat draped over my shoulders. But no one saw the corset underneath it all. The corset that dug into my flesh and crushed my bones. A piece of the clothing that I was obliged to wear, to look skinny on a man's arms. Luckily, I found a man who doesn't care about all that. As I turned to leave the candles flickered in the window; with one singular flame blowing out. It was like someone had purposely blown it out, it was the candle that illuminated my face. Now all that I could see was my reflection from the chest down. It made me look just like her. I hated that. A chilling breeze scraped my neck, setting the tiny hairs on edge before the trees whispered warnings. I ignored them.

Once at home the glow of the coal fire lit my tiny living room and I warmed my hands by the flames. My strange encounter with the wind was still playing on my mind. A large thump came from the room above me. It was strange since tonight I was the only one at home: my husband was working overseas; my two beautiful children were with their grandma and my sister - well I don't concern myself with her whereabouts anymore. Suddenly, my stomach started to burn, lifting my top - long free from the trap of a corset - I saw my scar pulsating. It felt like it wanted to jump out of my skin. Thump.

Another crash. More burning skin.

Grabbing the closet candelabra, I stole some light from the fire and delicately made my way to the stairs. The stairs made a lot of noise but having grown up here, I knew exactly where to step to stop it from squeaking underfoot. I was careful and agile, not wanting to alert whatever was upstairs of my presence. It seemed the intruder was in the last room on the right, but that room hadn't been used in years. The floors were dirty, and the out-of-date furniture was covered with cloth. I hadn't dared step foot in there since. Thump. This time I ran, hoping to scare it off. I swung the door open, waving the fire around like some weapon. But there was nothing. No animal. No sign of a forced entry. Turning to leave I saw the red box knocked on its side and the photo of me and my two sisters on the floor. I thought I had thrown that photo away or at least taken it out of this house. It was a disgrace to look at. I bent down to see it more clearly and just as I picked it up my candelabra went out. Just like when I was standing outside that shop. This time I knew someone had blown it out. I jumped up and the door slammed shut, making me gasp. The room felt suffocating, like someone else was using up all the oxygen. But there was no sound of another person breathing or their movements trying to keep them hidden.

And out of nowhere, it flew in front of me, blocking my escape. A ghost. Slyly smiling down at me. "Hello..." it whispered, bearing its sharp shark-like teeth, "sister."

'Typical Delusion: A Victorian Ghost Story

By Emily Cronan

As the lamplighter snuffed out the final flame, the only lights which could be seen were from inside the comfort of the imposing houses of Highgate Village. In one such house, the cosy glow of the hearth illuminated a newlywed couple, settling down on the chesterfield settee for their first Christmas night together. A tall, fastidiously decorated spruce tree loomed over the otherwise peaceful living room, a young and rosy-cheeked Elizabeth knitting for a needlework project she had recently begun while her husband, a middle-aged man by the name of William, read silently beside her. The atmosphere smelt subtly of almonds, the cook presumably readying a meal for Christmas day.

A sudden draught of chilling air swept in from the cracks underneath the front door, obtaining the attention of the young bride. She cast her glance over to the grandiose porch, the stained glass appearing peculiarly gloomy. Seemingly noticing her shift in attention, William called out – rather stridently – for a servant to ensure the door had been shut properly. He resumed his reading. However, Elizabeth was not so easily reassured, even when one of the maids rushed over and confirmed all was fine. Her sapphire gaze remained focused on the doorway, the dark mahogany frame flaunting her husband's rich pockets. As the maid turned to leave, Elizabeth caught a glance of a subtle, abnormal ripple in the air. Yet she spoke not of it, knowing William would likely dismiss it as 'typical feminine delusion' – he would probably be right. He always was.

She stood nervously, her hands fumbling and fidgeting around, touching her silver wedding band and anxiously waiting until William finally looked up at her, his steely gaze piercing through the tense air. "I shall retire to bed... As the festivities of the day have tired me, I feel it would be best for me to have an early night. Is this alright by you?"

He gave her a nod and Elizabeth waited not, quickly exiting the grand room and ascending the long spiral staircase. The deep browns of the wood cast a strikingly sinister sensation that Elizabeth had never really noticed before. Perhaps it was just paranoia, but the long, winding, empty hallways and doleful, lifeless, vacant rooms that she had previously viewed as elegant, regal, proper... suddenly seemed awfully eerie.

She finally approached the master bedroom, the door creaking open as she passed the threshold. She hesitated. Confusion and surprise swallowed her mind; a book with a worn leather sheath sat in the middle of the four-poster bed. Approaching the mysterious item, it became clear that the book was not only a diary, but the diary of William's first wife, Ophelia Hart. Now, Elizabeth was of course very familiar with her demise; it had been all over the newspapers of London, and William would often complain about her while they were... spending nights together, so to say. Ophelia had died of tuberculosis, which – as William had expertly explained with his charming brilliance – had curiously affected her psyche. In her final days, she rarely showed her face in public but when she did, she had been hysterical and, honestly, quite frightening; William was a good man for standing up for Ophelia and keeping her inside to protect her reputation up until her death (which took slightly longer than Elizabeth would've liked, but it was all well and good now that it'd finally happened and she could have William all to herself).

'Typical Delusion: A Victorian Ghost Story

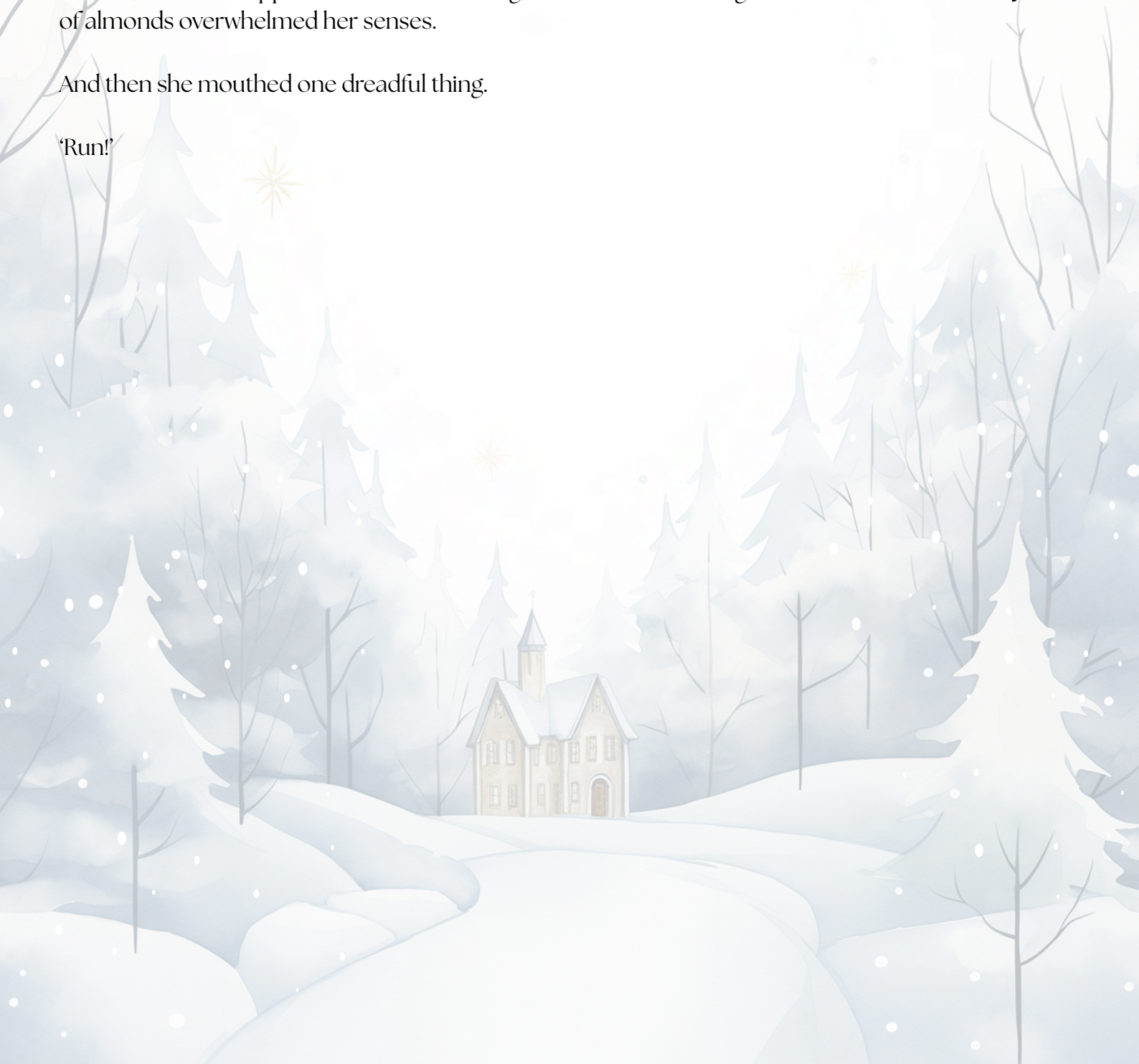
By Emily Cronan

Dismissing as a servant's mistake, Elizabeth hastily snatched the diary away, not wanting William to see or think she'd been snooping around. She headed into the closest bagnio, conveniently on the same floor, intending to tuck away the diary somewhere it would remain unseen. Even if William did still stumble across it, there would be little chance of him suspecting her, his innocent and harmless and foolish wife, as the one whom had planted it there.

Yet, while searching through the cabinets and cupboards, she caught glimpse of something in the corner of her eye. She turned and froze. There, in the reflection in the mirror mounted upon the wall, was the ghost of Ophelia Hart. But... she didn't look like someone who had died from tuberculosis, no. Her skin was a cherry red, as opposed to the typical pale whiteness; froth dripped from her open mouth, rather than the coughed-up blood you would expect from someone that had befallen the fate she did; her chest appeared as it was heaving, like she was straining herself to breathe. A sickly scent of almonds overwhelmed her senses.

And then she mouthed one dreadful thing.

'Run!'



'The Ghost of Christmas'

By Toby Bak

The winter cold tries to invade the warmth protected by my winter coat. The crunch of snow can be heard under people's feet, echoing off the walls of the narrow streets. A distant ringing of bells can be heard, as it was Christmas Eve and the day was coming to a close. When I arrive home and shut the door, I feel an urge to light a fire and warm up the place. The fire soon comes to life, filling the room with the relaxing crackling sound and the warm glow I have become so familiar with this winter. I soon relax in an armchair and make the most of the heat before the fire dies down. I have truly received a Christmas miracle this winter, as I have been promoted in my place of work. After five minutes I light some candles and start making dinner, which will be turkey as a special Christmas treat. I soon fill my belly with the delicious stuff and go to bed shortly after. I blow out all the candles and walk up the stairs to the bedroom, where I tuck myself under the bedsheets while snowflakes fall onto the windows, and then I go to sleep.

I wake up, look at the alarm clock on my bedside table and see that it is 4 a.m. The room feels unrealistically cold, and the only source of light is the moonlight shining through the window. Suddenly I hear the shattering sound of glass falling off a table. I was frightened to my core, but this was nothing compared to what I saw next. A small figure began to appear — only a faint outline at first — but it began to get clearer. Then I realised who it was. I was shocked. It was my dead son.

I physically could not move as the ghostly figure stood at my bedside. He did not look one bit different from how he was before he died. He said, "Father, I have come down to Earth to tell you some very important news — you will soon be dead." I soon came to the conclusion that "I must be dreaming, I must be!" The ghost replied, "I promise you are not dreaming, Father. This is very real, and this is very serious news. You will be dead in no more and no less than forty days. I advise you to use this time very wisely, Father. Now goodbye." The ghost faded away before I had any time to react, and I just sat upright in my bed, stunned.



'The Brother'

By Coney O'Shea

It was a dark night: snow building on the nearby factories' smokestacks, and the fire under the chimney emitting soothing crackles that echoed throughout my house's walls. I was sleeping deeply and peacefully when suddenly a loud crash broke the air of tranquillity in my home. I sprang up, cautious of the noise that seemed to have come from the hallway leading to my room. I rubbed my eyes to rid myself of the haziness that remained after my awakening and mustered up the courage to check what had transpired outside my room.

I crept up to my door in utmost silence so as not to alert any possible intruders to my presence, and carefully prised it open. Much to my dismay, I saw a translucent man, no more than six feet tall, raspily breathing while looking just past me. Despite my belief that this couldn't be worse, the ghost's eyes travelled from my side to my own, its grey, dulled eyes piercing mine. It was my late brother. I reached out to him weakly; he had died just a year beforehand from cholera.

His shrill voice drilled into my skull: "You can't carry on with my death burdening you."

My throat tightened as I struggled for words.

"You have to let go."

His final words echoed throughout my mind. Before I even had the chance to react to his sudden and haunting appearance, his apparition slowly faded away like mist.

I was short of breath. I simply couldn't comprehend what had just happened or what I should do. I ended up deciding to take a brisk walk and sleep to clear my mind, but once I awoke in the morning I couldn't shake my brother's words. They weighed so heavily on my thoughts that they convinced me to make amends with those I had wronged in the past — and those who had wronged me. I decided to go and talk to the rest of my family, whom I had not spoken to since my brother's death...



'The Maid'

Evie Briddon

Once upon a time in the 19th century, a robin sat on the branch of a fir tree. It overlooked the cobbled streets with a light dusting of snow. The robin could hear the clicking of the horses' hooves as they pulled carriages. Through the window was a candle-lit house, with three young children playing around the bottom of a little tree with a pine cone. The father laid the table whilst the mother prepared what little food they had. Laughter filled the room with warmth as the fire lightly glowed. Underneath the tree was bare, with only five gifts; they were nicely wrapped in day-old newspaper, with string tied around in bows. They gathered around the fireplace and began to pull at the strings. The robin fluttered its wings and flew down the street at once.

A mansion stood further down a street with others just the same. They were all tall and had multiple storeys. Vines spread along the walls. They all ranged in different colours: off-white, and some grey that needed repainting. There was one house in particular that stood out. It was tucked away at the bottom. Bricks had begun to crumble, and the pillars had many chips. It looked archaic and original. The robin flew up to the splintered wooden window frame. Unlike the previous house, the activity inside was cold, unwanted, and felt unnatural.

Aaron sat at the far head of the table. A servant strode over with a jug in hand. She was unbelievably pale and had a stick-like figure. Aaron did not recognise her to be one of their many household staff. He tried to remember all their names, but his mother made it difficult, as she had a habit of firing them. He and his mother were accustomed to a life of luxury. Money was no problem for them; if something wasn't to their taste, they simply replaced it. From an outsider's view, it looked as if they had everything anyone could ever ask for — expensive clothes, endless amounts of food, and exclusive collections of art decorating their gracious house.

Grief changes people and how they act, although that is no excuse for bad behaviour. Aaron used to be a delightful boy, running around the house with his father chasing him. Laughter used to fill the rooms, and the maids had exceptional bonds with the family. Unfortunately, his father passed away while on a business trip. Ever since then, the household had mourned him and changed their ways. They became snobbish and protective over their money.

As much as Aaron loved his way of life, he longed to be loved and treasured. His mother was distant and uninvolved in his life. His affection was bought with whatever his heart desired — but now he craved more.

The servant poured his drink.

"What do you wish for this year, young man?"

"What does it have to do with you?" he scoffed.

"I can give you whatever you want, just say the word," she replied.

He looked at her. His eyes were distant, as if staring right through the lady.

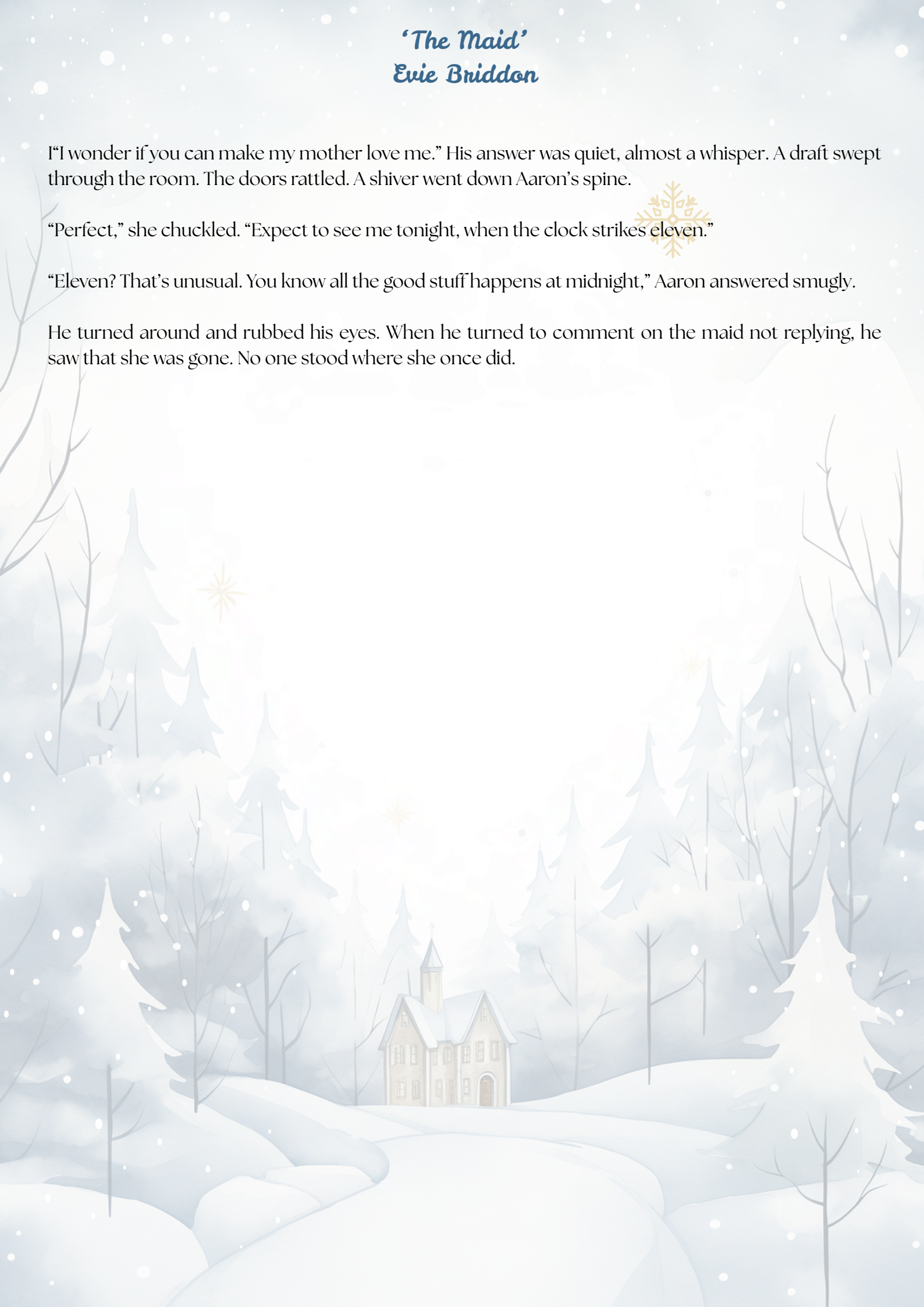
'The Maid'
Evie Briddon

"I wonder if you can make my mother love me." His answer was quiet, almost a whisper. A draft swept through the room. The doors rattled. A shiver went down Aaron's spine.

"Perfect," she chuckled. "Expect to see me tonight, when the clock strikes eleven."

"Eleven? That's unusual. You know all the good stuff happens at midnight," Aaron answered smugly.

He turned around and rubbed his eyes. When he turned to comment on the maid not replying, he saw that she was gone. No one stood where she once did.



'White Christmas'

By Gianna Dhillon

The snow lay thick like a white blanket on the streets of London; the fog from the chimneys swirled in the air. Yet there was a spine-chilling feeling that cloaked the streets — the feeling of someone breathing down your neck.



Inside a candle-lit tailor's shop, a young girl named Carmen stared outside, her breath fogging up the glass windows as she whispered, "The joy of Christmas..."

Suddenly, the warmth of the room disappeared, and Carmen shivered. She thought she had heard something — like a foot sliding down a chimney or a breathless whisper. The candle flickered. She saw something in the corner.

"Who's there...?"

A raspy voice answered, "Me. Skelly."

The figure of smoke and bones stepped out. "I used to clean these chimneys... until I didn't make it up one Christmas Eve."

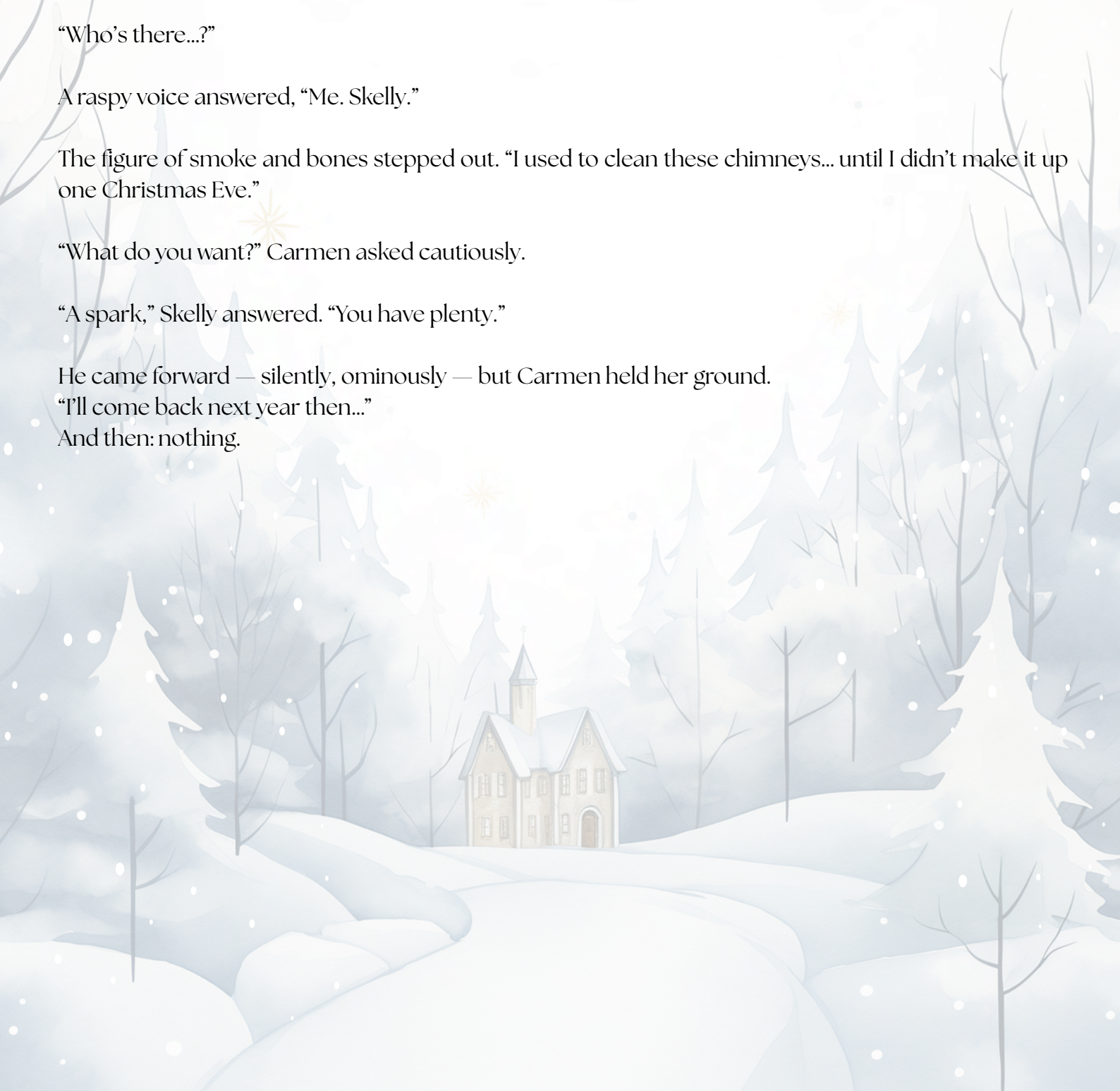
"What do you want?" Carmen asked cautiously.

"A spark," Skelly answered. "You have plenty."

He came forward — silently, ominously — but Carmen held her ground.

"I'll come back next year then..."

And then: nothing.



'Once Upon a Christmas'

By Beau Sweetman

On a dark winter night, snow covered the cobbled streets of London.
The warm glow of coal fires filled homes as families gathered together for Christmas feasts. But one
man sat alone,
in the blistering cold
and continued to sit there, until he grew old.



But that same night, when the man was in bed,
He felt something touch his head,
He looked up, terror in his eyes,
This is when he saw a familiar guy.

It was his old work partner,
As pure as light,
Come to take him on an adventure,
This Christmas night.

Up through the chimney,
To the rooftops they soared,
The man felt the wind,
Like never before.

Through the night they went,
Down to a little house,
They looked through the window,
What did they see?
A little boy, all fast asleep.

The man had a look of pity in his eyes
As he looked at the end of the bed,
Where an empty stocking lied

He knew what to do,
To make this right,
So he rushed to his home,
Gliding through the night.

To his house he went,
And through drawers he looked
Just to find,
A little red book.

'Once Upon a Christmas'

By Beau Sweetman

It was from his old work partner,
A parting gift,
He would give it to the boy,
To make his spirits lift.



Back to the boy he went,
To make amends,
But had to do it,
Before the night ends.

He climbed down the chimney,
And entered the house,
Crept through the hallway,
As quiet as a mouse.

He got to the boy's room,
And opened the door,
Quickly and quietly,
Snuck across the floor.

He placed the book in the stocking,
Giggled with glee,
Waiting for the morning,
For the boy to see.

He returned to his home,
And saw his friend one more time,
Before he had to go,
For his final goodbye.



'A Ghost's Story'

By Mathilda Goldbloom

Rain trickled down the murky pane of the windowsill, solitary as the tear on his cheek. It left a glistening line, the silvery aftermath of sorrow and pain. The fireplace glowed a dull orange, casting the room with a wash of ochre, sharpening the shadows, highlighting his angular nose and sunken eyes. Glancing to his left out the window, he could make out the dull joy of carollers and the harsh glow of the candles they bared. They would soon be upon his own door, singing carelessly despite his loss, despite her absence, despite her death. Sighing, he turned back to the moody fire, hanging his head low once more.

I sat in the corner of the room, on that small wooden stool I had always hated. It used to rock whenever I shifted my weight and would tip me over if I leaned too far in any direction. Of course, this no longer applied. I was weightless: a mere conjuring of who I used to be. Arthur was sitting in his armchair, so I decided to leave the stool and move over to mine. Now opposite from him, I could see the wrinkles he'd developed this year, the age that had settled on his face, all a result of me and my illness. He grunted and sighed.

"Leave me Anne," he whimpered, "Every night you visit me in my dreams, and yet I cannot reach you. You are not here."

A new tear slipped and fell down his cheek.

I placed a hand on his knee and saw him shudder at the chill that came with my touch. This must have shocked him, as for the first time since my arrival, he lifted his head to look at me.

"Anne?"

I smiled, "Merry Christmas my dear."

Very suddenly, the bell rang for the door, and the sound of carollers became loud and bright. Arthur turned his head to the door, and when he glanced back, I was gone, watching him from some other place, away from the rain and the orange glow of the fire. His head hung low once more, and I began to fear that my visit had meant nothing. Yet he stood and walked to the door, bathing in the smooth candlelight and tranquil carols.



'Reunited'
By Manwa Ghailan

Thick snow covered the cobblestone streets of London, making the world quiet and still. Inside a dim parlour, Mr. Harcourt sat by his coal fire, counting his coins. The flickering light danced across the room, but it couldn't warm the coldness in his heart. It was Christmas Eve, yet he had turned away every caroller who came knocking.

At midnight, a soft knock echoed through the silence. Mr. Harcourt sighed, thinking it would be another beggar asking for food. But when he opened the door, the icy wind blew in, and a faint, glowing figure stood there.

"Martha?" he gasped. It was his late wife, wearing the old shawl she had loved before she passed away.

"You sit by your fire, Edward," she said, her voice soft and echoing, "while others freeze in the streets. Once you had kindness in you, but now you care for nothing but your money."

Mr. Harcourt looked down, guilt creeping over him. "I gave to the poor once," he mumbled, "years ago..."

Martha shook her head gently. "You have to ease your own conscience, not to help others."

The candles flickered. Suddenly, ghostly images filled the room: a shivering boy beneath a bridge, a mother whispering comfort to her hungry children, a sick girl coughing by a broken window. Mr. Harcourt felt a tear slide down his cheek.

"What must I do?" he whispered.

"Remember what it means to give," the ghost said softly. "Give before it's too late."

Then she faded away, leaving only the sound of snow drifting against the window.

When morning came, Mr. Harcourt's door stood open. The street children gathered in surprise as he handed out warm blankets, food, and coins. His coal fire burned behind him, but he cared more for the smiles on their faces. As light filled the street, some said they saw a faint figure in the window, smiling as the fire glowed brighter than ever.



'A Visit'
By Anbel Lifshitz

Snow whispered against the windowpanes of Lady Violet's manor house. From downstairs, the faint sound of jubilant chatter floated up to the Lady's chamber, the servants defying silence with forbidden cheer. The coal fire burned before her, its embers glinting. Slowly rising from her bed, she rang her bell, the sound coming out like a cheery song. Her maid entered the vast room, curtsying, unable to conceal her smile. Violet's face was in a fixed, stony expression. It had been five years since the death of her dear husband, but her constant flashbacks and memories of him blocked her path of recovery to normalcy. She dismissed her maid with quiet authority and took up her cane. She moved along the long, twisting hallway until she reached his portrait. Candlelight flickered across his greying hair and his sagging skin but his piercing, blue eyes caught her eye. They seemed almost alive. Or maybe they were.

Slowly, the ghost of her husband rose out of the portrait. Violet's eyes widened in shock. "Violet," whispered the ghost, the wobbling candlelight casting shadows on his face.

She trembled, "It's you! But you've been dead, all these years."

"And in those five years, you buried your joy alongside me. You turned away your kin and your friends, leaving this house to mourn along with you."

"I kept faith with your memory!" She cried.

"You kept faith with your pride," he answered gently, "when I lived, I valued money over warmth, pride over kin. And you followed me. But look what is going to happen to us, we are going to end up as dusty portraits in a cold hall. No one will remember us."

Violet's eyes glazed over with tears. He carried on, "let this house, and yourself, live again. Open your doors and light the fires. Share what you used to hoard. Only then will it be possible to find peace." The spirit faded back into the portrait, leaving Violet standing, alone, tears streaming down her face.

When morning came, the servants were surprised to see the lady standing in the hall, garlands in hand, commanding for the doors to be opened and for the village to be let in.

That night, laughter, bright and alive, echoed through the walls of the manor for the first time in years. In the portrait's eyes, the faintest gleam of joy appeared.

'A Christmas Spirit'
By Matilda Bennyman

On a dark, stormy night, Lola and her mother Sarah moved into a new house that was dark but, despite this, it felt like a home.

It was only one day until Christmas.



Carefully, they began setting things around the house before Christmas day. Walking towards her room, a ... thing ... slashed past her before she could get to the door.

She was terrified.

Running into her room, she locked the door as quick as she could so the ... thing ... couldn't catch her. Swiftly unpacking her things, willing her room would feel like home.

All of a sudden, she heard a loud bang on her door.

She froze, like ice.

A few seconds later she carried on with sorting her room out.

But... Was that crying she could hear?

Lola started to look round the house, petrified. Had someone broken in?

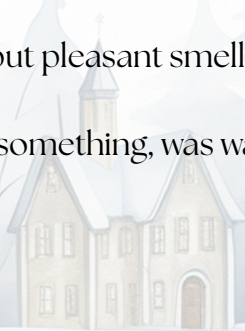
Then, there it was. A ghost.

The ghost vanished into the eerie, hollow and dull walls.

Tucking herself into bed, willing away the spirit, hoping for a joy-filled and tranquil Christmas Day. But thoughts of the ghost plagued her dreams, plagued her sleep, kept her awake periodically through the night.

And in the morning? Nothing. Nothing but pleasant smells, eager chatter.

But Lola knew, Lola knew someone, or something, was watching.



'The Ghosts of Christmas Past'

By Paveen Dhillon

Snow covered the cobblestoned street of Harrow Lane, soft and settled under the watchful eye of the moonlight. The air was cold and still, and the only sound was the faint singing of carolers in the distance. Inside the small house at number 12, a single lit candle glowed in the window—its warm light contrasting against the darkness that lingered outside.



Mrs. Lydia Harcourt sat by the fire, wrapped in a shawl. The coal burned low, and shadows crept across the walls. She had once loved Christmas, but not since her husband had died three years earlier. He used to put a candle in the window every Christmas Eve, saying it was to guide lost souls home. Now, she kept it burning out of habit, though she no longer believed in such things.

The clock on the mantel ticked closer to midnight. The house was silent except for the wind outside. Then the fire gave a small hiss, and the room grew cold. The candle flame flickered wildly, as if something unseen had passed through the air.

A faint shape appeared by the hearth—misty and pale, almost like smoke caught in the light. It stood still, its head bowed slightly. Lydia felt her heart pound. The figure looked familiar. The broadness of the shoulders, the calmness of the face—it was her husband.

He didn't speak. He simply turned his head toward the window where the candle burned, then looked at the closed door, then back toward the candle. His eyes seemed to plead, not for himself, but for others.

And then he was gone. The air warmed, the fire stirred, and the candle burned steadily once more. Lydia sat for a long time, thinking. Then she heard carolers outside—the children's voices, high and thin in the cold. She stood, went to the window, and saw their small figures huddled in the snow. Without thinking, she opened the door.

Warm air poured into the street. The children stopped singing, surprised. Lydia smiled faintly and waved them in. Soon the house was filled with laughter and chatter. She brought out mince pies to share with everyone. The fire glowed brighter, and for the first time in years, the room felt alive again. Outside, the candles still shone in the window. But now it was no longer a light for the dead—it was a light for the living too.







The Marlborough
Science Academy
'shaping futures'



Thank you for reading

