

The Yuletide Spirit

A ghostly Christmas story

by Rob Keeley

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“Dad?” Ellie stepped into the house, carrying four bags of shopping. They were patterned with holly and dancing elves. She was wearing a jumper with a snowman on it. “Got everything! All except the Christmas pud! They said there’d been a run on them...”

She walked along the hall, past the fairy-lights and the reindeer with the glowing red nose. It stood on its hind legs, wore a stripy scarf and held a sign that said WELCOME SANTA! It had been part of Christmas ever since Ellie could remember. Not that she would be spending much of the holiday here. Mum and Dad still weren’t speaking, and next week Ellie was down for Christmas Day with Mum at Nanna’s house. Dad would have to wait until Boxing Day...

Ellie opened the kitchen door.

“Dad?”

“Boo!”

Ellie nearly dropped the shopping. Then she realised it wasn’t a ghost.

“Charlie! Where’s Dad?”

“Gone to Mikele’s,” said Charlie. Ellie didn’t bother to ask who Mikele was. She had given up trying to keep track of Dad’s girlfriends. “So he’s lent me the house for the evening. Everyone’s gonna be here soon. Don’t tell Mum. She thinks I’m at the school carol concert.”

He dipped into the bags.

“Oh, great. Mince pies... sausage rolls... they’ll do fine.”

“They’re for Dad, Charlie!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll sort it tomorrow.”

“You’re having a party?” Ellie put the bags on the kitchen table. “And you didn’t invite *me*?”

“It’s all the lads from school. And some girls. There won’t be anyone here your age.”

Ellie stood with arms folded. Charlie smirked.

“Tell you what. Do some food for us, I’ll let you come.”

“What...!”

“There’s plenty of stuff. Stick the oven on for those pies and things... I think there’s some pizza in the freezer... come *on*, Ellie! It’s *Christmas!*”

One hour later, Ellie stood in the living room, trying to have a good time.

She could hardly move. And she wanted to cover her ears. Charlie seemed to have invited everyone he knew, and the music was deafening. His mate Tommo, with his blond floppy hair and diamond stud earrings, was the DJ. His decks were set up at the far end of the room – two turntables, and massive speakers, and a laptop connected up. His idea of music seemed to be more noise than tune. The lights had been dimmed, and someone had brought a disco ball that cast multicoloured beams all over the walls and ceiling. Dancing was going on, and anyone who wanted to talk to a mate had to scream in their ear. Dad had been smart to clear out for the evening. Ellie just hoped the neighbours were away for Christmas.

On the dining table was the food – the sausage rolls and pies and pizza. Ellie had made ham sandwiches, and cheese and pineapple on sticks. But hardly anyone was eating. They seemed more interested in drinking. They were enjoying being eighteen.

She didn’t know many people, and no one was noticing her. Charlie had been right. There was no one here of her age. Ellie felt very little and lonely. She was a teenager too, but

didn't feel like one. This was the story of her life. Everyone was older.

She caught sight of a tall, dark boy as he left the crowd and made his way towards the buffet table. At least someone wanted food. She watched as he took a plate and made for the crisps and cocktail sausages. He was rather nice. He had a lovely face, all suntanned and smiley. His black shirt and jeans looked very smart...

Once his plate was full, he stepped out into the hall. Ellie slid after him.

He was leaning against the stairs, eating, knocking fairy lights with his back. Clumsy great beanpole.

He gave Ellie a smile as he saw her. Ellie found herself smiling back.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"You're Chas's li'l sis, aren't you?" the boy asked.

Ellie would normally have been annoyed at this, but somehow she didn't mind when he said it. She nodded.

"I'm Ellie."

"Luke," the boy said. "Had to get out of there, for a minute. My head's banging."

"Are you at school with Charlie?"

"Was," Luke said. "Left when I was sixteen." He offered the plate of food to her. Ellie shook her head. "I was ready for this. Didn't get my dinner today."

"Glad someone's enjoying it."

"Did you make this stuff?" Luke bit into a sausage roll. He took a look at the knitted snowman. "Nice jumper."

"My Dad bought it for me," said Ellie, by way of an apology. "He really *does* Christmas."

My Mum's always too busy."

"She's, like, a big boss at Journeyback, isn't she?"

"Well, she does their events."

"Yeah..." Luke grinned. "I work for them, now. Seen your Mum. Whenever she comes by, I'm like..." He stood to attention, and wobbled his bottom lip in fear. Ellie laughed.

"So, what do you do at Journeyback, Luke?"

"Landscape Assistant," said Luke. He grinned. "Basically, I'm a gardener. And I fix stuff..."

No sooner had he said the words than the whole row of fairy lights came down around his neck. He looked like a human Christmas tree.

"Whoops. Sorry."

Ellie's smile was growing. She liked this boy.

Luke freed himself. He turned at the sight of a nose flashing on and off. There was something wrong with the reindeer.

"Is it meant to do that?"

"No."

"Looks like one of them traffic beacons," said Luke. He went over and took a curious look. "Want me to see if I can fix it? I'm good with my hands..."

He gave the nose a twist, and the whole thing came off in his fingers.

At the same moment, all the fairy lights in the hall went out.

Ellie met Luke's eye.

Then both of them burst out laughing.

"Not my night, is it?" Luke tried to fix the nose back on, and failed. "Sorry, Rudolph."

The living room door opened, and Charlie came out.

“The lights are going on and off in there... and the music, too... is the power...?” He ignored the nose in Luke’s hand. “Hope we’re not in for a power cut. Maybe it’s the fuse.”

He went back in to the party. Two more teenagers were coming out... a girl with dreadlocks... and a boy with piercings. Luke gave them a grin, but they barely noticed him. They went into the kitchen and closed the door.

“Weird, isn’t it?” said Ellie. “You set up a party in the living room, and everyone goes and talks in the kitchen.”

“Not just talking,” said Luke. “The mistletoe’s in there.”

Ellie blushed.

“Coming back in, then?” Luke held up the nose, then threw it to Ellie. “Catch.”

He put his hands in his pockets, then mooched back into the living room.

Ellie glanced at the noseless reindeer. Silly boy.

She didn’t know why, but she suddenly felt rather excited. Maybe it was Christmas.

She looked along the hall. There was something lying on the floor. She went and picked it up... a slender leather wallet. That other boy must have dropped it.

She opened the kitchen door.

“Hey...”

She blinked.

The kitchen was empty.

Ellie had a quick look around, but the back door was shut and bolted, and there was no one in the freezing cold garden outside. She had seen two people go in...

She went through into the living room. They weren't there, either. And somehow, there seemed to be fewer people than before.

Ellie knew this feeling. Something weird was happening.

At once, some words flew into her mind.

Stay away from ghosts and spirits...

You've put everyone in danger...

She clenched her fists. No. She didn't do stuff like this, any more. Not for a year and a half, now. Leave the mysteries to someone else.

No one seemed to have noticed the missing girls and boys. The party was going on, as before.

The music stopped. There were cries of annoyance, and some booing.

"Sorry!" called Charlie. "But it's just to say... the buffet is now open! If there's any food left that hasn't been pawed by Luke."

There was some jeering. Luke didn't mind. He grinned.

Ellie was pleased to see people going for food, at last. She'd worked hard at those sandwiches.

From behind the sofa, Charlie took a cardboard box. It contained various old vinyl records, in cardboard and paper sleeves. He carried it over to Tommo.

"Anything here you can play, Tom? Might be nice to have some easy listening. They're old ones of Dad's from the Eighties."

Tommo had a poke through the box, none too carefully.

"Ha! Old school discos." He went on sorting. "OK, I'll have a look."

Charlie went back towards the buffet.

“Have we got enough food here? There were more mince pies and cheese straws in the kitchen... weren’t there?”

He made for the hall. Ellie ran after him and grabbed him.

“No!”

“Eh?”

“Er...” Ellie tried to think quickly. “Don’t go in there. It’s... too dark. I mean... the cooker’s on, and you might burn yourself. I mean... there’s a...”

“Hurricane?”

“Yes. No!”

Charlie gave her a really weird look.

“What’s up with you? That’s what you get, talking to Luke. He’s crazy, just like you.”

He pulled away from her, opened the kitchen door and walked in.

Everything happened at once. The house shook as the door slammed after Charlie. Ellie heard him yell. The lights were flickering again, and Ellie thought the house felt colder...

She ran after Charlie and flung the door open.

He had vanished.

Ellie returned trembling to the living room. There was no doubt now. There were ghosts behind this. Where was Charlie? Where had those other people gone?

Again, no one seemed to have noticed. Everyone was eating and talking. All except for Tommo, who was playing some awful Eighties pop of Dad’s.

Ellie’s heart was thumping. What could she do? She had vowed never again to interfere in the spirit world...

She moved nearer to Luke. In the absence of Charlie, she felt safest with him. It was silly. She'd only known him five minutes. Yet it felt like longer. Somehow, he reminded her of somebody...

Luke had just finished more food, and was dipping greasy hands into the box of records. Ellie rolled her eyes. This was Dad's collection. He'd go mad.

Luke pulled out a record that looked much older than the others, in a brown paper sleeve.

"Hey! What's this?"

Tommo took it.

"Dame Ellen Metcalfe, in concert, December 1930. Christmas Carols to Stir the Heart."

He laughed. "Jon must have got it second-hand. Wonder if it still plays?"

He took it out and placed it onto the turntable.

"Hey, I've heard of her." An arty-looking girl with dungarees and two hair colours came across the room. She took out her phone and did a quick search. "She was an opera singer. Like, *really* famous. Look. She must have made this record just before she died. Christmas Eve, 1930... she was doing this exact same concert. Her husband was in the front row. At the end of the last act he stood up in front of everyone and shot her."

Everyone winced.

"Gross," Tommo said. "Why?"

"He was her manager. She was planning to leave him. Divorce him, and get someone else to run her life. He found out."

"Let's hear her, then," said Tommo. He had found the correct speed, and set the record spinning gently.

The beautiful sound of a Christmas carol filled the room. To Ellie it sounded

stirring...and romantic...but to Charlie's friends it just sounded cheesy. They were sniggering.

Luke came nearer to the decks.

"Sorry, Ellen. No one's gonna be downloading you." He planted a hand on the record.

"Hey, hey. How 'bout this? Ellen, the cool version."

He wiggled his hand back and forth, making the "scratching" noise. Dame Ellen's shrills were now coming in short, breathless gasps. Everyone laughed, except Tommo.

"Mate. Don't scratch it. You'll damage the record, that old."

Luke went on fiddling.

"Probably the best she's ever sounded..."

"Leave that alone."

Everyone jumped, as a hard female voice came through the speakers. Luke blinked.

"What?"

"You leave my recording alone, boy."

For a second time, things happened very quickly. Ellie realised the danger long before anyone else, and came running towards the turntable... but she was too late.

A blast of spiritual energy came surging out of the record, up Luke's arm and across his whole body.

Luke disappeared.

Ellie wasn't surprised to see that everyone else had frozen where they stood. She was used to life waiting for her, whenever there were spirits around. Only she could see or hear now.

Ellie stood and watched as a figure began to materialise in the room. She was middle-aged, broad, with a beautiful but haughty face framed by fair ringlets of hair. She was dressed in

a dazzling silver evening gown. Ellie noticed a bullet hole in the chest.

The woman was transparent, but growing more solid all the time. Soon, she would have entered fully into the mortal world.

Ellie knew how to deal with spirits now. She forced herself to speak calmly.

“Dame Ellen?”

The woman nodded.

“I’m...”

“I know who you are. Eleanor.”

“Why have you come here? And what have you done to my brother, and my friend?”

“I’ve taken their spiritual energy,” Dame Ellen said. She pointed to the record, which was still shrilling on the turntable. “Oh, those weren’t my final performances, Eleanor. I should thank you. Because of you, I’m making a comeback.”

Ellie knew what she meant.

“The spirit world. I breached the barrier.”

“Allowing some of us to return,” said Dame Ellen. “But I was never happy with anything less than a starring role. I shan’t be a spirit, any longer. I shall live again, and sing again! Like I did all those Christmases ago. My life essence survived in that recording. And now I’ve taken enough souls to return myself to life.”

“My brother, and his friends!” shouted Ellie. “They’re still just kids... that’s horrible!”

“Then perhaps you would like to join them? Fulfil your destiny?”

Ellie had no time to think what that meant.

In a burst of anger, she ran across and grabbed the record off the turntable. She held it high.

Dame Ellen's eyes widened.

"No... no!"

Ellie smashed the record across the decks.

There was an implosion of spiritual energy. Ellie was sucked off her feet and onto the floor.

Then Dame Ellen was gone.

Ellie stood up slowly. Luke was standing nearby, rubbing his head.

"Whoa. That was too loud, man."

The rest of the party had come back to life. But some of the teenagers were still missing...

Ellie ran into the hall.

The kitchen door was opening.

She saw Charlie emerge, along with the dreadlocked girl and the pierced boy and various other sixth-formers.

Charlie was looking as dazed as Luke.

"I only had half a beer. What happened?"

Ellie ushered them all through into the living room.

Then she stepped into the kitchen and closed the door.

She looked and felt around for a while. But there was nothing. If there had been a gap here into the spirit world... it had closed.

She took a deep breath.

"You really do get yourself into these things, don't you, Ellie?" said a voice.

Ellie jumped as she saw the woman from Viewpoint sitting at the kitchen table.

“So much for the promise you made yourself,” said the woman.

“It wasn’t my fault...” Ellie started.

The woman stood up.

“Enough. This is too early. It should never have happened. We can’t meet again, not yet. I think it’s best if you forget tonight’s events. I’ll see you next year.”

From the pocket of her mackintosh, she took a glowing red gemstone.

Ellie found herself staring into its light.

From a long way away, she heard the woman’s voice.

“Your memory of the last half-hour will be erased. And so will those of everyone here. I need you to start afresh, Ellie. When the spirits truly come... we have much to do.”

Ellie fell into the light.

Then she looked around the empty kitchen. What was she doing in here? This was Christmas! And there was a party going on in the next room. She’d teach Charlie to leave her out...

She closed the kitchen door after her. She shook her head. She felt sure she’d forgotten something important. But she couldn’t think what.

She went into the living room. Tommo was starting up the music again... though there was a record lying in pieces at his feet. Careless lot. Dad would go ballistic. It served Charlie right.

She caught sight of a tall, dark boy as he left the crowd and made his way towards the buffet table. He was rather nice. He had a lovely face, all suntanned and smiley. His black shirt and jeans looked very smart...

Once his plate was full, he stepped out into the hall. Ellie slid after him.

This was going to be a good Christmas, after all.

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If you'd like to find out what happened next to Ellie, Luke and Charlie, read:

High Spirits

And check out the earlier books in the Spirits series:

Childish Spirits

The Spirit of London

The Sword of the Spirit

Details at www.robkeeley.co.uk

Coming next year: the story concludes in

The Coming of the Spirits

Happy Christmas!