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Haunting Christmas

Haunting Christmas

By

Marina Favila

I

At first they were only irritated, the ghosts of Manorville Manor, seven souls haunting the house they died in, or wandered by, in the process of dying, some restless, some pining, as ghosts are wont to be, but mostly content to call the manor home. And that makes sense. For who knows what awaits us after death, the where or why or how of it? But here, in this beautiful old barn of a house, with its old-fashioned gabled roof and tall cathedral ceilings, its imposing stone fireplace and hanging chandelier, with the tiny frosted bulbs the shape of tiny frosted flames, and one large window, set at the top of a spiral staircase, where the ghosts could float up and turn round and look out at the town they were born in, twinkling black and gold at night or washed pale grey at dawn—life could be worse, they all knew.

Then she moved in.

Up until now they'd had a fine time, or a good enough time, for they were dead, after all, but before her, why, before her there'd been plenty to do, and they'd done it all and they'd done it well. The house was a veritable gold mine for ghosts. The attic wailed liked a banshee, drafty and cold, and easy to manipulate. A quick turnabout by one or two ghosts could create a mini-cyclone within seconds, rattling the attic windows and shoving around old trunks of clothes and hatboxes and hat racks and stacks of *National Geographics*, left long ago by previous frightened owners. And the stairs in the front and the stairs in the back

squeaked horribly; and the spirits, especially the young ones, could play those stairs like a violin. Ghostie-music, little Devin called it, when he first squeaked out "The Water is Wide" in mid-July, when the boards were dry and weak. He'd learned the old song right before catching a cold and dying of influenza in 1899; and his parents, two earnest do-gooders, who ran the Down on Your Luck Soup Kitchen for the town's down on their luck, were so devastated by the loss of their fat-cheeked Devvy, they packed up and moved away within weeks of the little boy's death, leaving him inconsolable. Those wheezing, whining, wood-turned tunes, drawn out from the manor's creaking stairs, did much to distract the young spirit.

So you see, up until then, the manor boasted a sterling reputation, for the living and the dead. There'd even been talk of a listing in the Northeast Haunted House Registry. Especially after Prof. Hautboy, the eldest spirit in human years, had organized the ghosts into performance sections: bumps in the night, staircase interludes, whirlwinds and cold spots, and flashing lights—a specialty of the house on Halloween night, when Manorville Manor lit up like a Star Wars laser show, shooting red and blue across the sky. And those spritely inhabitants might have gone on forever, flashing their lights and moving their trunks and moaning in the dark, had the girl moved into another old house and not their lovely manor.

But that girl, that *girl*, that slip of a girl,

with her college sweatshirt and skinny blue jeans. She'd arrived last spring on a warm afternoon, unloading a trunk full of antique mirrors and faux fur rugs. She'd not even bothered to check out the attic before signing the lease. Even the realtor seemed shocked that the girl knew nothing of the house's legendary past. Or perhaps she didn't care. Her smile was as wide as the Mississippi, and her pearl-pink cheeks flushed English rose at the thought she could be so lucky to live here, in this castle-like home, with its bad heat and faulty wires and creaky floor and leaky roof and that terribly romantic staircase, with its wrought iron railing twirling round and round and up and out, to the large picture window set so high you could see the whole town and the river beyond, its dark waters lit by sun and by star, or just slow-moving under slate-grey clouds. She knew life could be worse. So she signed on the dotted line. Alone, she signed, no mother or father beside her, not even a great aunt Lil or Uncle Joe. And the realtor placed the key in her hand, and rushed out the door, leaving the ghosts amazed at her presumption.

Not much past twenty, maybe not that—tall and thin, with the gangly stance of a newborn foal, all knees and elbows in constant motion. Hanging her curtains, stocking her fridge, pirouetting in the hall in front of the mirror, her honey-blond hair gave a melodic bounce around her heart-shaped face. Something there, too, in her eyes, an open edge, a rawness that perplexed the ghosts. For every so often she'd abruptly stop whatever she was doing, cooking or singing or banister-hopping, and stare into space for minutes on end.

But still, to think the house would welcome her and her knick-knacks and her multiple cans of turquoise paint—preposterous! And for someone so alert to every detail of the house, how could she be

so oblivious to their presence? That's what rattled the ghosts. For no matter how hard they rapped or knocked or thumped or flickered the lights, she never gave them the time of day, not a backward glance or a second look or a shiver or shock or a nervous tick—nothing.

"Youse think we didn't exist!" Mrs. Spartini exclaimed, after the first few days. She was particularly perturbed, for the house was originally hers, built by a dotting banker for his Ten Cents a Dance bride. He'd stolen Mabeleen from "The Orange Peel" speakeasy, just before midnight on New Year's Eve, and the former dancehall hostess took pride in reminding the ghosts that *she* was the original mistress of the manor, and still ordered them about to knock on the door with a menacing rap or streak the old walls with their skeletal hands. "I'se been doin' this for over a century," she huffed, "and I don't take kindly to being ignored in me own home!"

"There, there," Prof. Hautboy soothed her. He was by far the most educated of the ghosts, with a PhD in musicology. "She's young. I saw it in many of my students," and they all nodded, if ghosts can nod, that is. Even the Farmer Boy twins shimmered in agreement, two oafish white shadows, blustery and pale, with a touch of aquamarine swirling around. They'd never said a word, nor left each other's side, these past forty years.

"Yes, yes," the professor continued, "she's inattentive, with her iPod and smartphone glued to her ear. But she'll come around."

And they promised each other to give her a month, and took bets that such youthful self-centeredness would wear thin after two or three weeks. Give her time to lug in her Goodwill sofa and flea market lamps, and that god-awful basket of marbled eggs to clutter the fireplace

mantel. They'd even endured her initial cleaning. The fumes alone should have driven them out, but they knew, they just knew, once she settled down, they would have her attention, then send her packing to some sterile apartment in the suburbs!

But that was nearly nine months ago. She'd arrived in April, a gorgeous yellowy month, which turned bright green in early May and emerald-green the next. But those glorious colors faded fast to sage and gold by summer's end, then golded themselves to a ruby fall and fell to the ground with a silent crunch, quilting the earth in cranberry, copper, marigold, mustard, and rust. Three weeks later, all was ice, the air wet-weighted with the promise of snow. But by Christmas Eve the ghosts were no closer to making their presence known. Huddled together for warmth in the attic, they took stock of their situation.

Professor Hautboy called the meeting to order. "Quiet down, quiet down," he started, as he always did, with the only joke he knew: "We don't want to wake the dead!" And he laughed to himself, as he always did, alone.

"But it's ridiculous," rushed in Ravensby, a tattooed punk, triple-pierced and pacing, who'd been hit by a speeding car outside the house two years passing. Still relatively new to the manor, he was young and feisty, though death had admittedly slowed him down. "We've tried it all. Just last week I knocked down every single one of her piles of clean laundry—towels, wash cloths, two sets of sheets, eight pairs of athletic socks, all piled high on her four-poster bed and not a second glance at the mess I'd made!"

"Me, too," piped Petunia Sweeney, who turned ninety-nine this month, if you counted the years from her birth not her death. She was the last one to die in the house, surrounded by her children and

children's children, who held her hand and patted her cheek, though they'd already sold everything in the house, save the bed where she lay dying.

"I hid her keys in the refrigerator—*my* refrigerator, under the moldy lettuce in the vegetable bin." Petunia fingered remembered pearls, with the air of a duchess who'd suddenly found the maid in her brocade gown. "She looked for them alright, but when she found them in the fridge she merely laughed—laughed! As if I'd done it wrong!"

"She's a mess," Prof. Hautboy sighed. "A terrible housekeeper and unobservant to the max. How can we compete with that? Even the old chairs-on-the-table trick, just administered last month, which took quite a bit of energy ("and coordination," Ravensby added)—a fiasco!" For when the girl came home that night ("too late for a young lady," Petunia sneered) she slammed the door in a fury, blasted her stereo, and jumped round the room till the chairs came crashing down. Then she wove her way to the bedroom, without a backward glance at the dining room wreckage.

"She just can't hear us," Devvy said quietly, "but I might could like her if she could." Ravensby rustled himself closer to the forlorn little spirit, by far his favorite in the house.

"A terrible problem," Hautboy concluded. And he slid the finger that didn't exist up the nose that didn't exist to push up the memory of thick glasses falling down his long face. "We must find a way to communicate with our, ahem, guest."

II

From the balustrade Devin watched the young girl decorate for Christmas. He had been sent by the other ghosts to guard the new mistress of the house, as if the spirit

could effect much of anything at his young age—a ghostly glimmer, perhaps, aided by moonlight, or a lukewarm coolness, for cold was not in his nature. But he liked her, and they knew it, and thought it best for him not to be in their war room as they set their plans in motion.

Devvy was just as glad. The girl was particularly happy tonight, and he liked to watch her then, for her eyes glistened when she was joyful, and she hummed under her breath and sometimes burst into song at the top of her lungs. Tonight was something special to see. She was decorating the house for the holidays, in multi-colored garlands and shimmering icicles. A fire burned in the fireplace, and the mantelpiece was dressed with a delicate crèche: jewel-type stones set in the camel's saddle, and the three kings' crowns were painted in gold. Cutout stars wrapped in shiny foil dangled from a coat rack, and a huge fir wreath hung on the dining room wall with a large red satiny bow. The table was decorated with clips of holly and giant pinecones dusted with glitter. And everywhere—candles! Fifty, more, in wine bottles, jelly jars, tiny votive cups, and one large brass candelabrum, just tarnished enough to look expensive.

But Devvy's favorite was the Christmas tree, a tall blue spruce set up by the window and dressed up fine with red glass balls and candy canes, and a treasure trove of miniature antique toys: rocking horses, pogo sticks, dollies with golden hair and tiny blinkable eyes. Strands and strands of warm yellow lights seemingly floated on prickly branches. *There must be hundreds*, he thought, blinking on and off to the music box tunes of "Greensleeves" and "O Christmas Tree."

Devvy was entranced as he watched the girl climb a rickety ladder to place a five-point star at the top of the tree. When a knock on the door startled them both, the

ladder swayed as the girl jumped in surprise. Without thinking, the little ghost rushed to steady the ladder. Pushing himself hard into the wood, till the white oak pinched his very essence, Devvy steadied the ladder, while the girl traipsed down the steps with a lilting laugh at her luck and agility. Thank goodness the other ghosts were still in the attic, else there'd be hell to pay.

The open door let in gusts of wet darkness, but it was swallowed up by the warmth of the candlelit house and the greater warmth of its beaming mistress. The girl's voice hit a high-pitched squeal. There before her, a dowdy woman in a dark blue coat, a peek of nurse's scrubs beneath, and at her side, a small thing, with a heart-shaped face and honey-brown hair, cramped in a tiny wheelchair. When the girl stepped back, Devvy gasped, for he thought he saw himself, such a wasted creature there, mostly skin and bones, and hollowed out eyes, darkly and deeply creased. The boy looked nine, maybe ten, and . . . ghost-like, Devvy thought, for his skin was near translucent, and his eyes glazed over like he wasn't there. The spirit shivered in response, until he saw the boy look up from his chair. Seeing the girl towering above him, he smiled the same wide-as-a-river smile as her own.

With a deep bow, which made the boy giggle, the girl ushered in her visitors, closing the door with a definitive push, as if shutting out all that is bad or indecent in the world. She took over the woman's duties, wheeling her charge to a sofa covered with pillows and a large knitted quilt, kelly green, white, and tangerine, a zigzag pattern with scraggly tassels and many a snag in the yarn. When the girl and the woman pushed the couch closer to the fireplace, the light and the heat brought a healthy flush to the young boy's face.

Then all was a flurry in the house. And

the flurry was the girl. Like a humming bird, here, there at once, she leapt and twirled around the room: stoking the fire; plumping the pillows; wheeling in an old-time tray, with mix-matched teacups of cocoa and cream; passing around a platter of cookies, shortbread Santas and chocolate reindeers, one with a raspberry nose. *How wonderful to be here*, Devvy thought to himself, for he felt he too was part of the eating and sipping and singing and pillow-plumping and belly-laughing, for everything seemed funny, now, to the three living inhabitants of Manorville Manor. Even the woman had begun to unwind, as she dipped a second Santa into her cocoa. Devin hoped the ghosts in the attic would take a long time with their evening preparations.

III

“Settled!” Hautboy concluded. “We’ll wait until the clock strikes twelve, or rather, till I make that clock chime twelve booming clangs, and that in itself should get her attention, for the grandfather clock is a hundred years old and hasn’t chimed for fifty.

“Then I’ll sweep in,” said Ravensby, slicking back the air where his hair used to be, “and do my cyclone thing, picking up anything I can in my wake: cups, saucers, tinkling spoons, knick-knacks—books! She’s always leaving them scattered about. The fluttering pages in my little whirlwind will make a fine rat-a-tat-tat, adding to the confusion. If I move fast enough, perhaps I can even raise a chair!”

“Now, now,” Prof. Hautboy advised, “we don’t want to *kill* her.” And he tried to look stern, though his transparent expression conveyed very little. Still, he wanted his tone forbidding, for he worried about the Farmer twins, hearts of gold, those boys, and silent as the grave, but easily stirred to their

old roughhouse ways.

“We’ll take care of the window,” Mrs. Spartini interjected, for she wanted to make sure that everyone knew she was really in charge. “A frosty peel! Inside, of course, for the window’s been rusty-eyed shut for years. But if we steam the inside, we can write some dastardly message for hers to read. Petunia, dear, what might be fearful for you?”

“Anything!” Even at ninety-nine, the ghost’s voice went up in a girlish lilt, at the sheer pleasure of being asked. “Something about the night, I suppose, for I was always afraid of the dark. I . . .”

“And the twins?” Ravensby rushed in, worried they’d never escape Petunia’s lengthy riff on the dark.

“Lights!” Hautboy responded. “Multi-colored!” The whitish shadows glowed in response, for they loved shooting red and blue across the room, whether they had an audience or not.

“And if that doesn’t work?” Petunia whined.

Even in death, Prof. Hautboy was a teacher and a good one, and he responded with authority: “It *will* work. Never fear, Petunia! And if it doesn’t--we’ll wrap that horrid afghan so tight about her tiny frame that when we finally let her go, she’ll run from the house and never return to Manorville Manor!” And the ghosts all shimmered in approval.

But as they floated out to take their places, at the hearth, by the tree, hovering near the window, they paused, for the girl was reading now, to a young boy on the couch, while the older woman faded in and out of sleep in an overstuffed chair. And the girl was reading with enthusiasm and dramatic gestures, about some ghost of Christmas past and a singing child on crutches. Hautboy signaled the spirits to wait. They wouldn’t have started even if he hadn’t, for they knew, as he knew, what was

coming.

IV

At first Devvy kept his distance, hidden in the branches of the spruced-up spruce. But it had been so many years since someone had read to him, and before long he was pressed up next to the fireplace, then folded around the ottoman, close to the sofa with the ugly quilt, not so close to touch the humans, though he could feel their warmth. And with the cookie crumbs lavishly dotting the floor, and the teacups emptied of cocoa and cream, he saw the girl reach beneath an embroidered cushion to retrieve an old blue book.

It was dusty, cracked, bound in leather, with pages edged in gold. She presented it to the boy like some precious treasure befitting the Magi, and pointed at the illustrations and the lavish scrolled print. Then she jumped from the couch and began to read. Both boy and ghost were transported as she skipped around the room and motioned with her hands and acted all the parts. With the lighted tree sparkling behind her like the backdrop of some Christmas play, the girl became Scrooge, counting his money, and timid Bob Cratchet, cowering before him, and Tiny Tim, leaning on crutches, but singing in a high sweet voice. Even the joyful nephew with his blasted "Merry Christmas" brought a tear to the woman's eye, before she fell back to sleep. And though Devin was a ghost himself, he trembled when Marley arrived, with a raspy voice like a rusty nail, floating in air on the living room stairs and clanging his voluminous chains.

But then the boy began to cough, then cough in earnest, great sobbing, hacking coughs, and the girl swept down from her staircase perch and cuddled him up on the sofa. She pulled the raggedy afghan round

them, tucked it in tight, on the left and the right, so snug they might have been bound together. And she plodded on, reading aloud, but Devin could tell, as anyone could, that all her attention was on the boy. For even when she raised her voice or pointed to the air when a new ghost appeared, her other hand felt for the young boy's neck and brushed back the hair from his hot flushed face.

And she read for an hour, maybe two, of Ebenezer's life and his love and his money, and though each new ghost prompted Devin to shiver, the boy lay still, so still, in fact, he seemed asleep. And it was then Devin noticed they were not alone, but joined by the ghosts, around the room, still and staring at the boy in the girl's arms. For the ghosts could see, though she could not, the outlines of the boy beginning to blur, like the edges of a photo no longer in focus or the fresh white smear of a dab of paint, titanium white on a dark oil canvas.

And the girl read faster, flipping through pages with furious intent, playing each part with commitment and verve, but the boy was no longer listening. He's . . . rising, trying to shake his body loose. Impatient, his movement, like a pupa shedding its skin, he pushes himself away from himself and from his sister too, oblivious to who she is, even to her loving attention as she turns each page and adjusts the blanket that holds them together. He is no longer who he was, nor does he care for her. He thinks only of ridding himself of this great weight. And though the ghosts have taken this journey themselves, they are transfixed by his ascent, for he does not see them. He does not acknowledge they even exist. He simply rises, past the lighted tree and the fireplace and the spiral staircase, learning how to swim in that great sea of air.

And a light seems to grow inside him, and now he is all titanium white, brilliant

and bright-edged. And the ghosts can see right through him; and the lights from the candles and the lights from the tree flicker behind him, and it looks for a moment as if the Milky Way has descended into the room and revolves around them. And the boy's form is some low constellation or gossamer angel descended to earth—but an angel that feels nothing human, and so he is both like the ghosts and nothing like the ghosts, for they have always felt human, and they have always felt tied to this world.

A huge gust of wind opens the window that hasn't been open for years and years, and the boy, looking now like a shiny piece of foil, acts like a magnet to the other ghosts, who also feel the need to rise. And they rise: Petunia and Ravensby, into the air, like helium balloons let loose in the wind. And Mrs. Spartini, waving to the house, like some grand dame in a local parade. And the Farmer Boy twins, still hand in hand, like a pale green fog, frosting the window inside out. Even Prof. Hautboy joins in, waving an imaginary conductor's baton, as if he is leading an orchestra again, pointing to each ghost to play their part. "Two notes up. Now jump the octave! Jump!" He laughs to himself, alone.

But Devvy sees none of this, for all his attention is on the girl. And she is crying, cradling the boy in her arms, while the older woman talks on the phone. From high above Devin can hear Ravensby calling, calling him *now*, and Prof. Hautboy taps the air and motions for him to follow. When Devvy looks up, he sees Mrs. Spartini floating out the window, in a great twisty movement reminiscent of her Orange Peel days; and Petunia joins her, no longer afraid of the dark, but sparkling like a slow-shooting star in the heavens, or a snowflake welcomed by a sky full of glitter. And that sky full of glitter is suddenly covered by a gauzy white cloud with aqua-green swirls, following the

boy out the window as well.

Red and blue lights sweep through the house. Not as bright as the dazzle the Farmer Boys planned, but a whirling pattern around the room. A high-pitched wail shaking the walls deafens the calls for Devin to follow. And all is a flurry: rushing and moaning, doors that are opening, closing, and slamming, a table with wheels wheeling round the room, and strangers in uniform shaking their heads. Coats and boots grabbed, gloves by the door, in minutes it's dark, and the whole house is empty of all of the living and all of the dying. Crowding the window, three shadows remain.

V

When the girl returns, it is late, and she enters the house alone. She walks like she's been sleeping. Her face holds no expression. She shrugs off her coat in the middle of the room, letting it drop to the floor. Then she climbs the spiral staircase in a slow, measured gait. And she pays no mind to the snow on the steps, blown in from the open window. Nor does she notice the ice on the railing; her hands are just as cold.

She reaches the top of the stairs without stopping. She leans out the window and waits. The clock strikes one and the clock strikes two, and the air grows cold and colder. And every minute of every hour she's searching the town below, from house to house, and street to street, all lit by the muted glow of streetlamps covered deep in snow. Then she raises her face to the sky. She searches its depth with a long, long look, as if she might seriously count the stars or the snowflakes falling around her. And she seems to be listening to something or nothing. Even the wind is silent.

Then she leans out further and extends her hands, into the night and into the snow, her palms face up, her forehead wrinkled, as she squints into the darkness.

And now she's on tiptoe, leaning

forward, her bare arms raised to a cloud-laced sky. And she waits and she waits, as the clock strikes three, and she listens. She's listening.

She'll fall if she's not careful, Devin thinks from far below. "She'll fall if she's not careful," he repeats into the air.

"We must grab her attention!" Hautboy commands. Ravensby, Devin, begin!

The chandelier creaks as it slowly turns, and the frosted bulbs charge a ruby red, and the lights on the tree blink faster now, its music box tempo increasing as well. And far in the corner, the grandfather clock begins to chime with a booming clang, as a whirlwind rises in the middle of the room, filled with objects of the evening's bliss: teacups, saucers, silver spoons, a platter dotted with cookie crumbs; cut-out stars covered in foil, each one boasting a flickering train of multi-colored candle flames; marbled eggs and clips of holly and pine cones dusted with silver glitter; and books, books, a vortex of books, flying like starlings around the room, their pages a clattering, thunderous flutter. Even the ottoman knocks on the floor, as if trying to jump to the whirlwind above.

And the girl whips around, amazed at the sight. The house is alive and dances before her. She gasps as a tea cup twirls within reach, then a trio of spoons tap together like bells; and with so many candles and jelly jar lights, it looks like the Milky Way now has returned, made up of objects from daily life. And the girl starts to laugh. She laughs in surprise. Doubles over and laughs. She laughs so hard that tears overflow her pearl-pink cheeks and heart-shaped face. Laughing so hard she loses control; and shaking with laughter, she feels herself slip on the snow-laden stairs. Slipping and falling, backwards she's reeling, with only the night and the wide-open window to catch her as she falls.

And then such a rush rushing inside her,

a hard-air push. It's almost warm. Wedged in tight it holds her steady, just for a moment, on the edge of the sill, where she sees—she swears, still swears to this day—that she sees the old quilt with its zigzag design and gnarly strings, rising in earnest and billowing out like a tall ship's sail that sails on high, through the air and into her arms.

It wraps her up twice and pulls her in fast, and she slides down the railing, around and around, down to the floor where she's dropped on the sofa in one magnificent plop. And be it fatigue or the ice-edged cold or the wet night air or the warmth of the quilt, or the whirling images of a house come alive that she can't take in and she can't deny, the girl falls asleep as soon as her head hits the plumped up pillow of her Goodwill couch, wrapped up tight in a ragtag throw, with a ghost pressed up to her heart.

VI

On Christmas Day, the gabled roof of Manorville Manor is sagging, from the snow and the cold and the wind and the rain and the decades it's been standing. But a girl can be seen at the window there, on the second floor, or so it seems, enveloped in an afghan quilt of green and white and tangerine, with a delicate teacup in her hand, from which she slowly sips. And the sun through the window must feel warm, for a lovely glow surrounds her there, the softest cloud of peach and gold, almost a mist that clings and swirls as she stands by the window, one hand up, as if to touch the sun. Some trick, too, of the afternoon light casts three shadows against the wall, making her look both small and bright and strangely not alone. She looks out the window at the town she was born in, washed pearl-white by the glittering snow. And she stares at the river as it circles her home, slow-moving and slate-gray.