

## Ghost of Christmas Past

By

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Darkness imprisons the idyllic cul-de-sac. Homes, perched like gargoyles, backlit by the low-hanging moon, sit dark and lifeless. Frozen rain, mixed with clumps of snow, coats everything. Each home, virtually identical, stand cropped together. Incandescent holiday lights burn through the sackcloth of night, reflecting their cheer on glassy ground. Biting wind snarls and cuts between the stepford homes. Strings of lit colored glass clank and chink against roof and wall as street lamps, like dozens of gnarled fingers, threaten to choke the road. Cranky bare oak trees, beset the unlit lamps, groan and creak.

Each lawn, festive and cheery in their own way, awaits beneath a slick and icy tomb. Back and forth they gossip as a new impenetrable layer is applied. Blowmold figures, in various degrees of paint loss, glow pale white-yellow as the bright bulbs behind their plastic masks fight to escape. Pine trees, numbering in single digits, stand as vigilant, ominous guardians. The baubles and charms covering their facades glisten and twinkle as light plays on their burnished faces. Holiday trees light the living rooms of their dark, vacant homes while wreaths hang on their doors.

An unassuming blue and white home holds court at the foot of the turn-around. Candles flicker in each of the windows, creating dancing shadows. The bay window plays a movie of holiday frivolity. A chorus of music and laughter explodes into the cold wasteland lying beyond the bright red door. This home's wreath, larger than most, is nearly the width of the door. Pine cones, ornaments, and photographs of loved ones, held with care by bobby pins, welcomes all.

Lights approach with steadied care from the cul-de-sac entrance. White-walled tires crunch and compact fresh crystals. The Mustang's throaty V8 silences the whispering trees and gossiping lawns as it pulls into the round-about, sliding to a soft stop in front of the blue and white home. The engine purrs a few moments before being silenced, its lights extinguished. Cold, rusty hinges squeal as steel rubs on steel. Ice crunches below polished black dress shoes as a man in a crisp-pressed Army uniform emerges. He slams the door with a rattling clang. Moving toward the passenger side, he waits, watching the movie of festive sweaters and elf hats.

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The living room is alive with raucous holiday cheer. Bits of charred hickory floats in the air as logs crackle and pop within the stocking-laden fireplace. A Douglas fir, closing in on the ceiling, stands proud in the corner, dressed with popcorn garland, gold and silver tinsel, and a rainbow of ornaments. The glass baubles clink as Twinkles, a black cat wearing a Santa's hat, bats at the lower ornaments. A brass angel sits atop, watching the merrymakers below.

Guests mingle throughout the home, no hand in the lot without a goblet of egg nog or plate of pot-luck. "*Christmas Time is Here*" offers soft ambience as its vinyl spins on the greyish-green portable RCA Victrola. Children dodge adults as the elderly fight off the sandman. Wisps of fragrant smoke escape the occasional pipe or cigar. Not a single seat is left unoccupied.

In the study, off from the living room, stands a woman. Her blonde hair cascades in subtle waves that just cover her soft features. Flawless in her pink Jackie-O dress and tan heels, she gazes at the dark cherry mantle above an unlit fireplace. Shallow pools under her blue eyes twinkle in the light filtered from the living room. She twists the unpretentious gold band around her left ring finger, focusing on the pictures crowding the dark cherry mantle.

A photograph of a uniformed man, handsome and young, sits center in a gilded frame. Stamped in faded gold, “’55” is visible on the bottom right corner. A Purple Heart, polished, hangs from the corner of the frame. A faded Western Union telegram sits beside it. “I regret to inform you...” and “December 25<sup>th</sup>, 1960”, the only words readable through age and salt water stains. She kisses her fingers and transfers it to the portrait. Photos of herself with a child changing from baby to teenager fill the gaps on the mantle, becoming a miniature version of herself. She blots her eyes, turning away. A black velvet box, blocked by her slight frame, now visible as she leaves to rejoin her guests. A Bronze Star rests inside.

She pauses by a 1968 calendar tacked to the wall. Grabbing the red marker hanging by a string, she crosses out “Christmas Day”. She stares at the other crossed off days. She removes the thumbtack and flips through the year of crossed-off dates. Reaching the beginning, she throws it across the cross, the pages flapping. It hits the floor with a soft splat. Composing herself, she creates a smile on her face. She moves into the party, greeting and hugging everyone.

Knuckles strike the front door. Firm. Tough. With a smile affixed on her face, she moves to the door. Without a thought, she opens it. Snow, on the back of frigid air, mount a frontal assault on the foyer. A soldier, sturdy and unwavering in the wintry mix, stands on the salt-crusted welcome mat.

She looks at the man. Her face turns ashen, legs tremble. Shouts of concern ring out from behind her as she collapses. Her daughter, in sensible flats and a slim-fit blue dress, rushes to her side.

“Mom, what’s wrong? What’s happened?” she says.

She seizes her daughter's arms in a vice-like grip, refusing to let go. Her body tense and shaking, but not from the cold, lips quivering, she looks at her daughter through blurred vision.

She looks back at the man in her doorway.

“Kristen... meet your father.”