



A  
CAROL'S  
CHRISTMAS

BY  
TINA PISCO



# A CAROL'S CHRISTMAS

IN PROSE

BEING

A GHOST STORY OF CHRISTMAS

by

**Tina Pisco**

First published by  
Fish Publishing, 2016  
Durrus, Bantry, Co. Cork.

in  
Sunrise Sunset and other fictions

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ISBN 978-0-9562721-9-5

## STAVE ONE

### MARLA'S GHOST

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There was no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge’s name was good upon ‘Change for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was dead as a doornail.”

*What a load of bullshit*, thought Carol as she closed the book and put it back on the pile of unwrapped presents on her desk. How the hell was she meant to get her kids to read a book if Charles Dickens couldn’t write a more attention grabbing first paragraph. He would never have made it in television.

It was a handsome volume, bound in red leather with: “Children’s Classics: A Christmas Carol” embossed in gold. Very posh, very educational. It would look well on the bookshelf, even if nobody ever read it. It was one of those last minute stocking-filler impulse buys that she forgot about almost immediately after she’d swiped her credit card. When the bills came in January she could never remember why the hell she thought whatever she’d bought was so wonderful just a month earlier. She would give it to Tom. Tracy was too old and too cool for Children’s Classics and Sam was too young for Dickens.

Tom would probably glance at it once and chuck it on to his pile of presents. Still it would look nice in Tom’s bookcase; very nice indeed. Her sister Su would be most impressed. She’d probably go out and buy the whole collection for the nursery she was decorating. Her baby was only three months old and Su was already looking around for a Suzuki violin class.

“Carol Edwards’ desk,” said Carol, picking up the phone on the first ring.

“Well hello, Carol’s desk. May I speak to my sister?”

“Very funny,” said Carol. “It’s useful for bores I don’t want to talk to. I can pretend to be my secretary and say that I’m out.”

Carol reached over the pile of presents and took a cigarette. The pack she’d bought that morning was almost empty. If she didn’t watch herself it

was going to be a two pack day.

“Are you insinuating that you don’t want to talk to *moi*?”

“Gimme a break. I’ve had a tough day.” Grabbing her notepad, Carol started crossing out names from her Christmas list.

“I just wanted to tell you that I finally tracked down that wallpaper border for the nursery; the one with the Teddy bears and the butterflies.”

“I’m overjoyed for you. Best news I’ve heard all day,” said Carol, still ticking off her list. She didn’t have anything for John. Husbands and fathers were impossible. Maybe another book?

“The baby was a bit colicky last night. She seems fine now. She’s finally sleeping. I expect it’s not anything serious,” Su said, ignoring Carol’s snub. “So are you all set for Christmas?”

“Don’t ask.” Carol glanced down the page. “I still have a News Roundup of the year for broadcast on the 26th. I have to find a replacement for Louis, our cameraman because he’s taking a week to work on his tan. I have to file my expenses for December and badger accounts to pay up before the end of the month, so that I’m not completely wiped out when my credit card bill lands in January. I need to call the dentist and make an appointment for Tom, bribe Tom to go, and find a way to get him there. Oh yeah, which reminds me,” Carol scribbled a new line to her list, “I still need to arrange transportation for Tracy to ski camp, and send in a cheque, though we can’t really afford it in the first place. Not to mention defrost the turkey and make mince pies, for Christ’s sake! God I hate Christmas!”

“You don’t mean that!” laughed Su. “Everybody loves Christmas!”

“Well, I don’t,” snapped Carol. “It’s just an excuse for spending more money while we all pretend to be filled with the fucking festive spirit. I don’t have time to be festive. Can you hold? I have another call. Hello? Carol Edwards’ desk.”

“*Carololol?* It’s *JohnJohn*,” said a crackly voice. The line crackled and hissed.

“Where are you? You sound like you’re in Siberia. I thought you’d be home by now. You were meant to get in this morning!”

“My flight was cancelled~~cancelled~~. I’m stuck in transit~~transit~~. I’m trying get a flight out tonight *flightouttonight*.”

“Ah for fuck’s sake. That’s just great, John! You promised you’d make it home today. Thank you very much!”

"It's not my fault *taultault*."

"Bullshit! You could have left yesterday. You always leave it to the last minute. Don't you think you were calling it a little tight?"

"Carolarol. Let's not fight now *fightnow*. Wait till I get home *gethome*. There's a flight that'll get me in at 6am *6am6am*."

"Well I'm not picking you up!"

"Fine. I'll take a taxi *taxiataxiataxi*."

"That'll cost a fortune! You may not have noticed but it's fucking Christmas!"

"What? *What?What?What?*"

"Nothing. I've got to go," said Carol. She stabbed the keypad, cutting the line without saying goodbye. Remembering her sister on the other line, she hit the hold button, but Su was gone. Probably had a pilates class to go to. Her mobile started vibrating on her desk. A quick glance confirmed that it was her mother. That was twice today. Carol ignored it and ran through her list again. The last thing she needed was to deal with more Christmas and family. Sometimes Carol felt old, especially at this time of year. Thirty-eight wasn't meant to be old. Not by a long shot. Not anymore. No wonder the suicide rate shot up during the holidays. She had to focus.

Her number one priority was the pilot of a new current affairs show that was starting in the new year. Carol had made it clear that she wanted to be considered for the producer's job and she stood a good chance of getting it. She wasn't about to screw it up. Christmas could wait.

"Roger just called," yelled her assistant Rosie from her desk in the main newsroom. "He says that they're stuck in traffic. He's on line 5."

"I don't have time to talk to him. Tell him I said that his balls are up for auction if he doesn't get his butt back here ASAP. The edit is booked in 25 minutes starting now. And tell him that he can pay for his own speeding tickets. And Rosie! Come in here when you're done with that asshole - preferably with coffee. Black."

Carol looked up at the row of clocks on the back wall of the newsroom: three o'clock. Not too bad. Not great, but not too bad. If that idiot didn't come in late, or with bad shots, she might be OK. CNN caught her eye in the corner of her office. They were running a story about a llama visiting a NYC department store dressed up as a reindeer. Christ they must be desperate.

Carol pushed her notepad away and glanced at her own line-up, while

speed-dialling her home number on her mobile: Another analysis of the European summit, another sex scandal in the government, a survey on consumer spending at Christmas, and Roger's thing on Christmas for the homeless. She tried to remember if they hadn't done exactly the same show last Christmas. Maybe she should try and get clips of the llama, just in case Roger didn't make it in on time.

Carol drew a circle around the sex scandal story while she waited for her housekeeper to pick up the bloody phone. Maybe she should open with the homeless thing instead, but she'd have to wait and see the footage. If that bum Roger got back in time.

"Hello? Hi, Sweetie, it's Mommy," Carol said as she heard Sam, her five year old answer the phone. "No I haven't got the tree yet. Don't worry. I'll get it. Sam? Where's Maria? Yes Mommy's coming home soon. You be good baby. Don't cry. Big girls don't cry. Get Maria. Please Sweetheart, just get Maria." Heavy breathing and sniffles is all she heard, until Tracy's voice came on the line. Carol could hear Sam wailing in the background.

"Tracy? Can you get me Maria? No you can't go over to Sharon's house. Because I don't want you to. I'm sorry but I'm stuck in the office, your father was meant to be home, but he's somewhere between Hong Kong and God knows where. I spent my entire lunch hour fighting Christmas shoppers and the last thing I need is a thirteen year old with an attitude. What? Of course I got a present for Maria. It's very nice. I can't remember what I got her, but I know it's very nice."

Carol looked up to see Rosie waiting with her coffee and gestured for her to wait.

"Maria? How is everything? Great. I'll be home late so make sure that they eat dinner. No, she can't go to Sharon's. I told her no already. Also can you take the turkey out of the freezer? Just make sure to put it where the cat can't get it."

"Roger called again," said Rosie as Carol hung up the phone. "He'll be here in five. He said he's got some great shots of homeless kids."

"Well he doesn't have much time left. Listen, Rosie - if you've finished filing your nails for the day, would you mind giving me a hand? I have a bunch of presents that need wrapping."

"I'm not sure that fits my job description," said Rosie, her cheeks

reddening. The station had run an assertiveness training workshop and ever since Rosie kept making lame attempts to speak her mind. Carol hadn't bothered attending. She could have taught the damn thing.

"Your job description is to assist me," said Carol. "Just stick a post-it note with a brief description of what it is on the wrapped present."

"You want me to write Merry Christmas, Love Carol, too?" asked Rosie as she picked up the presents and the big bag of wrapping paper.

"I wish," said Carol. She picked up her desk phone and tried an outside line.

"By the way - can I leave early today?"

"Why?" said Carol trying another line.

"It's Christmas and I still haven't done any shopping. You understand don't you?" pleaded Rosie. Carol hated whining. A framed card on her desk said: *Thank You For Not Whining*. It wasn't a joke.

"First of all it's not Christmas yet. It's December 23rd. Secondly, I do not understand. I did my shopping over lunch."

"But you asked me to man the phones at lunch and I'm working tomorrow."

"That's why God made late night shopping," snapped Carol. She tried another number only to find it engaged.

"But you know that Timmy is back in the hospital for treatment. I have to visit tonight," whispered Rosie, hanging her head.

Carol slammed the phone down. "Listen, I asked if you could handle it when he was diagnosed and you assured me that you could. Appearances to the contrary, we are not running a charity here. This is commercial television news, with an emphasis on commercial. Time is money and my time is running out today. Now go and do something else than look pretty up at that desk of yours."

Rosie sighed and started out the door with the pile of presents. "You know, Carol," she said softly without turning around, "sometimes you can be a real bitch."

"Thank you, Sweetheart. That's what they pay me for. And may I remind you that they pay me a hell of a lot more to be a bitch than they pay you to be nice to people on the phone."

Carol didn't look up as Rosie left. She was sweet, but stupid. Borderline Bimbo. No amount of training could change that. She even dotted the i in her name with a smilie face. It was too bad about the kid. Carol couldn't

remember what was wrong with him, but it wasn't her problem. If Rosie couldn't handle the pressure, she should give up her job. When Tom was rushed to the hospital with what could have been a ruptured appendix she hadn't gone all whiney. She'd sucked it up and dealt with it. That was the problem with people these days. They were always looking around for a shoulder to cry on, instead of just sucking it up and dealing. Bringing personal problems to the office just was not on. Marla, her old boss, had taught her that early on in her career.

Marla was the numero uno bitch-on-wheels. The very best. After Marla died, Carole had worked hard to match her mentor. When they'd given her Marla's job, she'd found Marla's old plaque and put it on the wall: GRAB 'EM BY THE BALLS AND THEIR HEARTS AND MINDS WILL FOLLOW. Come to think about it - wasn't today the anniversary of her death? Seven years already.

Roger burst in through the door at full sprint. He looked like a schoolboy on his way to play football as he waved a tape at her. They kept getting younger every year, thought Carol. Sometimes she felt more like a babysitter than a producer.

Roger bounced into a chair and swivelled round and round as he spoke. "You've only got me down for a minute on this homeless thing. I've got some great stuff. There's a good three minutes' worth," he said. "Just have a look. I've got this kid talking about Christmas on the street. It's dynamite. I really think that we should open with it."

"Jesus, Roger!" said Carol as she took the tape and popped it into the machine. "Could you put a damper on it. You're lit up like a Christmas tree."

"But it's Christmas, boss!"

"Don't rub it in, Roger," said Carol as she pushed play.

The screen came to life with a close shot of a snot nosed, mean looking kid, about ten years old. He was wearing so many layers that it was difficult to tell if it was a boy or a girl. The eyes were small. The face was dirty. A front tooth was chipped. The voice was shrill and wheezed with a cold. Carol started fast forwarding.

"Carol! What are you doing?" yelled Roger. "You haven't listened to him."

"The kid is ugly, Roger. He looks as if he's about to swipe your handbag, for Christ's sake! We can't use this. I thought you had more sense." Carol pressed fast forward in exasperation. The blurred child raced across the screen.

"You said it yourself Rudolf - it's Christmas. You do a piece on homeless kids at Christmas you want a bit of bathos. Fine. But you don't want to overdo it. Couldn't you get me an *Up* homeless story?"

"An *Up* homeless story?" laughed Roger. "What exactly do you mean by an *Up* homeless story?"

Carol slowed the tape back to normal speed. A cute little blonde girl was eating an ice cream. "What's this?" she asked.

"That's the ugly kid's cute little sister. We took them both to an ice cream parlour. We only shot it because she wanted to see herself on TV."

"Does she say that?" asked Carol leaning forward. "Do you have any filler shots of them on the streets?"

"Yeah, I think she says it. Of course we have street shots."

"Great. Roger, I love you. Give me a minute and a half: Homeless kids living on the street get their Christmas wish: An ice cream and a chance to be on TV!"

"What?"

"An *UP* homeless story, Roger," said Carol picking up her phone. "Make it pronto. If you don't have enough street shots, just get some out of stock. They all look the same anyway. Oh and sweet buns ... Don't use the brother in any close-up shots." Carol watched Roger walk back across the newsroom as she dialled the edit suite. Nice butt. Shame about the brain.

Nick sat hunched over the keyboard in the tiny dark room. Three monitors reflected ghostly coloured shadows across his face and hands, while the rest of his body blended in with the darkness. Along the back wall a crazy jagged skyline wavered helter-skelter, the shadow of tapes piled like the ramparts of a medieval fortress. Carol slid into the chair next to him and looked up at the monitors. One had a family portrait of a NATO summit. Two had a wide shot of a woman crying. The blurred features were pulled into a mask of despair.

"What's that? Gaza?" asked Carol pointing. "Great shot. Is that the footage of the woman watching her house burning?"

Nick laughed. "No. That's nothing. It's the Miss Universe pageant. She's the chick who won. I thought we might slip it in somewhere. You know Beauty and the Beast. Lighten up a little. I'm just starting a segment of world disasters. I thought we could slam a great big red TRAGEDY on it. Or maybe save that for

the human stuff like the little kid who was kidnapped and murdered and just put WORLD on this one?"

"We can decide on the décor later," said Carol. "Show me what you've got so far."

"Monitor Two."

Nick pushed PLAY and a freeze frame barren landscape came to life as the shot swung to the left to reveal a large refugee camp. Makeshift tents swayed in the breeze like multi-coloured kites. All around people swarmed.

"Have you got any sound?" asked Carol.

"Not really. It was terrible. I tried dubbing it with an African market tape, but it sounded too jolly."

"That's exactly what I'm thinking," said Carol. "These shots are too pretty."

"It gets better," said Nick.

The shot changed to a view inside the camp. Children played football. Women milled around a food station.

"They look very well fed," said Carol.

"It's not a famine. It's a war," said Nick fast forwarding. "Mind you, if they don't get some help soon they'll look hungry enough. Hey! You'll like this bit."

A crowd of people were running, kicking up red dust cloud. The camera shot changed to a truck pulling up. Within seconds the truck was overwhelmed by a wave of people crawling over each other, grabbing supplies. Men in military garb ran up and tried to pry people off.

"That's not bad. Do we have any close-up shots?"

"How close?"

"As close as you can make it without throwing up. We've seen stuff like this so many times, you'll have to find something to make it look different."

"I'll see what I can do, Bossman," said Nick grinning.

"That's Ms Bossman to you," said Carol squeezing past Nick's chair. "Just remember, you only have two days left."

"Merry Christmas to you too," Nick replied.

"Enough with the Christmas cheer already! It's only the 23rd, for Christ's sake!"

Carol worked steadily through the afternoon until the sky outside darkened and the lights on the street below slowly came on like a second sunrise. She

wasn't getting anywhere in securing a kick-ass interview for the new pilot. She had to bust her butt and come up with something by the end of the week. Carol had come really close to getting the guy accused of murdering thirteen runaways, but she'd lost him to the tabloids at the last minute. The only interview she had was a mother of two dying of AIDS. Not very impressive. AIDS was old news.

She looked out the window and watched people scurrying like ants against the cold wind. It must be freezing down there. For a second she thought of the homeless kids in Roger's piece. Then again those kind of kids were used to sleeping rough. They were street wise. They probably had a shelter to go to or something like that. Carol made a mental note to send a cheque to whatever charity took in homeless kids. The thought of the cheque made her feel good. She'd do it in February when her account wasn't so overdrawn.

On a street corner a Santa Claus was ringing a bell while, from further down, the sound of Carol singing could be heard but not seen. Carol thought that it was a shame it wasn't the other way around. Christmas was such a bitch with its false frivolity, tacky tinsel and fake holiday spirit. Who needed it? She sure didn't. The kids were home from school, which was always a drag. The staff at the station went hyper. She spent more money every year. Her housekeeper got the day off, and she got stuck with Christmas dinner for the whole family, including her parents who came to stay for two whole days. At the thought of her parents she remembered the mince pies. Every year she made mince pies at some ungodly hour of the night on Christmas Eve. Forget it. She was too tired. She had more important things to do than make mince pies. This year she'd buy the damn things.

Carol got up and rubbed her eyes. She did a few stretches and then dropped heavily onto the black leather sofa. Lying back, she looked out at the newsroom. It was the dead time at the station when most of the stories were being finished or already in the can. Most of the desks were empty. In a couple of hours the place would be buzzing again, gearing up for broadcast. She could call it a day and go home. Maybe pop in later to see how Nick was getting on. Instead she lay on the sofa, pushing the pile of presents Rosie had brought in earlier. The slim red book fell out of the bag. Rosie must have run out of wrapping paper. Carol started to leaf through it.

"What's this then? Sleeping on the job? Boy, this place has gone to the

dogs since I left,” said a low voice above Carol’s head. Carol jerked awake. She must have drifted off. She wondered how long she’d been asleep.

“Wakey wakey, you lazy bitch. Rise and shine!”

That voice was so familiar. Yet Carol couldn’t quite place it. She must still be asleep.

“You’re not dreaming, Kid. Believe me.”

“Go away,” said Carol closing her eyes tightly. This was one hell of a vivid dream. She could smell the expensive upholstery; feel the cool leather caress her cheek.

“Ask me who I was,” said the voice.

“OK,” said Carol, gritting her teeth. “Who were you?”

“In life I was your boss, Marla Murphy.”

Carol sat up and looked at the woman standing in front of her.

“Is this some kind of sick joke?”

The woman looked remarkably like Marla: same carefully coiffed hair, same power suit in muted tones, same expensive yet understated jewellery. Nice touch - the joker had handcuffed a briefcase to the woman’s wrist and weighed her down with a collection of phones, pads and devices, all trailing cables and wires which wrapped around her arms and legs. Who was the sicko who thought it would be funny to send her a Marla lookalike on the anniversary of her death? It was amazing what singing telegram companies could do if you paid them enough.

“Bravo!” said Carol slowly clapping. “I’m sure this is meant to be very amusing. Well done. Now go.”

The Marla stood smiling.

“Hello? It’s over.”

The Marla still smiled.

“I’m very busy, so would you kindly get the fuck out of my office?” said Carol, less assuredly than she would have liked. She had just noticed a certain fluidity about this weirdo; a transparency that waxed and waned like a flickering candle. It faded until its outline wavered like a net curtain in a soft breeze. Carol could look straight through the Marla and into the newsroom beyond where someone was using the photocopying machine. Carol shook her head and tried to adjust her vision, but the Marla had now faded so much that only its head and low heeled pumps were still visible. Carol shivered as a

cold gust blew through the Marla and over her face.

"Are we paying attention now?" smiled the Marla's head. Carol did not answer.

"Would you prefer all of me?" she asked sweetly and started taking on a more solid form while humming *All of me* off key. Carol just sat and stared.

"You don't believe in me," the Marla said, frowning.

"Damn right, I don't believe in you," blurted Carol.

"But you can see me. You can hear me. Why do you doubt your senses?" asked the Marla, fully visible again.

"My senses! My senses are the most doubtful part of me. Anything can affect them: a moonlit night and some wine. Indigestion! An extra cocktail can blow your sense of reality out the window. I'd have never gotten where I am today if I went around trusting my senses. You could be the result of a bad prawn in my sandwich at lunch, or a sick new twist on PMS, or early menopause. The result of my missspent youth - I could be having an acid flashback."

"Get a grip girlfriend. I'm a ghost."

"Bullshit! You are some electrical distortion of my brain. I'm obviously hallucinating."

At that the Marla let out such a chilling wail that Carol looked up to see if anyone in the newsroom had heard, but the place was deserted. The Marla screeched as all the beepers, phones, faxes and tablets started beeping, pinging and ringing. Still screeching, she started answering them one after the other, and tearing at her hair. It came out in brown clumps, until with one great pull it came right off like a wig. The Marla's teeth turned black and shrivelled away. Her makeup melted. Her face sagged. Jowls, bags and wrinkles pulled her features into that of an old hag.

"Now look what you've done!" screamed the toothless Marla over the constant ringing, waving her hair at Carol. It looked like a large dead rat. "Do you have any idea how much it cost to keep this all together tonight? Damn it - there goes the lipo and the bum tuck! Oh God no! Not the tits!" she yelled, cradling her two deflated breasts in a parody of a cleavage.

Carol was petrified. Maybe if she humoured this illusion, it would go away. "Why are you here?" she asked. She was surprised at how shaky her voice sounded. The devices fell silent.

“Do you believe in me?” asked the Marla as she picked at the buttons of her suit which were now stretched to bursting point due to the appearance of a ghostly spare tyre.

“I don’t, but I have to. Even though I can’t see why a dead person would want to walk into my office and scare the shit out of me.”

“Well, it seems that each of us has a spirit - you know, like a soul,” said Marla, taking a denture out of her pocket and popping it in her mouth. It did not fit well.

“And this soul is meant to experience life to the full while you’re alive. Yada yada yada. Long story short - If it doesn’t, then you’re condemned to do so after the body has died. It’s a hell of a bummer,” sighed the Marla trying to pat her hair back into place. “You get to walk around, lost among the living, watching them have a great time, and basically see everything that you missed. All that happiness that you passed up.”

A phone hanging out of Marla’s top pocket started ringing. An army of devices chimed along. Marla ignored them. An answering machine in the distance went into action:

*Hello. You have reached the answering service of Marla Murphy. I’m sorry, I’m not able to take your call right now. In fact I’m never going to be able to. I’m dead. But if you please leave your name and number and I’ll try and get back to you as soon as I can. Speak clearly after the tone.*

“Nobody ever leaves a message,” Marla said, waving her hair as if swatting away the pain.

“I hate to ask, but why are you covered in telecommunications?” asked Carol, relieved that the ringing had stopped. “It can’t be that useful now that you’re dead. I mean, does anybody ever call?”

“No. Nobody. It’s like, you know: Live by the sword, die by the sword. Only it’s forever. Some sick cosmic joke. Anyhoo, we’d better get a move on. I’m running late and I still have masses of appointments.” Marla took in a big breath, plonked her hair back on her head and pulled a large diary out of her briefcase.

“You have places to go?” asked Carol, giggling despite her fright. “People to meet?”

“No, I don’t,” snapped Marla. “It’s like the phones. I have all these appointments, only there’s no-one there. No one to see. Just the appointment,

but I've got to go. Coming to think about it," she added brightening up, "I have three for you, and they're not in pencil. They're in ink!"

"What appointments?" asked Carol.

"Later. First have a look at this," said the Marla handing Carol a tape. "Go on. Watch it."

Carol took the tape and put it in the machine. It was streaky and dark, but it clearly showed a restaurant on a city street. The sidewalks were drenched in the pouring rain. Oily black pools reflected the blinking flash of a neon light. The sign on the door read "Florio's". The door opened and the real Marla, the one that Carol remembered, stepped out.

"I really looked great for fifty-four," said the Marla with a sigh.

"Fifty-four?" exclaimed Carol. "You told me you weren't fifty!"

The Marla shrugged her shoulders. "I'd just had a terrific Italian meal, which was good because it ended up being my last. Shit. I wish I'd known. I didn't even have any pasta. I didn't have dessert and the tiramisu looked divine. You see? That's one more thing to regret. Two if you count the missed rigatoni," said the Marla.

Across the street from Florio's a heavily pregnant woman and a small child stood next to a pile of suitcases. They looked expectantly at the traffic lights. Suddenly they started waving joyfully at a taxi-cab turning the corner. The cab pulled up and the woman exchanged some words with the driver, pointing at the luggage. As the woman turned to fetch her bags, the shot changed to Marla standing outside the restaurant. A look of triumph crossed Marla's face. She started sprinting across the street.

"Way to go Marla," smirked Carol. "Stealing a pregnant woman's cab."

"It was raining," said the Marla. "That's probably why I didn't see the bus."

"What bus?"

"That one," said Marla pointing at the screen.

Brakes screeched followed by a hollow thump. Carol watched as Marla's body flew through the air in a perfect arc and landed flat on the roof of the taxi, bouncing back on to the pavement.

"I did that bit in slomo," said the Marla. "Looks pretty cool. Want to rewind?"

Carol shook her head as she fought back a wave of nausea. People were stopping traffic. Someone was running. Sirens screamed in the distance.

Marla's inanimate body lay on the wet street. Her head was twisted in an unusual position. A woman's voice yelled "She was trying to steal my cab!"

"You watch the next bit. I'll just stand over here. I've seen it before," Marla walked over to the window and took a lipstick from her purse. "You know the worst thing about Hell - no mirrors. Then again it could be a God send."

On the screen the scene changed to what looked like a hospital corridor. A body, covered with a sheet, was being wheeled on a gurney by two young orderlies.

"Another Jane Doe?" asked one man to another.

"Nope. Name's Marla Murphy. She had a pack of credit cards a mile high. Press credentials too. Must have been some hot shot journalist. She got hit by a bus trying to steal a cab! Can you believe it?"

"Serves the bitch right. So why are we putting her on ice if we know who she is?"

"There's no one to claim her. No one to call. No family. Nothing. The doorman in her building says she doesn't have any friends that he knows of, not even a cat. Travelled too much for pets." The gurney banged through double swing doors. "Real fancy address too. Like I said, some hot shot journalist."

"Can't be that important, poor bitch," said the first orderly as they disappeared into a dimly lit room. "No one to call. No one to claim her. Poor bitch."

Marla wiped her streaming eyes with a tissue. Her mascara was running down over the blob of lipstick she had applied in a crooked red gash across her puckered mouth. "Life was so short and I screwed it up so badly that no matter how much I regret it, I can never make amends. Oh the things I could have done ..."

"You did a lot," said Carol. "You were the best."

"At what? Editing tape? Yelling at people? How many others did I help? What daily kindness did I give? What legacy of love did I leave behind? Not even a lousy cat to miss me. I even paid someone to water my plants."

"I've got to go soon," said Marla, patting her lopsided hair, "so listen up. I came to warn you so that you don't end up like me. I always liked you and you know I drive a hard bargain. I managed to cut a great deal for you."

"You were always good to me. Tough but fair," said Carol.

"You will be haunted by three ghosts."

"That's the great deal you cut for me?"

"Your first ghost is due tomorrow at 1am."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'd rather pass if you don't mind."

"Without their visits your fate will be worse than mine," said Marla prodding the air with her lipstick. "As I said your first ghost will visit tomorrow."

"Couldn't we arrange a meeting with all three and get it over with? Do lunch?" Carol suggested weakly.

"Your second ghost will come the next night. Same time, same place. Ghost number three is scheduled for the following night around midnight." Marla pocketed her lipstick and snapped the diary shut. "Got to fly now. Busy. Busy. Busy. Don't forget what I said tonight," she said, slowly moving backwards towards the window. "How do I look?"

Carol started to answer, but only a stifled gasp escaped her lips. Marla was rising as she slowly passed through the window. Hovering in the air she beckoned Carol to come to her. As Carol reached the glass pane, Marla held up a bony hand and gestured to come no further. Carol became aware of a growing cacophony. Confused voices overlapped with heart wrenching sobs. If guilt and remorse had a sound this would be it. Try as she might Carol could not blot out the pitiful noise.

Marla turned and without so much as a wave goodbye started her own wailing lament, her voice joining the chorus outside as she lifted into the air and vanished. Carol looked up above the rooftops of the city and gripped the window sill for fear that she might faint.

The sky was filled with swirling shapes darting this way and that, oblivious to each other's presence. Many like Marla were weighed down with the paraphernalia of their former lives; files strapped to their backs, phone cables snaking around their legs, sports cars chained to their necks. Carol recognized some of them: a politician, a newspaper magnate. There went Sarah Jones the film star, followed by a pack of preternatural paparazzi, flashbulbs popping, and a mob of fans waving photos and ripping at her clothes.

One poor woman was almost hidden under a mountain of elegant shopping bags filled to the brim with designer clothes, her ankle tied to a heavy chain which dragged a sleek black Porche. Carol watched as the woman caught sight of a shivering young girl sitting under a street lamp far below.

The woman howled as she tried to take a shopping bag and throw clothes down to the girl, only to see them tumble gracefully, fold themselves up again and pile back into her arms. Clouds crossed the sky and the vision of those souls slowly faded, dissolved into darkness. Still Carol stood transfixed.

She screamed as she felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Woah! Carol! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” laughed Roger, standing beside her. “I’ve finished the piece. Do you have a minute to check if it’s *up* enough for you?”

“Sure, sure. Whatever,” stammered Carol.

“Are you OK?” Asked Roger, looking at her strangely. “You’re as white as a sheet. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Bullshit, Roger,” Carol croaked. “Bull shit.”

## STAVE TWO

### THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS

She was tired.

Not sleepy tired. Not the blessed need for rest that is gone when morning ends a good night's sleep. She was wired-tired. Caffeine and nicotine tired. Wide awake tired. Carol knew that she would wake up tired.

Carol dropped her heavy bags in the hallway and listened to the house sleeping. She was pleased that no one was awake. She couldn't deal with her kids right now. The sensible thing to do would be for her to join them in sleep but she couldn't.

Taking off her Prada pumps she walked up the stairs to her bedroom, still rattled by her day. Was that a vision? She shivered just to think of it. A hallucination? It had upset her. She had walked blankly around the studio attending to details that did not need her attention, postponing the moment when she'd be alone. When the feed had died with their correspondent in Berlin she had had to shake herself to shout at the operations desk.

Carol undid the buttons on her skirt and sighed in relief as it dropped to the floor. She rubbed the red marks as she rolled off her pantyhose and gave her belly a good scratch. She should get some exercise. As if she had the time to prance around in lycra with a bunch of ageing elephants. A quick look in the mirror confirmed her impression.

"You're a fat old cow," she said to her reflection and stuck out her tongue.

Carol threw her office clothes on the bed and put on an old track suit she found on the floor. She never let Maria tidy her room with the result that it was often a jumbled mess of discarded outfits. She made a mental note to pick them up before she went to sleep so that she could tell Maria to change the sheets and clean the room before she took off tomorrow.

What the hell had happened in her office? What was that about? Should she see a doctor? Maybe she should wait until she had a drink before she

thought about it. Maybe she was having a breakdown. It didn't feel like she was having a breakdown. Not that it mattered. It was Christmas - she couldn't be having a breakdown. She had too much to do.

She had to pull herself together. A little peace and quiet is what she needed. A little me-time. Padding back down to the kitchen in fluffy bear slippers, she felt a small thrill at the prospect of being alone and awake with only a vodka tonic and some late night surfing for company.

The shopping bags in the hallway reminded her that she still had things to do before she could try and chill out. The post was laid out on the hall table. She reached out and then stayed her hand as she noticed the piano bill. It could wait. She picked up the shopping bags, went down into the basement and hid the presents in the laundry room cupboard. The washing machine and dryer were both full, beckoning her to take action. Starting with the dryer, she pulled out the now cold sheets and folded them in a pile, feeling cheated that they had lost their comforting warmth. The piano was two months overdue. How the hell was she going to pay for it this month? How the hell could a family on their income not be able to pay for it? Her two bank accounts were overdrawn. Could she pay the piano bill with a credit card? Her own card would soon be maxed out by Christmas. Maybe John could pay for the piano. Except that she needed him for hard cash.

The washing machine delivered an even less appealing load of cold, wet clothes. Knotted and stuck together, they plastered the contours of the drum. Surrendering the task of untying mangled shirt sleeves to Maria, she pulled out the entire load like an unwilling toddler and stuffed it into the dryer, slamming the door quickly lest a sock escape. She needed cash for Maria, who would be expecting a Christmas bonus. And extra cash around the house for those awful people who terrorized you at this time of the year: postmen, firemen, sanitation workers and local charities. Each "Merry Christmas" felt like a thinly veiled threat that if you were not generous your mail would go undelivered, your garbage remain uncollected and your house would burn down as they looked on and cheered. The dryer chugged happily, slowly rotating its burden into an even more tangled embrace. The washer's open door pleaded to be filled so as to join its companion in useful purpose. Carol wondered if there was anywhere that she could buy a Christmas tree with a credit card. Shit. She'd better find the decorations before tomorrow. Maybe

Maria could have a root around under the stairs?

Separating the whites from the colours was like a mantra. White sock. Green T-shirt. White knickers. White sock. Pink dress. The tree should have been up a week ago. Someone had decreed that putting up the Christmas tree was a family occasion that required the presence of every member. Purple jogging pants. Maybe she should make a separate red pile? It was probably some Victorian, with a wife and four rosy cheeked domestics to do all the work. The Victorians were largely responsible for all the yuletide crap. Getting everyone in her family at home on the same night was easier said than done. Red shirt. Lilac sweat shirt. Red pile. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and she hadn't even bought the tree yet. She'd been counting on John to do it. It was the only thing he had to do and he couldn't even manage that. White shirt. White shirt with pale stripe. Another white shirt. How many white shirts did the man have for Christ's sake? Last year she'd managed to get the Christmas tree up just three days before Christmas. And after the novelty of opening the decoration box had worn off, the older kids had left to watch a Christmas special on TV, John had taken an overseas call from a country where it was two in the afternoon and that didn't celebrate Christmas, and she had found herself alone with Sam and a partly decorated tree. The red pile wasn't really materializing, but the white pile was growing into a mountain. It might even make two loads. Would she stay up for two loads? Shit. What time was it? Past twelve. Too late to call the station and check if anyone had figured out why the feed from Berlin had died. One purple sock. Three more white shirts. Maybe Nick was still in. He practically lived at the station since his wife had left him, often crashing on the sofa instead of going home. Shit. Khaki. She hated khaki. She hated cream and beige. You never knew which pile to put them in. What she hated most were little tags that said COLD WASH SEPARATE. DO NOT TUMBLE DRY. They should be outlawed by an international convention.

She overloaded the machine with whites and spilled washing powder on the floor as she filled the little compartment. Bending down to brush the white specks under the washing machine she felt as if someone was looking over her shoulder. She could almost feel the breath on her neck. She recoiled. That horrible vision of Marla. She shook her head, but couldn't shake the feeling of someone standing right behind her. Too scared to look over her shoulder, she ran back up the stairs without turning off the lights in the basement lest

a ghostly hand touched hers as she flipped the switch.

Back in the white formality of the living room she felt safe. Its clean, almost clinical lines declared that this was a place where wine was never spilt, where crisps were never crushed into the plush carpet, where dirt and grime and ghosts had no place. The children were not allowed into the living room except on special occasions.

Carol settled herself into the sofa with a nice, big vodka tonic. The clock on the mantelpiece started to chime as she lit a cigarette and took a deep, long drag. "You're losing it babe!" she said with a shallow little laugh as she raised her glass to her reflection in the ornate mirror on the wall. Her smile died as she noticed the dark shadows under her eyes, and the tiny lines that crept out of the corners and frowned between her eyebrows. Her mouth was already showing the strain of puffing on a pack of cigarettes a day. Carol powered up her notebook, but couldn't connect to the internet. Carol tried her phone, but still couldn't connect. The router must be down. She couldn't be bothered to get up and reboot it. She settled for the next best thing and switched on the TV.

A jaunty tune was playing that matched an early Sixties suburban décor. "And now! Your Hostess with the Mostest: The Happy Homemaker!" A logo of The Happy Homemaker danced merrily into view as the camera swung around to reveal a woman sitting primly on a sofa. Her cashmere twin set matched her pencil skirt, both molding her voluptuous body. A single row of pearls adorned her neck and a small Christmas tree brooch was pinned to her ample bosom. Her hair was teased into a perfect bouffant which framed her pretty, made-up face. She sat rod straight, one ankle tucked neatly behind the other, her gloved hands held serenely in her lap. She seemed perfectly at ease. Watching her, Carol had to resist the impulse to uncross her legs and sit up properly.

"Welcome" said the Happy Homemaker, tilting her head slightly but otherwise remaining perfectly still. "A woman's place is in the home and what better time to make that home a place of peace and joy, but at Christmas. Tonight we are going to see what we can do to make our homes reflect the spirit of Christmas for our families."

"Bullshit!" thought Carol. "What the hell channel is this? Must be a documentary." She hit the remote.

"Ivy, holly and evergreens are traditional at Christmas," continued the Happy Homemaker.

Carol hit the remote again.

"Red, silver and gold all compliment the green to give our homes a festive air." She hit the remote again, but the same channel came on. "A Happy Homemaker makes your family's Christmas unforgettable. Isn't that so Mrs Cooper?"

Carol didn't care to hear Mrs Cooper's answer. She roused herself to get up and change the channel directly on the monitor. She fiddled with the buttons but it didn't work.

"Mrs Cooper?" Carol kneeled on the floor and busied herself with the tiny buttons on the TV. Who designed these things? "Excuse me, but you are Mrs Cooper are you not?" Carol looked up to find a huge grainy close-up looking down at her. "And we have an appointment at one o'clock, do we not?"

It was happening again. Carol felt the panic rushing from below her bowels up through her body. If it made it to her throat, she might throw up. If it made it to her head she might explode.

"Mrs Cooper? Are you all right? Can I get you a glass of water?"

"I am not Mrs Cooper," Carol spit through clenched teeth. I am talking to a TV screen, thought Carol. I am going crazy. I need to get a grip and call for help.

"Oh my! That is rather troublesome. Are you sure? I have an appointment with a Mrs John Cooper."

"The only Mrs Cooper I know is my mother-in-law. She is Mrs Henry Cooper. I am Carol Edwards." Close your eyes. Count to ten. Breathe. Cross your fingers. Whatever it takes. Make it go away.

"How very curious. Well, never mind," said the huge face on the screen peering at her with concern. "I know I'm at the right address. Do come in and join me."

"You must be kidding. Who the hell are you anyway?" said Carol, inching away from the screen.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past," said the woman, rising to her feet in one fluid motion. A long elegant hand reached out through the screen and grasped Carol's hand. Without any effort, Carol was lifted off her feet and pulled into the television.

Carol and the ghost sat on opposite antique chairs. Between them was a small table, covered with a linen cloth, set with a bone china tea service for two. The room was lined with wall to wall built in closets. The only other furniture was a large three way mirror.

“Would you be Mother while I sort out some clothes for you?” the Ghost asked sweetly.

“Mother? Clothes?” Carol echoed in shock.

“Yes, be a dear and pour the tea,” said the Ghost over her shoulder as she busied herself in a drawer that seemed full of white undergarments.

“Now you mustn’t take offence, but you are not dressed appropriately for a woman of your standing. We must present a tidy and pleasant appearance at all times. This will help for a start.” She brandished what looked like a structured brassiere and a knee length girdle and suspenders. “I can’t imagine what you are wearing under that shapeless garment, but it does nothing for your figure.” Carol took the underwear and turned them over in her hands. “You have a lovely bust and shapely hips,” continued the ghost, passing Carol stockings, heels, a pencil skirt and fitted jacket. “We can’t have you wobbling and jiggling, can we? That would be most unseemly. A woman’s body is her temple. If you are to be respected you must guard the temple. Foundation garments are the foundations of your temple. Decorum starts with how we present ourselves to others.”

“I don’t want to put on these clothes,” said Carol looking wildly around her. This could not be happening. “I don’t want to be here.”

“I’m terribly sorry to hear it, but the truth is that you have no choice. It’s for your own good,” said the Ghost snapping her fingers. “There, you look better already.”

Carol looked in the mirror. A long forgotten image of her mother looked back at her. Her mother had been getting ready to go to a wedding reception. Carol sat on the bed watching her dress in high heels, sheer stockings, and a tightly tailored suit with matching hat and gloves. She must have been five or six at the most. Carol remembered thinking that her mother was the most beautiful woman in the world. How had her mother put up with it? The girdle pinched. The heels hurt. The skirt gave no space to move and the bra restricted her breathing

“Some temple. I look like a drag queen,” said Carol.

“Let’s forget the tea for now. Shall we go? You look wonderful,” said the Ghost. Not waiting for an answer, she took Carol by the hand and led her though the wall onto an open country road with fields on either side. They stood under the huge leafless branches of an old oak tree.

When Carol recovered from the sudden change of scenery she started looking around. A smile broke across her face as she felt the crisp breeze rustle around her. She smelt the damp cold loam. Her eyes widened as her eyesight expanded to take in the blue vastness of the horizon. White clouds the size of cathedrals slowly paraded across the sky in a stately procession.

“I know this place. This is my tree,” she said, touching the rough bark of the oak. The Ghost still held Carol’s hand as if to cushion the shock. Sounds, sights and smells came rushing at Carol through every pore. She was giddy with feelings. She felt so alive. She wanted to run, skip and jump at the same time. For the first time in years and years she wanted to climb a tree. In the near distance a group of children were tumbling down a small hill, rolling over and over, giggling and laughing. Still laughing they picked themselves up and started walking together across the field.

“Do you remember how to get to the house?” asked the Ghost.

“I could find it blind-folded,” Carol replied. Following the children down the road, Carol tried as much of a skip as her skirt and heels would allow. This was good. This was great. She could handle this ghost thing. She had to remember this when she woke up. She made herself a promise to go to the countryside with the kids. They’d love it. She’d rent a house with no TV and no WiFi. Well maybe that was a bit of a stretch. They could all promise to stay off line during the day. Tracy might resist, but Carol would bring her around. Except that there was no way that Carol could persuade Tracy to go offline for even an hour. The children were slowing down as they neared the house.

“Look! There’s Paul and Ted from the farm next door. And my cousins Steph, and Patty, and Mary and George ...”

Carol stopped as her eight year old self stepped out onto the road accompanied by a little boy. His face was streaked with tears and he was hiccupping and sniffing loudly. An angry red graze on his knee was probably the cause of his distress. Carol tried to reach out and touch him, but the Ghost stopped her.

“They are just shadows of the past. They cannot see us.”

The young Carol had obviously been comforting him. She now called to the group and pulled a funny face, trying to get the boy to laugh. He laughed and she hugged him.

“Boy, I sure was a skinny little kid,” said Carol laughing. Tears tracked her cheeks, matching the little boy’s. “My cousin Martin was such an angel. He sort of looked up to me.”

“He died soon after, didn’t he?” said the Ghost.

Carol nodded. “I never saw him again. He died that summer. He was so smart. What a waste. He never had a chance to really live. He could have been anything he wanted.”

“Nonsense!” said the Ghost, the anger in her voice confusing Carol’s tears. “How dare you say that his life was a waste? He had a great heart and a wonderful soul. In the five years that he walked this earth he spread more joy and love and laughter than many a high flying executive. Which, I presume, is what you hoped he’d become.”

Carol stood shocked into stillness by the Ghost’s words.

“I wish ...” she whispered.

“What’s past is past,” said the Ghost, cutting her off.

“No. I don’t mean Martin,” said Carol, lost in thought. “I was remembering a homeless boy I saw today. I wish I could have done something for him.”

“Why don’t you send a cheque?” said the Ghost, pulling Carol up to a large bay window. “Come! Let us see another Christmas.”

A large Christmas tree dominated the room. A slightly older Carol of about twelve sat watching a little girl unwrap a large present.

“Hurry up, Susie. Open it!” said the young Carol, just as impatient to see what it contained as her sister.

“Oh I hope it’s a nurse outfit! I asked Santa Claus to get me one,” said Susie as she ripped the final sheet of paper off the box. “Yes! I knew it” she yelped, brandishing a stethoscope and syringe. “I’m going to be a nurse!”

“Don’t be a nurse. That’s stupid.”

“No it’s not. Nurses help people.”

“Doctors help people and they make a lot more money.”

“Boys are doctors,” said her little sister, confused. “Girls are nurses.”

“No they’re not!” said the child Carol with authority. “Girls can be doctors. Girls can do anything boys can do.”

Carol stepped back from the window. "And then some," she said to herself sourly. "Girls can be anything they want to be and they can even still get to do the laundry."

The Ghost tapped Carol on the shoulder and pointed to another window. Carol looked in and let out a yelp of glee. "Well fuck a duck! There's Uncle Albert!"

The Ghost pursed her lips. "You really must watch your language. It is most unbecoming."

Carol ignored her, captivated by the scene. Uncle Albert was performing his favourite party trick: The Hairpiece from Hell. This consisted in pretending that his toupee had come to life and was attacking him. The children roared with laughter as Uncle Albert's hairpiece wrapped itself around his neck and proceeded to strangle him.

"My parents never liked Uncle Albert," said Carol with a laugh. "I think they thought he was common."

"So did you apparently," said the Ghost.

"I loved Uncle Albert!" protested Carol, "and he loved me. He was terrific."

"Really? Is that so?" asked the Ghost, pointing to a corner of the room.

Carol looked and saw her father standing with his back turned, ignoring Uncle Albert's rendition of the Toupee That Ate Topeka. Next to him she recognised a pretty teenager, long and willowy in a red and green taffeta dress. She would have been lovely but for the look of wry disgust that crossed her face as she watched the laughing crowd in the room. Her eyes met Uncle Albert's and for a split second his laughing face was shadowed by pain and embarrassed confusion. Then shrugging his shoulders he blew her a kiss and put his hair on backwards to the shrieking delight of the younger children. The teenage Carol turned and left the room.

"Don't leave you stupid jerk," said Carol at the window. "Fuck it! I swear, teenagers are impossible."

"Your language really is appalling. Come. We must go now," said the Ghost, shaking her head.

"Not yet. I want to watch some more," pleaded Carol. "That was our last real Christmas. They sold the house and Grandma moved into an apartment. And then Grandma was gone and everyone sort of drifted."

"You didn't want to see it then. You won't see it now," said the Ghost,

grabbing Carol's hand. "You can't change the past."

"I was only fifteen for Christ's sake!" said Carol, pulling her hand away.

"Too late."

"You know, for a ghost, you can be a real bitch," said Carol.

"Thank you. Coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment," said the Ghost, smiling as she turned to leave.

Light bounced off the shiny ornaments on the Christmas tree and was spun wildly into the fire to dance in the flickering arms of the flames. Smells escaped from the kitchen, filling the room with the promise of good things yet to come. And in the middle of the light and smells and laughter sat Grandma, her eyes darting around with pleasure as she followed the antics of her children, young and old. Carol tried to pull away from the Ghost to see more, but was yanked against her will through a box hedge and onto a bridge overshadowed by the looming Gothic spires of the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

"What the fu..?!" spurted Carol, stopping herself just in time. "You've got to stop doing this. At least give me some kind of warning or something."

"Ah, Paris!" said the Ghost, opening her arms to the city around her. "Ville Lumiere! Recontre des Amoureux! The most elegant city in the world. You were so lucky."

"Lucky?" repeated Carol, confused.

"To be young and in love and in Paris!" exclaimed the Ghost, pointing to a young couple leaning on the bridge. They wore matching berets, faded jeans and long multicoloured wool scarves. Not only were their arms wrapped around each other, their legs were also entwined as if standing side by side was too far apart to bear.

"I can't believe we were ever that young," said Carol as she smiled at the couple. "John's hair was down to his shoulders and mine was so short! God if Tracy could see this she'd freak."

They leaned over the bridge watching the sun set and waved at the tourists passing on the river in the bateaux-mouches. They nibbled at each other's ears, nuzzled noses in each other's necks and huddled so close together that the shadow they cast from the sun's dying light was of a single being and not two separate bodies.

"I love you," whispered John into Carol's ear.

"Ah, but I love you more," laughed Carol, hugging him even closer.

"No you don't!"

"Do so."

"Do not," said John, kissing her hard to stop her from speaking. She wriggled until he released her.

"Will you promise me something?" asked Carol, planting little kisses on his eyelids as she spoke.

"I'd promise you the world," said John.

"No seriously," said Carol, looking back down at the river. "Promise me that we'll never forget this. Promise me that we'll always remember what it's like to be young, and broke, and in Paris and in love. Promise me that we won't turn into two bored people with a bunch of kids, and two cars and a time share on a condo."

"I solemnly swear," said John, laying his hand on his heart, "on the head of that balding German tourist over there."

"You jerk. You'll probably end up behind a desk with a blonde bimbo secretary," laughed Carol and kissed him again.

"No I won't," said John, "but who knows? - maybe you will."

"You were very much in love," said the Ghost.

"Yeah," sighed Carol. "That Christmas in Paris was the best. Well, at least we don't have a time share on a condo," she added sadly.

"Was it your honeymoon?" asked the Ghost

"No. We weren't married yet. We were just living together," answered Carol.

"Not married?" gasped the Ghost.

"Times have changed since you were dating," teased Carol. "Coming to think about it, times have changed since I was dating. Raising kids these days isn't easy."

"I expect girls can still get into trouble?" said the Ghost, arching a perfectly plucked eyebrow.

"Trouble?" snorted Carol. "You mean get pregnant? I wish that was still the worst thing that could happen. No, these days they can get dead."

The sound of an accordion wafted its way across the river and caught the ears of the young Carol and John. They disentangled themselves just enough to follow it over to the large square in front of the Cathedral.

"John and I spent an entire evening looking for the star in the pavement.

It's the Central point of France and all the maps are measured by it," said Carol as they followed the couple into the square "Look!" she pointed excitedly. "It's the musicians! They were just as broke as we were, and we pooled all our money together and went out for Christmas dinner in a smelly bistro. Later on we went back to their tiny flat, and we sang, and drank, and then the tall guy - Youssef, yeah Youssef was his name - said that the bedroom had to be for "les amoureux". So they all slept on the living room floor. They gave us the bed and slept on the floor!"

The couple stopped in front of the musicians who were just starting up another song. Carol stood next to them and closed her eyes, gently swaying to the music and humming along.

"Beau Dommage," she said, her eyes still closed. "La Complainte du Phoque - the Seal's Lament. We loved that song so much we bought the record and I learnt it. I used to sing it to Tracy when she was a baby." Carol sang softly under her breath: "*Ca ne vaut pas la peine de quitter ceux qu'on aime.*" Carol's body swayed to the music as she sang. When she opened her eyes the square had gone dark and the music had faded. She was standing in a corner of a tiny room looking at a couple sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Moonlight fashioned their naked limbs and backs and feet into curves of light and shadow. They slept as one, their bodies fitting together as perfectly as a pair of spoons in a drawer. "We still sleep that way sometimes," she said softly. "When we forget how angry we are at each other."

Carol was struck by how beautiful they were lying there in the moonlight. How like satin his skin had felt to her touch. The scratch of stubble on her cheek. The smell of him. The taste of him. How safe the world had been when she lay sleeping cradled in his arms. But when the waves receded they left only sad longing in their wake. When had life snowballed from talking about eternal love to snarling about who was going to pay for the piano?

"Do you still love him?" asked the Ghost.

"Does it matter?" Carol was surprised by the sharp taste of salt tears inching their way down her face. Music was floating in from the room next door. The same sad melody as before. "I don't know why we liked that song so much," said Carol to the sleeping couple, brushing away her tears. "It's about some stupid seal who runs off to join a circus and leaves his beloved on an ice bank in Alaska." Still she let the music take her. "*Ca fait rire les enfants. Ca*

*dure jamais longtemps ...*" Carol was swaying again, rocking back and forth as she sang. Suddenly she was engulfed in the most wonderful smell. It was warm, and soft and sweet. Mostly it was soft.

Carol became aware of a small bundle in her arms, nestled into the contours of her body, sticking to her breast like velvet. She lowered her face and her mouth touched the top of the baby's head. Tiny wisps of silken hair caressed her lips. The smell was so overpowering that it made her swoon.

"Tracy," whispered Carol, breathing in deeply. "That's my little Tracy."

As suddenly as it had come, the heady warmth was snatched from her. It was cruel. A wild panic clutched her heart. Carol reached out and took a cigarette from an open pack on her desk. Her desk? Where was her baby? What was she doing at her desk?

"Children are a terrible burden," said the Ghost sitting across from her.

"No they're not!" yelled Carol, searching for a lighter. Her heart was still pounding desperately. "They are everything. Nothing is more important to me than my children. Nothing."

"Is that so?" said the Ghost.

"For Christ's sake! Do you have a light?" snapped Carol, the unlit cigarette clenched between her teeth.

"Ladies don't smoke," said the Ghost.

The phone started ringing.

"Don't do this to me," said Carol, throwing her cigarette away. "I don't need this. It's not fair. I'm not going to answer that. I know what you're up to. I'm fed up with your holier-than-thou little game and I'm not playing anymore."

"You don't have to answer," said the Ghost, pointing at the glass partition wall that separated her office from the newsroom. "She will."

Carol felt compelled to follow the ghost's gloved hand. Through the glass she saw, not the newsroom, but rather the living room of her old apartment. Christmas decorations lay strewn throughout the room. John and five year old Tom were trying get a small tree to stand straight in a bucket full of sand while eight year old Tracy held up one decoration after another. A younger, decidedly heavier Carol walked in the room and picked up the ringing phone.

"Was I really that fat?" asked Carol, peering at herself and shaking her head.

“You weren’t fat. You were with child,” whispered the Ghost, cupping her hand in front of her mouth.

“Oh, my God! Yes!” laughed Carol. “I was pregnant with Samantha. She was an accident. Nobody knew. I just kept wearing more layers and let them think I was putting on weight.”

The pregnant Carol performed a schizophrenic routine as she spoke on the phone. Her voice was crisp and efficient, but her face grimaced crazily at Tracy, alternatively admiring the bright decoration the child held up to her and shooing her away.

“Could you just hang on one moment? Thanks,” she said, sounding as if someone was calling her, and then dropped her voice to a whispered hiss as she held a pillow over the receiver. Carol gestured wildly to her husband. “John! John?” she hissed. “Can you get the kids out of my hair? It’s the office, for Christ’s sake!”

“Hi! I’m back,” Carol said brightly into the phone as she watched John round up Tracy and Tom. “No problem. I’m on my way. Give me twenty minutes.”

“I’ve got to go,” said Carol as she hung up the phone. “They need me. I’m sorry but it’s important. I’m up for that promotion and I can’t let them think I’m not up to it.”

“Have you told the station about the baby yet?” asked John, reaching out to touch Tom’s shoulder.

“Not yet. I’m waiting for the right moment. I don’t want them to get scared,” said Carol, picking up her bag and coat.

“Are you sure you’re OK? You look tired.”

“Hey! I can deal this. It’s a piece of cake,” answered Carol, struggling to get into her coat.

Tom’s hand pulled at his mother’s sleeve. “Don’t go,” he said sadly. “We have to do the Christmas tree.”

“I don’t want to go, Baby, but I have to,” said Carol, squatting down to hug the little boy. “You do the tree with Daddy and surprise me for when I come home. OK?”

“It won’t be as much fun without you,” said Tom. He looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

“Of course it will,” said Carol cheerfully. “You be a big boy and suck up

those tears. No crying OK?" Tom scrunched up his face and bit his lower lip. "Mommy has to go, but I'll be back. Tracy understands - don't you Tracy?"

Tracy nodded silently as her mother kissed her on the cheek and hugged her little brother. With a final wave Carol breezed out the door and was gone. The little group stood for a minute looking at the closed door.

"I want Mommy," sniffed Tom.

"Come on big guy. Let's see if we can get these lights working," said John, picking up Tom.

"I don't even remember what story I did that night," said Carol as the image of her family decorating the tree without her started to fade.

"Oh, I'm sure it was very important," said the Ghost. "And, after all, you did get that job!"

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" asked Carol angrily. "Tell the office: 'Sorry but I'm decorating a tree with my kids tonight'? Don't you know only men get to say things like that? And yes, God Damn it - I did get that job. I had to compromise to get where I am."

"And you still have to," said the Ghost.

"What the hell do you mean?"

Tracy's voice came in from across the room: "Do you know when Dad's getting home? Do you think he can give me my extra Christmas money? I really need it."

"Sweetie! What are you doing here at this hour? Are you OK?"

"She can't hear you," said the Ghost. Tracy passed between them, grabbed an apple, and walked back out the door. "She's a lovely girl. Though if you don't mind me saying, she could use some lessons in posture and decorum."

"Bullshit! She's perfect!" Carol followed her daughter and found herself in her office at home. Tracy was walking aimlessly around, munching her apple and picking up various objects and papers strewn all over the room. Carol sat at her computer pounding the keys.

"I'm never going to get the hang of watching myself like this," said Carol.

"Tracy! Will you stop wandering around. And don't touch my stuff. Don't you have homework or something?" said the other Carol at her desk, not looking up from the screen.

"School's out for Christmas, Mom."

"Yeah. Right. What do you want?"

“Why did you marry Dad?”

“I don’t know. I was young and stupid,” said the other Carol, still typing.

“You don’t see each other much,” said Tracy, picking up a press pass lying on the desk. “Way to go, Mom! That’s got to be the worst mugshot ever!”

“Put that down for Christ’s sake! Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“You guys fight a lot. Are you and Dad going to get a divorce?”

“Tracy, please! Can we talk about this some other time? I’ve got a deadline!” said Carol, raising her hands to heaven before starting to type again.

“Mom?” Tracy was standing in front of a small mirror. “Am I pretty?”

“Jesus Christ, Tracy, are you deaf? Not now!” yelled the Carol at the keyboard.

Tracy looked into the mirror. A cloud of worry drifted across her face.

“Mom?” said Tracy softly.

“Jesus Christ! What now?” snapped Carol.

“Do you love me?”

“Of course I love you. Don’t be silly. Now go away.”

Tracy shrugged her shoulders and disappeared into the back wall of the office.

“That was yesterday,” said Carol softly to herself.

“I know,” said the Ghost, pursing her lips. She looked so prim and proper and judgemental. Carol felt like strangling her.

“You have it easy, sitting there in your matching twin set,” Carol yelled at the Ghost. “You’re the Happy Homemaker. The Domestic Goddess. You had it made. Liberated from the drudgery of housework by the miracle of modern household appliances you suddenly had lots of time on your hands. You could watch daytime television instead of washing clothes by hand. You could have Tupperware parties! You didn’t know any better. You thought the high point of the year was baking green and red cookies shaped like Christmas trees. It’s women like you that made women like me go out and get a career.” Carol grabbed the pack of cigarettes and ripped one out. “What the fuck do you know about anything anyway? You’re a ghost.”

The Ghost said nothing. She sat on the edge of the chair, one ankle tucked neatly behind the other, and smiled.

“So what do you do for an encore?” continued Carol, finally finding a

box of matches and lighting her cigarette. "Got any more neat tricks? Are you going to show me the time I left Sam when she was a baby? The time I couldn't make it to Tom's play? Do we get an action replay of a fight with John? Tracy's troubled teens?"

"No," said the Ghost sweetly. "I think you can manage that quite well on your own."

The lights in the office dimmed and Carol found herself in a reclining position. She was back in her house curled on her white sofa. She was dressed in her comfy track suit. The television was transmitting a blurred grey buzz. A lit cigarette burned in the ashtray.

She was exhausted.

Fleeing the living room she went upstairs to her room and threw herself in bed, wrapping the quilt around her head. She fell into a deep sleep, untroubled by dreams of any sort.



## STAVE THREE

### THE SECOND OF THE THREE SPIRITS

A phone was ringing.

Carol turned in her sleep and buried her head deeper into her pillow. Her body pushed into the mattress. Her mind's eye made a feeble attempt at opening, but her eyelids stayed glued shut. See nothing. Hear nothing. Sink into the heavy blackness. Feel nothing. Forget.

Except that somewhere a phone was ringing.

Carol's hand snaked its way instinctively out from under the pillow. Finding an empty space where a warm body should be, the hand sent a red alert to her nervous system. A message shot through her sleeping brain: John. Where was John? The phone was ringing in the middle of the night. Something had happened to John. Her eyes flew open and Carol remembered that John was flying home. Shit! It was probably the office. Carol wondered what minor world catastrophe demanded her attention. Where was the Goddamn phone? You got a mobile phone so you wouldn't be tied to a telephone cord and you spent your entire life looking for it. Carol hung upside down over her bed and spied the phone lying beside a discarded shoe. As she reached for it she froze. "You will be haunted by three ghosts." Carol felt the blood pounding in her temples as she hung upside down. "The first ghost is due at 1am." The phone was blinking. Carol's sinuses contracted with every ring. "Your second ghost will come the next night. Same time, same place." Carol sighed with relief and picked up the phone; another human was waiting to talk to her. Someone made of flesh and blood wanted to communicate. Carol felt like kissing the damn thing.

"Carol Edwards," she said, trying to sound briskly efficient and fully awake.

"Hey! Great! You're home. I was starting to get a little worried," said a woman's voice. "I'm calling from my car. I'm just turning into your street. See you in a minute."

“Excuse me,” said Carol, “who is this?”

“Sorry, Carol. I thought you’d know. It’s like: ‘This Is Your Life’ time again! I’m the Ghost of Christmas Present. Remember? We had a date? Personally, I’m not crazy about the name but they can’t seem to come up with anything better. So - ready to rock on outta here?”

“You’re not meant to come until tomorrow,” said Carol weakly.

“Today. Tomorrow. Yesterday. It’s all the same to me. See ya in a minute!”

The line went blank. She looked at the clock beside her bed. It read one o’clock. Had she slept through an entire day and into the next night? Carol knew it didn’t matter. It didn’t have to make sense. She went downstairs, sat on the bottom step, and waited for the door bell to ring.

“Hey there, girlfriend! How ya doing?” said a voice behind her.

Carol turned around to find a woman sitting a few steps above her. “You’re the Ghost of Christmas Present?” Carol asked, gobsmacked by this new vision. “Where did they get you from: a Kellogg’s Special K ad?”

“You like?” asked the Ghost, suddenly appearing in the middle of the hallway and twirling around. She was tall and long with great muscle definition only lightly covered by her red spandex cycling shorts and a matching tank top that showed off her abs. From her high tops to her short tousled brown hair, she was lean and tight.

“Nice bod,” said Carol.

“You know you could have a great body if you worked out,” said the Ghost eyeing Carol. “Sit ups. A few weights - light to start with. Leg lifts. Some crunches. A couple of hours a day and you could work yourself up to some proper cross-fit training. Potentially you have a great figure. You just have to make it work for you. Your body is an engine. it needs good fuel and fine tuning.”

“Please. Spare me. I can’t take any more beauty tips from the spirit world,” said Carol.

“Carol. Baby. Get real. You’ve let yourself go. The right diet and exercise programme can do wonders for your looks. And when you look good, you feel good. Check it out,” said the ghost, hooking her thumb at Carol as if hitching a lift from a passing truck.

Carol looked down at her naked body. The muscles in her thighs and calves rippled under her tanned skin. Her belly was smooth and ridiculously flat. Carol faced her reflection in the hall mirror.

"What have you done to my face?" asked Carol, frowning. Her frown was smooth. No lines crossed her brow. Her mouth was plump. Her jaw-line was sharp and taut.

"Just a few snips and tucks. Filled out the mouth a little. Nothing drastic," said the Ghost. "You know it's no use waiting till the whole thing comes crumbling down. Better to start before you hit forty. We thought we'd do the boobs too. Don't they look great? Real perky."

"They look like they belong on my daughter. I look like a Barbie doll for Christ's sake!" said Carol.

"Believe me your body will thank you for it," said the Ghost, sounding piqued. "But if you want to look like a fat old cow - that's your prerogative."

"Bullshit! I am not a fat cow."

"Well excuse *Moi* - but I believe I've heard that line somewhere before," said the Ghost, sticking out her tongue. She snapped her fingers and Carol watched in fascination as her body's outline wavered and changed, slowly settling back into her normal womanly shape. "OK. Forget the bod for now ... You've got to get your shit together. You've got some big problems heading your way this Christmas."

"Like what?" said Carol.

"Like you're down one housekeeper," said the Ghost. "Maria is quitting today."

"That's ridiculous. Maria is a pearl. My life would fall apart without her. And anyway she loves the kids. No way is she leaving."

"You'd be surprised," smirked the Ghost, and walked into the living room where Maria sat cradling the phone.

"Si. I can start work right after Christmas. No. On the 27th. Si. I will tell her tomorrow. No problem. I'll send for my things later," said Maria, whispering into the receiver.

"The bitch!" hissed Carol. "Sneaking around and making deals on my phone!"

"You can't blame her," said the Ghost. "She'll be getting a much higher salary. *And* they'll fix her papers. Embassy people."

"But she promised to give me at least a month's notice. She wasn't going to go for at least a year. I just gave her a raise for Christ's sake!" wailed Carol.

"Face it Carol. She's got a better deal. If it were you, you'd take it. The big

problem is Sam. Half days at school.”

“Oh my God. What will I do with Sam?” said Carol, sitting on the sofa and hiding her face in her hands.

“Momma?” said a sleepy voice at her shoulder. Carol looked up to see Samantha framed in the doorway, rubbing her eyes with the back of one hand. Her hair was still tangled with sleep and she held a large stuffed dinosaur under her arm. Carol rose, wanting to cradle her in her arms, but Sam walked straight through her like a hot summer breeze. Carol stood drenched in the sticky warm smell of her.

“Your momma is not home yet,” said Maria, hanging up the phone. “What are you doing awake? Go back to sleep.”

“I had a nightmare,” said Sam, her lower lip starting to tremble.

“You should have never had Sam. It was not a smart career move,” said the Ghost as Maria walked Sam back upstairs.

Carol watched them go. She ached to go with them. To take Sam into her bed and comfort the nightmare away.

“Well no time to linger!” sang the Ghost brightly. “Are we ready to party?”

“No,” said Carol. She’d had enough.

“Let’s see. What’ll it be? Something useful. Something relevant.” The Ghost started doing deep knee bends.

“I’d be grateful if you just went away,” said Carol as the Ghost switched to touching her toes and then pulling herself slowly into a full stretch.

“You know one little thing that could make a huge difference? Pelvic floor lifts! Every time you think of it - on the phone, waiting for a bus, whatever - just pull in those tummy muscles and hold for the count of ten. You’d be surprised how effective that is. Just don’t forget to breath.”

“I’m sure that’s very relevant.”

“I’ve got it!” said the Ghost, ignoring Carol’s barb. “You’ve got a news roundup to do, right? Well let’s start rounding it up right now.” The Ghost skipped over to the large French windows and pulled them open, beckoning Carol to follow. She tucked tiny earphones in her ears and jogged out into the garden.

Carol stepped outside into searing bright daylight. The sun poured down, baking the arid plains that stretched out as far as her eyes could see. Below her, a valley swarmed with movement. There were people everywhere. Hundreds,

thousands, maybe millions. It was impossible to count such a crowd. Carol had never seen such a mass of humanity. Some sat on the ground, others walked in one direction, fighting a flood walking in the opposite direction. Small groups seemed to be walking in circles, gathering up their bundles and walking a short way, only to come back to where they started and sit down again.

“What is this place?” Carol asked, swatting flies from her face.

“Let me think” said the Ghost, checking her smartphone. “Red Cross Camp number 5.”

“Where? What country?”

“Does it matter?” asked the Ghost, “Oh shit. That’s right - you’re a journalist. You want to know that stuff. Can you see the faces down there? We might be able to at least figure out if we’re in Africa or the Middle East. I don’t think it’s Asia.”

A wave of people surged forward. The valley echoed as thousands of voices rose to a fevered pitch. Three trucks rolled into the centre of the camp and were stopped by the human flood. People swarmed up the sides like ants over a crust of bread. Fights broke out as parcels were snatched and people elbowed their way into the throng. Carol thought she saw several bodies fall, trampled before they even knew what had happened.

“What is going on here?” demanded Carol.

“I don’t know: War? Famine? Outbreak of something? The usual shit. You can get the details back at the office. You can probably use library pictures.”

“Can’t you do something?”

“Yo, Carol! I’m just a Ghost - remember? Anyway we can’t stay.”

“We’re not just going to leave them there?”

“Of course we are,” said the Ghost.

“But we can’t. Those people need help!”

“OK. You asked for it,” said the Ghost, zapping Carol with a remote control.

There were people all around her. The stench of sweating bodies that had not washed for days, maybe weeks, was overpowering. Carol was pushed and shoved as she was swept into the crowd racing for the trucks. She had to fight back just to stay on her feet. Her legs ached with the strain. Her head felt light, almost giddy. She needed to lie down. Just lie down and sleep for a while. Still her aching feet ran, joining a thousand other feet pounding the dust into

hot red clouds. Ten more yards and they would reach the truck. Through the bobbing heads and flailing arms Carol saw an opening. She ducked down and squeezed through as she ran. Her stomach growled, hungry yet nauseous at the thought of food. A swirling vortex pushed her forward, elbowing bodies in her path. Five more yards to go. Already the fastest ones were scrambling up the sides. Carol had made it through to the front line. If the searing pain in her side could just hold off for a moment, she might make a sprint to the back of the truck where a soldier was handing down bags.

Suddenly an old man appeared. He wandered up in front of the truck and slowly turned to face the crowd bearing down on him as if curious to see what all the ruckus was about. Confused, he watched them come. Carol stopped in her tracks. Paralyzed with horror she felt the crowd push past her. Her mouth opened to shout a warning, but no sound emerged from her strangled throat. She watched the old man go down, arms and legs flying in a wild parody of joyous dance. Her eyes searched the spot where he fell, but could find no trace of him in the writhing beast that now engulfed the truck. It was a churning mindless monster made up of thousands of crawling legs, and climbing feet, and clawing hands.

“Get me out of here!” screamed Carol, her voice rising into the first notes of hysteria.

“Gotcha!” said the Ghost, zipper in hand.

Carol’s chest still heaved with the exertion. She sat slumped on the pavement with her head between her knees. A wave of nausea shook her and she vomited into the gutter.

“Too close for comfort?” asked the Ghost. “I’d have thought you were used to that stuff. I guess he was right: You’re not that tough.”

“Who was right?” croaked Carol, slowly recovering.

“Mr. Watson. Greg. Your boss,” said the Ghost, pulling Carol to her feet and guiding her past an elegant doorman standing guard at the door of a luxurious apartment building. “Enough of current affairs for now. Anyway it’s old news. Let’s interrupt this broadcast for a short personal reality check.”

“This is Greg’s building,” said Carol as they walked into the elevator.

“That’s right. He’s having a few close colleagues over for drinks. I think you’ll find it enlightening.”

“He’s having people from the office over? I didn’t hear about it,” said Carol

as the elevator came to a halt.

“Don’t you just love crashing a party?”

The elevator opened directly into the wood panelled hallway of the Watson home. Carol had heard they had shipped the panelling from a castle in Scotland and had it stripped back to the natural wood. Apart from being head of the news division, Gregory Watson had a neat little sideline going in real estate. He bought apartments, renovated them, and sold them for a hefty profit before moving on to another one. This last one was rumoured to have been a bargain at \$20,000,000. Another year and Mrs. Watson could start packing again.

A ten foot tall Christmas tree decorated solely with gold glass balls dominated the huge empty space. A deep voice, followed by much laughter, could be heard coming from the living room.

“Wow what a guy! Rich, powerful and he tells such great jokes!” giggled the Ghost. “I’ve got to tell you I’m impressed. This is the life! If I were alive you know where you’d find me.”

The living room was the same apricot splendour Carol remembered from last year when she had been invited for Christmas drinks. The bleached oak floor reflected the warmth of the cream and salmon Chinese rug, which matched the apricot furnishings and silk wallpaper. Tall flower arrangements with a subtle Christmas theme were artfully placed around the room. A huge pyre of imported seasoned pine burned in the hearth of a white marble fireplace, its warmth scarcely noticed in the cocooned atmosphere of a central heated, double glazed apartment.

Gregory Watson sat in the middle of a small group of people. Carol’s heart sank as she recognised Roger, Tim and Su; three of her reporters, along with Eileen Stewart, her co-producer on the news. Why wasn’t she invited? What was going on?

“I think we’ve got a great team here,” said Greg Watson, beaming down fondly as if shepherding a group of children. “A real dream team. We’re going places with this new show and you’re all going with it.”

“You know, Greg,” said Eileen, reaching out for a platter of giant chilled prawns, “I’m really honoured by the trust you’ve placed in me. Frankly I thought Carol Edwards had it cornered. I feel kind of bad for her, but I can tell you I won’t let you down.”

“That bitch!” said Carol under her breath “Look at her gloating. I hope she’s allergic to shellfish.”

“I know we can count on you Eileen. As for Carol - well ... she was never really a contender. We had high hopes for her in the past. Thought she might turn out to be another Marla Murphy. She’s a good producer all right - but she doesn’t have the balls for a hard hitting news magazine like this one.”

“Yeah. She can be kind of flaky sometimes,” volunteered Roger, helping himself to another tiny vol-au-vent.

“Ass lick!” said Carol, flying the bird at Roger as she sank into a plush armchair in a corner of the room. “I taught you everything you know.”

“Anyway, Eileen - you got the Ryan McCarthy interview,” said Su, sipping her champagne. “All Carol has so far is that mother of two nobody’s heard of who is dying of AIDS. I mean it’s really tragic, but everyone’s done a story like that by now.”

Carol stiffened. Wow. Ryan McCarthy was the 11 year old from a middle class suburban family, accused of murdering a neighbour’s 4 year old son. The papers were having a heyday bringing out every child psychologist expert who cared to comment. But not a word had been heard from either the boy or his family. Eileen beamed a humble smile and turned her attention to a platter of raw fruit and vegetables.

“Come on Eileen! How did you nail it? The family’s lawyer put up a blockade the size of the great wall of China,” asked Tim eagerly.

“Go on Eileen” said Greg proudly. “Tell them how you got it.”

“Well, like you said, the lawyer representing him was impossible. He even stopped returning my calls. He had a total blackout on the family - no phones, no mail. Anyway, I sent the mother several long letters, handwritten, which I got through to her by sending them to her sister. ‘We’re not here to judge Ryan, we want to give you the opportunity to set the record straight. I understand the pain you must be going through, the need for privacy in which to grieve’, the usual stuff. Flowers, chocolates, a cheese basket. The works,” said Eileen, waving a celery stick at the group who sat entranced by the unfolding drama, nodding their admiration at every turn.

“Then yesterday - I can’t believe my luck - the lawyer’s secretary lets it slip out that he’s going away for Christmas. So ...” Eileen crunched on her celery as the rest held their breath and waited for her to chew and swallow. “I get in

my car, drive 150 miles, and I'm at the kid's home at 7am this morning. The Mom opens the door - she's just woken up - and there I am standing on her doorstep with a Christmas tree."

"A Christmas tree?" echoed the group in chorus.

"Yup! A Christmas tree. I picked one up on the way. I figured that these people are so caught up in this horrible mess that they haven't even thought about getting a tree. So, she opens the door and I say: 'Mrs. McCarthy this is for Ryan. No matter what he's done, no kid deserves to miss out on Christmas.' And she just falls in my arms," concluded Eileen, popping a grape delicately into her mouth.

"Way to go Eileen!" mumbled Roger, eating another vol-au-vent.

"She's a wonderful mother. It's a terrible tragedy," said Eileen sincerely, picking at another grape.

"I think I'm going to throw up again," said Carol.

"You have to admit it, she's good. She's very good," said the Ghost, nodding in approval.

"Bullshit."

"Do you see what I mean?" said Greg, putting his arm around Eileen, "compassionate, quick on the draw, and ballsy. Carol just isn't up to it."

"You bet your fat ass I'm not," answered Carol. "What a load of bullshit."

"Give her credit Greg," said Eileen, smiling up at her boss. "She's under a lot of pressure. Three kids is no joke. I don't know how she does it."

"What the hell would you know?" yelled Carol. "You dried up, sterile old prune!"

"Three kids is crazy. One of them is still in pre-school. Cute little boy," said Greg.

"She's a little girl, you smuck," said Carol as the Ghost threw her an I-told-you-so look.

"Well, I hate to leave such a charming gathering, but we really must be getting on," said the Ghost crossing the room and walking straight through the coffee table covered in trays of hors d'oeuvres.

"Not too soon for me," said Carol, following the Ghost through the table. "The fucking bastards. How could they? After all the work I put into their fucking, lousy station. I quit. I'm going to a TV station that fucking appreciates me."

“You go, girl!” beamed the ghost.

“I need a drink” said Carol, looking at the carefully laid out bar.

“Great idea,” said the Ghost. “Don’t move a muscle. We aim to please.”

The room blurred and changed. Carol heard feet walking, carts creaking and the intermittent chimes of cash registers. As the scene settled into a more solid form Carol wondered if she was now in a large shopping mall. A loud crackle made her jump.

“American Airlines apologises for the delay. We are experiencing technical difficulties. Estimated take-off is now in two hours. Transit passengers are invited to a complimentary meal and drink at the Sky restaurant. First class passengers may redeem their vouchers in the first class lounge.”

The Ghost materialised on the bar stool next to her. She was sipping an enormous cocktail complete with pineapple slice and pink parasol. She handed a similar concoction over to Carol.

“Candy’s dandy but liqueur quicker!” giggled the Ghost.

The bar was on a mezzanine overlooking the main check-in hall. Below, the harsh lights cast no shadows on the long lines of people. They stood, all eyes on the counter ahead, moving a few inches as soon as a small opening appeared, wheeling their suitcases along as they moved up a notch. They eyed each passing stranger warily, lest someone try and take their place or snatch a bag.

Carol looked around the bar. She found the usual collection of Japanese business men, senior citizens and young backpackers asleep in their seats. A man in a rumpled business suit caught her eye. He was sitting at a small table in the centre of the room. Her heart jumped as she recognised him. John was here. Thank God! She had so much to tell him. She deposited her drink on the counter and jumped off the bar stool.

“Hey! You can’t do that,” said the Ghost.

“Like hell I can’t,” said Carol, crossing the room.

“Suit yourself,” said the Ghost, sipping her cocktail.

John sat looking into the depths of a whiskey on ice that he held suspended above the table. He looked tired. Carol was so happy to see him that she refused to think about the absurdity of the situation. She was here, and so was John and nothing else mattered.

“John. It’s Carol. I’m not sure if you can hear me but you’ve got to try,” she

said, sitting down next to him. "The weirdest things have been happening and I'm so confused. My life is a mess. I've lost the promotion and Maria's leaving. I think our marriage might be over. I don't know what to do anymore." John kept staring, watching the ice melt in his drink.

"We need to talk. Everything's been so crazy I thought I was going insane - but maybe we still have a chance. If we take the time to make things right. I've been so busy. We've both been so busy," she said, watching him sip his whiskey pensively.

"You've got to hear me John. Do you remember that Christmas in Paris? Do you remember that song? The one about the seal?" Carol started humming. John smiled to himself slowly and looked up. His smile broadened to a grin. Carol looked up and stopped humming in mid note.

"Hello stranger. Still running away from me?" said a woman at the foot of the table.

"Rachel! What are you doing here?" laughed John.

"I know! It's unbelievable: 'Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine ...'" said the woman, laughing along with him.

"Don't tell me you're stuck here too?" said John in mock horror.

"Yup. Two lonely castaways in airport limbo."

Carol sank into her seat as her husband laughed and rose to pull out a chair. "Wonderful! Won't you join me?"

"I almost called you a dozen times to congratulate you on the Wiseman deal, but after our last encounter, I thought you might not want to hear from me again," said Rachel, cocking her head to one side.

"Sorry about that, Rachel. I was feeling down. I'd had too much to drink and I was feeling sorry for myself. It wasn't fair to bore you with my sob story about my wife."

"Not at all," said Rachel, taking his hand again. "I was happy to help. I just felt you thought I was coming on too strong."

"I should be so lucky," laughed John. "I guess I got a little spooked all right. I'm just not used to beautiful women taking an interest in me."

"They make a lovely couple," said the Ghost, now standing beside Carol.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snapped Carol. She wanted to grab this Rachel woman by the hair and fling her off the mezzanine.

"Carol? Get real. How long has it been since you've seen John this relaxed? This happy?" said the Ghost.

“Are they having an affair?” asked Carol, biting her lip.

“Not *exactly*,” answered the Ghost slowly. “Not yet. But they should. She’s great, and it would do him a load of good.”

“What about me?” blurted Carol as John gestured to the waiter for the bill.

“Well, you never know,” said the Ghost. “A little fling can really pep up a bored marriage. You should try it yourself. And if it doesn’t work? Well, all good things come to an end. Lifetime marriages were probably made up by some Victorian with three rosy cheeked mistresses. Nowadays no one really expects love to last.”

“I did,” said Carol softly.

“Well it’s not the end of the world if it doesn’t. You’re still relatively young. You’re still relatively attractive. You still have some market value. Believe me - it’s better if it happens now than in ten years’ time.”

John and Rachel were leaving the bar and walking towards the restaurant.

“Are you being picked up at the airport?” asked Rachel as John took her briefcase and guided her through the bar.

“No. I’m getting a cab. Want to share?”

“I’ve got my car in the short term parking. I could use the company on the drive in. I’d be happy to drop you in the city. It’s the least I can do since you insist on buying dinner. Deal?”

“Deal,” said John. “Being stuck in transit is looking better by the minute. Here’s looking at you, kid!”

Carol’s world was crumbling. She was torn between abysmal sadness and searing frustration. She looked over to the Ghost who was busy touching her toes again.

“You look like you need to talk. Find a new path. Work through the pain,” said the Ghost, hanging upside down, “until you get it out of your system. Drinking a lot of water helps.”

“There’s no one left to talk to,” said Carol, sadly watching as two Japanese men sat down at the table vacated by John and Rachel.

“You can talk to me,” said the Ghost, disregarding a group of Italian tourists who walked straight through her as she did sit-ups on the carpeted floor. “I’m a really caring, sharing sort of person you know. I’m a trained compassion counsellor.”

“So go hug yourself,” said Carol.

"What about your mother?" asked the Ghost, flipping over into a plank position.

"I haven't talked to my mother in years," said Carol.

"She called you yesterday," said the Ghost.

"I mean really talk. I mean ask for help."

"Do you ever ask anybody for help?" said the Ghost, sitting cross-legged as she checked her pulse. Carol didn't answer. "You sure you don't want to join me in some exercises? You'll feel much better."

Carol was lost in her thoughts. Faces of friends, colleagues, family members drifted past her offering advice. Carol rejected them all until she saw one particular face. Her sister. She could talk to her sister. It had been a long time, but her sister would understand.

"I want to see my sister," said Carol firmly.

"Presto," said the Ghost, zapping her remote. "Don't you just love ghost technology?"

The room blacked out and Carol was suddenly scared. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark she saw what little light there was came through a large window. She could just barely see a form sitting in an armchair looking out onto the streets below.

Carol was puzzled. "Is that Su? What's she doing?"

"Drinking," said the Ghost.

"Why is she sitting alone in the dark?"

"Don't you sometimes sit alone in the dark? Don't all women?" asked the Ghost.

"She looks so sad. I thought she was happy."

"She's been having some problems," said the Ghost, looking around the apartment. "Nice place. Her husband must be loaded."

"What problems?" asked Carol.

"The usual: depression, anxiety. That sort of stuff. She's pretty lonely. Her husband is away a lot and that baby cries most of the time. She should join a gym, and maybe cut out refined sugar and dairy products."

"She does aerobics three times a week for Christ's sake!" said Carol, watching her sister silently crying at the window. "Why is she so unhappy?"

"Well married bliss isn't quite what it was made out to be. And the crying baby doesn't help. My bet is she's got a dose of postpartum blues. Maybe she

could try a little Prozac?"

"She never told me. Why didn't she ever ask for my help?"

"Beats me," said the Ghost. "Could be genetic, with you guys."

Carol became aware of another shape in the far corner of the room. A long rectangular shape. Intrigued, she left her sister and walked over to get a closer view.

"Switch on the lamp," said the Ghost.

Carol reached down and turned it on. The pale yellow light revealed a pitifully thin woman lying on a bed. She didn't seem very old, but disease and pain had worn her features faster than time. She lay staring at the ceiling, her bright blue eyes the only thing about her that seemed truly alive. Carol looked over her shoulder at her sister still sitting at the window. She was confused and shot a bewildered glance at the Ghost.

"It's a sort of split screen effect," said the Ghost, "Don't you just love it? I thought you might like to check in on her," said the Ghost, pointing to the woman in the bed. "Then again maybe not."

"I don't know this woman," said Carol, teetering on the brink between compassion and disgust at the shrivelled body under the thin sheet.

"Of course! You never actually met her. She's the AIDS woman you were going to interview," said the Ghost.

"Is she dying?" asked Carol.

"Of course she's dying. That was the whole angle wasn't it? Then again - you didn't get the job after all so I guess you're not interested anymore."

Another tableau was slowly emerging in the other corner of the room. A bed, smaller this time, came into view. A child was lying in it tucked up with a teddy bear. Christmas decorations were hung on every available surface. Shiny tinsel was gaily wrapped everywhere, even on the drip by the side of the bed. Rosie sat on a chair, reading a book.

"... and it was said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!" read Rosie in a cheery voice. "The End."

"I loved that story!" sighed the little boy.

"My boss, Carol, bought it for her little boy, and gave me the idea of getting it for you," said Rosie, closing the book.

"She must be really nice," said the boy. "Not like Mr Scrooge was."

"Of course she is!" said Rosie laughing. "She's my boss. I wouldn't have a mean boss would I?"

"Is he going to make it?" whispered Carol.

"It doesn't look too good," said the Ghost picking up a chart hanging on the end of the bed and flipping through it.

Carol stood in the dark, her eyes darting from her sister, to the woman in the bed, to Tim and Rosie laughing together. "Why are you showing me this?" asked Carol. "What can I do?"

"Well, let me see ... Your sister will get over it one way or another. She's a big girl now. I mean like, you don't want to get into a co-dependant relationship or anything. If you help her who knows? She might start calling you in the middle of the night. She'll just have to suck it up. She can deal," said the Ghost. She turned her attention to the dying woman. "This one is on the way out so there isn't much you can do."

"What about her kids? What's going to happen to them?" asked Carol.

"Not your problem, Babe" said the Ghost. "Mind you, there is something you could do," she added. "It's a chance in a lifetime investment opportunity."

"Come again?" said Carol. "I thought you meant that there was some way I could help her."

"Yeah, but the best part is that you can help yourself too! This woman here is broke, but she's got a \$100,000 life insurance policy."

"I don't follow," said Carol. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"It's simple. You buy the policy for say, \$50,000. She gets to have some cash for her kids and in six months, a year at the most, you double your investment."

"If she dies?" said Carol, her breathing speeding up at the shock of the proposal. "I double my money if she dies?"

"When. When she dies. It's a sure thing. Win-win," said the Ghost, walking over to Rosie. "You could strike the same deal over here. Rosie took up that offer for a life insurance policy linked to a mutual fund for her kid. But it's riskier. The woman is your best bet."

"Why's that?" asked Carol, her head reeling.

"Well you know. I mean like, the kid might survive," said the Ghost, picking up a phone on Tim's bedside table. "Hiya! G.O.C. Present calling in. We're just about done here. I'll be right over."

The Ghost took her remote and pointed it at Carol. She found herself

sitting on the stairs back in her hallway.

“Wait a minute I don’t understand. It’s too fast,” said Carol, still shaken. “Can I have a little time to let this sink in or what?”

“Sorry, Carol - got to love ya and leave ya! It’s time for some other sucker to get the Grand Tour. Do yourself a favour, Carol. Get some exercise and start eating oatmeal.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” said Carol, throwing her hands up in despair. “Do you really think all of life’s problems can be resolved by sticking to a low fat, no salt diet? And as for your Grand Tour - What the hell was that supposed to mean? How come I got singled out for the tabloid version? Is there a Quality Time Ghost of the Present somewhere? What about the good times? What about the happy stuff?”

“I’m sorry, Lady. What you see is what you get. If you don’t like the programme, just change the channel,” said the Ghost.

“You make me sick!” hissed Carol.

“I make you sick? It’s *your* life - Remember? See ya around - NOT.” snickered the Ghost and disappeared.

Carol didn’t bother to say goodbye.

## STAVE FOUR

### THE LAST OF THE SPIRITS

Carol sat on the stairs. She lowered her head between her knees and listened to the house sleeping. If she were still enough maybe she could hear the children breathing; or a cough, a child shifting in their bed - any evidence that her children were alive and well. That her life had meaning. No matter how badly she had managed to screw up. The hallway clock struck three quarters past the hour. A quarter to midnight. Carol looked up. More time tricks. The next ghost was due in fifteen minutes.

Carol grabbed John's ski jacket from the hall closet and walked out into the darkest part of the garden. Sitting down with her back propped against a tree, she huddled in the oversized jacket and looked up at the moon. She wished she knew how to howl.

She reached out and felt the grass under her. Out here in the middle of the night she could almost forget the walls that surrounded her, the noisy city beyond. She dug her fingers into the ground and felt the wet clay, the gritty tiny stones under her nails. She brought her hand up to her face and smelt the earth, for once unafraid of the countless living organisms crawling unseen and unseeing in the dark mud. This was real wasn't it?

A hundred images floated behind her closed eyes. She let them drift by, trying not to focus on any one thought for more than a heartbeat. If she tried to take it all in at once, or focused too long on any single thought, she knew that she would break. They would find her gabbling incoherently in the garden the next morning. If there was such a thing as tomorrow morning.

The thought of a new tomorrow flooded her with hope. She remembered a poster she had had among the many plastered on the walls of her teenage room: *Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life!* If she could just make it through until then she would be all right. Maybe.

"You Carol Edwards?" said a deep voice somewhere to the right of her.

“Yes,” said Carol, bracing herself.

“I’m the Ghost of Christmas Future. You been waiting long?” asked the voice. Carol struggled to see a form but only managed to catch a faint rustle near the garden wall.

“I can’t see you,” said Carol. “Oh my God - you’re not invisible are you? I’m not sure I can deal with an invisible ghost.”

“I’m not invisible. You just can’t see me.”

“Same banana.”

“No, it ain’t,” said the Ghost, stepping out of the shadows. “Is this any better?”

“Hardly,” said Carol. A large figure stood enveloped in what looked like a long black cloak. The moon barely reflected the outlines, and the face remained totally hidden.

“Could you come closer?” said Carol, rising and taking a step forward.

“This is as close as I get,” said the Ghost, raising a slender black hand to stop Carol advancing any further. The long tapering fingers ended in bright red nails which flashed in the moonlight.

“Oh, *please!* What have we now? The politically correct vision? I’ve seen the ghost of the future and she’s black!”

“You are so full of bull, woman, I wonder how you can stand to smell yourself,” said the Ghost.

“Give me a break! I’ve had a rough night,” said Carol. “First some Fifties sitcom Mom shows me the crap in my past. Then an aerobics instructor with the morals of a hamster shows me the crap in my present, and now I get the black female version of Darth Vader to show me the crap in my future. What the hell is this anyway - the Mother of all guilt trips?”

“You don’t get it do you?” said the Ghost. “I told them it was a waste of time trying to talk sense to some privileged, middle class, white honky bitch who thinks her shit don’t stink.”

“You can cut the racial slurs. I bet you’ll be telling me how I can improve my figure. What’s it going to be this time: Loving the full-bodied woman? Getting back to my ethnic roots?” said Carol, feeling her anger frothing. It felt good.

“Hell no! I don’t care what you look like. Then, now, or in the future. Are you gonna listen up or should I leave right now?”

“Are you kidding? This is the good part. I get to see my future. After all I’ve

gone through tonight I might as well go the whole hog.”

“I’m not gonna show you your future,” said the Ghost.

“You’re not?”

“I can’t do that. What do you think - the whole thing is set in concrete? There is no future just sitting out there waiting for you to just drift in and become a part of it. The only thing I can show you are possible futures. And even that ain’t no big deal. If you had half a brain you could see them all by yourself.”

Carol was too hot with the jacket on. As she took it off and let it slip to the ground she became aware of an awful smell. A fetid rank stench of old carpeting and burnt rubber. Looking up she noticed the walls of the garden had disappeared.

She was in a large vacant lot surrounded by junk. Rotting furniture. An oil drum lying on its side. A broken toilet. A burnt out mattress. It was as if someone’s life had been heaved out of a window and left to lie where it fell. She could hear the sound of sirens in the distance and see what looked like small fires burning. She had a strong desire to take cover. To hide. To find her children.

“Where are we?” she said to the Ghost.

“I thought I’d start with an obvious one,” said the Ghost jovially. “Come on, now! You tell me where we are.”

“I don’t like this place,” said Carol, feeling her body start shaking. “It scares me. I don’t want to be here.”

“I can’t blame you. But come on. Give it a try. Doesn’t it feel just a little bit familiar?” said the Ghost, gesturing around her.

Carol could hardly bear to look around, the air was so full of menace. All her instincts told her to flee; to get away from open spaces. She lowered her eyes and caught sight of a large rectangular shape at her feet. It had once been white but now wore the indifferent colour of things left out in the rain; a green, brown, grey mildewed colour that was neither mineral nor vegetable, but somewhere in between. Lying next to it was a large broken mirror. The ornate frame was still intact, but the surface had been shattered into jagged splinters. A burnt out house was reflected over and over in its broken shards. Carol knelt and traced the intricate carvings of the frame, feeling the slimy mould rub off on her fingers. She saw a market stall in Mexico. Haggling for

the price. Unpacking the huge crate when it finally arrived. Carol felt a scream starting somewhere at the nape of her neck. It rose until it exploded through her gaping mouth.

“No! No! No! No! No!” screamed Carol.

“Bingo!” exclaimed the Ghost. She must have smiled because a row of brilliant white teeth flashed for a brief moment from under the black folds of her hood.

Carol ran to the house, stumbling over the junk that was strewn all around her. The empty shell of her home stood blackened and broken.

“Where are my children? What happened to my children?” she sobbed.

“Oh, they’re long gone. You too,” said the Ghost, shaking her hooded head. “If they were lucky they died quickly. At this point in time you should be more concerned about your children’s children.”

Carol looked around. Every house on the street was like her own. Some were barely standing. Blackened walls reached up their pleading timbers to the moon. The stench of despair filled her lungs. A dense silence hung heavy and low, broken now and again by the sounds of people shouting, of feet running. Carol thought she heard gunfire about a block away. A baby cried out and then stopped, as if stifled by a protective hand.

Carol looked to where the cry had come from. She could just about make out a small lean-to sagging against a bit of remaining wall. Peering into the darkness she made out the figure of a woman sitting cross legged on the floor. She was wrapped in the musty remnants of a duvet, its cartoon characters faded and worn. An ugly gash on her cheek was caked and dirty. She rocked a small bundle in her arms and hummed softly. The woman kissed the top of the baby’s head tenderly and whispered an endearment. Carol strained to hear.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” whispered the woman under her breath.

The woman looked up sharply and sniffed the air. Carol feared for a moment that the woman had seen her, forgetting that she was not visible. The woman turned and rummaged around the lean-to, hurriedly bringing out a collection of old cans and a large pot. She arranged them in a semicircle outside and bowed her head in prayer.

“Thank you Lord for your bounty,” repeated the woman over and over.

Carol had no time to be intrigued by the strange scene. She jumped with

fright as something touched her head. And again. This time on the top of her forehead. A cold trickle travelled down the bridge of her nose. Rain, it was only rain. Carol lifted her face and let it splash over her, mingling with her tears and washing them away.

"Was it a fire?" said Carol, slumping against a rotting armchair.

"You could say that. The biggest damn wildfire ever to hit the Earth. Once it got started wasn't nobody gonna put that sucker out."

"There was a war?" asked Carol very quietly.

The Ghost nodded. The rain continued to drizzle.

"A nuclear war? Who started it? Who was stupid enough to do that? North Korea? One of the new Republics? Did it start in the Middle East? Or was it Russia?" asked Carol with disgust.

The Ghost snorted beneath the folds of her black hood. "Does it matter who started it? What're you doing, girl? Playing playground politics again? You think some Headmaster is gonna come along and sort this mess out by figuring who started it?"

"Then what were we fighting about? What mattered enough to do this?" asked Carol. The rain intensified. Soon it was pouring down, drenching Carol and the Ghost.

"I thought you were some hot shot TV news person," said the Ghost, as if cajoling a child to guess the right answer in his homework. "And you can't think why anyone would want to do this."

"No-one is going to start a territorial war of this scale. Not in the 21st century!" Carol shivered as her wet clothes were whipped by the wind. "It had to be something important," said Carol, thinking hard.

"No shit Sherlock."

"Something really important."

"Uh-huh."

"Was it oil?"

The Ghost started to laugh. Her booming chuckles turned to guffaws that echoed around the vacant lot, louder than the rain. Louder than the wind. Her large frame shook as she held her sides. The wind and rain plastered her cloak to her body, revealing the Ghost's womanly curves. Her face was wet and shining, her wide mouth almost taking up her entire face as she laughed. Carol couldn't help but think how beautiful this woman looked, laughing at her in the rain.

“Woman, I swear!” said the Ghost, sighing as her laughter subsided. “It’s all around you and you can’t see it!” The Ghost arched her back and raised her arms to the heavens as if welcoming a lover. “Water,” whispered the Ghost sensuously.

“We ran out of water?”

“Clean water. Fresh water,” said the Ghost, still giving herself to the downpour. Finally she turned and faced Carol. “The cities kept pumping it, and dumping their garbage into it. The countryside kept diverting it, and damming it, and washing fertiliser in it to feed the cities. When the global drought hit, things started looking pretty thirsty.”

“Didn’t the governments do anything? The U.N.? Anybody?” asked Carol.

“Sure they farted around with hose pipe bans and water regulations. They tried rationing but it was too late. Nobody really believed we could run out of water,” said the Ghost. “Except maybe the ones who got into the bottled water business. Made a killing before the shit hit the fan. Of course afterwards it didn’t do them much good. Guess they learned that you can’t drink money,” she added chuckling.

Carol tried to remember the figures. She should know the stats. She’d done a story on global water shortages. What had she given it - two minutes? A minute and a half?

“Officially, the Water Wars started when they took out Las Vegas,” said the Ghost. “No great loss, mind you. Then everybody got on the bandwagon. The only place that wasn’t hit was the Kalihari Desert. Them people know how to live with no water.”

“Well we’re just about done here,” continued the Ghost. “Now remember this is just one possible future. You’re a smart lady. I’m sure that you can figure some other worst case scenarios: nuclear accidents, rising sea levels, *dead* seas, overpopulation, drug resistant diseases, viral infections of cereal crops, and then some. The choice is vast. It’s like a disaster smorgasbord at the End of the World Buffet. Oh yeah, and then there’s the one where an asteroid lands in the middle of Paris. We don’t have the time to go into those. We gotta go.”

“Hang on,” said Carol, helplessly looking around. “Why are you showing me this? There’s nothing I can do about it. What’s the point of showing me that everything that matters could just disappear and I can’t stop it?”

"That is the point, Einstein!" said the Ghost. "You ready for another one?"

"Another what?" asked Carol looking down at her shoes.

"Another future."

"Does it get any worse?"

"That depends who's doing the looking. If I recall correctly, this one doesn't include the end of the world as we know it, so I guess you could say it's an improvement."

Again the scene around her faded into darkness. Carol felt grateful for the neon lighting that slowly took its place along with the faint smell of antiseptic. She was in a hospital of some sort. A nurses station was plastered with Christmas cards. Someone had tried unsuccessfully to add some holiday spirit by wrapping gold tinsel on the door handle. It hung sad and limp in the harsh light.

A tall man in a well cut suit was walking down the hall followed by a short, but very large, nurse. His leather shoes tapped purposefully on the linoleum, accompanied by the hurried squish of her rubber soles as her short legs tried to keep up with his long ones.

"Tom!" said Carol as the pair passed her. "That's my Tom! He's so tall!" she exclaimed proudly. "And he seems to be doing well."

"Hush now," said the Ghost from the far end of the hallway where she receded further into the folds of her cloak.

"Do you have to hide like that? It's very disconcerting talking to someone wrapped up in a black sheet," said Carol, feeling much relieved by the change of decor.

"Shut up and watch. You're missing the action," said the Ghost, turning her back on Carol.

"How is she doing?" asked Tom as he came up to a glass partition and looked into the small room beyond.

"Much the same really. She has good days and bad days," said the nurse, flipping through a chart.

"He's a doctor!" said Carol happily. "I knew it. He's always been good at science when he applies himself." She walked up to the partition and peered over Tom's shoulder to see the patient beyond. An emaciated old woman sat in front of a small television. A game show was in progress. In the corner, a small plastic Christmas tree sat lopsided on a table. Its tiny blue lights were

reflected on the TV screen. The woman sat unmoving, staring blankly into space, her bottom lip thrust out in a pout. Her shawl had slipped off one shoulder and her wispy hair was coming undone.

"You sure she's still alive?" chuckled Carol. "I haven't even seen her blink for at least a minute."

"I wouldn't be so cocky," said the Ghost from down the hall "You be looking at yourself."

"That's me?" asked Carol, her voice trailing off. "I'm in a hospital and Tom is the doctor?"

"Tom is a commodities broker. He sold insurance for a while," answered the Ghost.

"I don't understand what these extra fees are for," said Tom curtly to the nurse.

"I'm sorry Mr. Cooper, but the rates for rooms with a private bathroom have gone up."

"She can't bathe herself. What does she need a private bathroom for?"

"Your sister expressly asked for a private room and bath," answered the nurse, pursing her mouth.

"Then let her pay for it." A phone beeped discreetly. "I have to take this," said Tom, turning away from the nurse. He strode down the hall brushing past Carol. She ran after him.

"You put me in a nursing home?" she yelled, trying to grab his jacket. "You snot nosed little bastard. How could you do that to me?"

"He can't hear you," said the Ghost in a tired voice.

"Where's Tracy?" yelled Carol as Tom leaned against a wall and consulted his phone.

"She's somewhere with her soon to be third husband," said the Ghost. "She's really busy."

"Third husband?" repeated Carol, throwing up her hands. "What do you mean third husband?"

"I mean she is going to get married for the third time and she's real busy."

"Don't you patronise me!" snapped Carol. "What about Sam? She'd never let them put me in here. Not my little Sam."

"Sam? Let me see. How can I put this?" said the Ghost slowly. "No-one's heard from Sam since she dropped out of College some years back. Wait! No.

I lie. She sent Tracy a postcard when she married for the second time.”

“What did it say?” said Carol.

“It said: Way to go, Sis!”

“That’s it. No address? No news? And they didn’t try to find her?” asked Carol as she watched Torn punch in a row of numbers on the phone. “You don’t even know where your little sister is?!” she yelled, trying to grab at him again.

“Tom hasn’t spoken to Sam since she came out,” said the Ghost. “It’s kind of the reason she fell off the family radar. In fairness she tried to make contact several times, but Tom doesn’t like the idea of having a dyke in the family - two if you count Sam’s partner. Tracy isn’t really bothered, but she’s been so caught up in her own shit that she just let things slide. Like I said. They’ve been busy.”

“Hi. It’s me. What’s up?” said Tom on the phone. “I don’t know. I’ll probably catch the last flight out. I still have to sort out this shit with my mother. Yeah, I was in the vicinity so I thought I’d better just deal with it in person. She’s fine. The same. I know it’s Christmas Eve, Sharon! OK, OK! I promise to call my father. Yeah. Bye.”

Tom started dialling another number.

“What about John?” asked Carol. “He knows I’m in here? He knows about Sam?”

“He’s retired. He’s been busy too,” said the Ghost.

“Hello, Cindy. It’s Tom. Can I speak to Dad?”

“Who is Cindy?” snapped Carol.

“His wife,” answered the Ghost.

“Well, when he gets back from the golf course tell him I called. Yeah. Tell him to call me at home tomorrow. No wait. Better tomorrow evening. We’re going out for lunch. Right - I know he hasn’t heard from us in a while. We’ve been real busy. Did you get the Christmas card? Good. Well, maybe we’ll get a chance to get out there next year. Merry Christmas to you too Cindy.” Tom started striding for the entrance followed by the scurrying nurse. “I will send you this month’s cheque, but starting next month I want her changed to a less expensive room. This is costing me an arm and a leg.”

“Would you like to spend some time with your mother before you go?” asked the nurse. “She’ll be having her dinner in a few minutes and she might

enjoy the company. She gets so few visitors," added the nurse pointedly.

"You don't visit me?" asked Carol bleakly as Tom walked past her.

"I have so little time that it wouldn't be fair," said Tom, holding on to the door. "And I wouldn't want to upset her. I've heard a change of routine can be very unsettling." Tom looked quickly at his watch. "If I rush I can make the mid-afternoon flight. Thanks for all you're doing here. Great work. Really great."

"Sure," said the nurse, sourly. "Thanks. Bye."

Carol didn't wait to see him leave. She walked slowly back up the corridor and stood looking through the glass partition. She cried silently as she watched the old woman trying to put her shawl back in place. She made no effort to wipe the tears away.

"You know the worst part isn't ending up like that," said Carol, pointing to the unwanted old woman.

"You don't mind?" asked the Ghost, surprised.

"Sure I mind. I guess I should have taken better care of myself or something. And I mind that nobody seems to care much. But that's not it. The worst thing is that they don't have each other. They're so busy they don't even know how lonely they are."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the Ghost. "There's hope left for you yet. Come on let's see another one."

"I don't want to see any more. I'm tired. All I want is a cigarette," said Carol.

"Hang in there. You're going to like this one. You deserve a treat," said the Ghost, her bright white smile suddenly flashing from under her hood.

Carol shook her head, but it was no use. The walls around her were already disappearing and the neon lights were growing dim. *I'll just close my eyes*, she thought. *I'll sit this one out. I can't take any more.* Carol felt wind rush past her face. Wonderfully refreshing, it carried the smell and taste of the sea. Despite herself, Carol opened her eyes.

She stood on an outcrop overlooking a small cove. The sun was an oversized red balloon hanging low on the horizon above the purple water. It cast a gold light on the green fields and trees behind her. Carol was bathed in colour. Red sun. Purple sea. Blue sky. Orange cloud. Grey rock. Gold light. Green grass. Black tree. A cormorant swooped and dipped into the waves.

Along the shoreline three oystercatchers glided effortlessly only inches above the sand. A movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Someone was watching her. Carol turned her head just in time to see a sleek black form slip into the water. For a minute she thought the Ghost might have decided to go for a swim, but moments later a small black head popped out of the waves.

It was a seal. Carol had never seen a seal before. Its inquisitive brown eyes looked straight at her and filled her with delight. The seal floated lazily on its back, bobbing up and down with the swell. Having had enough of Carol it rolled over and disappeared. Carol scanned the water waiting for it to come up again but only caught a glimpse of its head as it swam out of the cove and back out to the open sea. Carol sat down and hugged her knees. She could stay like this forever. She had no idea where she was but she knew that she belonged. She felt safe. For the first time in her life Carol was a part of the landscape, and it felt very good.

A discreet cough made her look away from the setting sun. The Ghost sat huddled on a rock a few yards below. Extending one arm slowly she pointed to a path. Carol brushed herself off and started walking. The path was overgrown with gorse and brambles. A little stream ran down one side, improvising a playful melody to the sea's repetitive rhythm.

She smelt the house before she heard it, and heard it before she saw it. A fire burning in the hearth mingled its sweet smoky perfume with the air's salty mix of surf and seaweed. It was followed closely by the warm yeasty smell of baking bread, enticing Carol to follow her nose. Laughter and the shrieks of small children met her as she meandered up the path along with what Carol guessed, by the cheers that followed it, was the thump of a football.

The path came to a final sharp bend. The house was tucked beyond it. Carol stopped and sat on a fallen tree trunk.

"Aren't you gonna have a peek?" asked the Ghost, materializing behind her.

"In a minute," said Carol, savouring the moment. "I was trying to remember an Arab saying I heard once: 'The best sound is that of water. The best taste is that of salt. The best smell is that of bread baking. And the best love is that of a child.'"

"That's a real good saying," said the Ghost.

Two pairs of boots came crashing through a low hedge, laughing as they came. One pair belonged to a small boy, the other to a tall and slender young girl. They carried piles of greenery in their arms.

"I'll race you home," said the girl.

"No. You always win," said the boy.

"I'm really out of breath. You've got a good chance. I'll give you a headstart."

"OK!" yelled the boy as he took off down the path. "Grandma! We've got loads and loads of ivy. And holly, too!"

The girl watched him go and lingered a moment before following at a slower pace. Her face was silhouetted in the twilight. Carol was struck by how much she resembled Tracy. Carol wanted to grab her and hug her hard.

"That's Tracy's daughter," said the Ghost as Carol followed the girl down the path.

Carol chuckled with delight as she watched the girl lay down her bundle of ivy and run to join a group of children playing ball on the lawn in front of the house.

"They're all your grandchildren," said the Ghost. "Except the two redheads over there. They're your sister's grandchildren." She pointed to two women holding hands as they watched the children play. "That's Sam and her partner. They've been together for ten years this Christmas, so it's a double celebration."

The front door opened and an attractive older woman walked onto the porch and called the children in.

"Is that Su?" laughed Carol. "Boy she aged well."

"She done good," agreed the Ghost. "So have all of you."

Carol joined the group of children as they poured into the house, revelling in their cold, fresh smell. The littlest child, a boy of about three, stopped in front of a tall Christmas tree. His eyes widened in awe as he tried to crane his neck and see the top. Sam's daughter came up behind him and took his hand. Behind a door Carol could hear many voices and the clattering of dishes and glasses being set out.

She pushed open the door excitedly and stopped. The room was sparkling with smiles. From the very young to the very old, each one was lit by their own personal glow. Carol scanned the sea of faces recognising one, hesitating

on another. Her eyes came to rest on a white haired man sitting by the fire, his face hidden by a small girl on his lap.

"Daddy?" whispered Carol. Hope flared for a second in her heart that she might, just for a moment, exchange places with the little girl. That she might once again, if only for a brief moment, know that the world was a simple place where being good was the only demand and should you fail you would still be loved.

"We're too far in the future," said the Ghost slowly.

"I know," answered Carol sadly. "I just hoped that maybe he'd still be around."

"Nobody lives forever," said the Ghost. "All of us are destined to be orphans - if our parents are lucky."

The little girl jumped up, pulling the older man by the hand. As he rose Carol's eyes met those of her husband. His hair was white, and his features etched with lines and wrinkles but there was no mistaking the eyes. Locked as if by an invisible beam Carol smiled at him. The old man stopped and, feeling the pull, smiled back.

"Come on Grandpa," said the little girl, tugging at his hand and breaking the bond. "Rachel said I had to get everyone for dinner!" The girl led him to a long table with many makeshift additions that took up most of the room.

Carol watched as John sat next to an elegant, elderly woman whom she recognised as the same Rachel who had been in transit with him. Carol's heart sank, but before she could ask any questions, a door banged open, focusing everyone's attention.

"Come and get it, guys!" said a voice out of sight. "It's Turkey Time!"

Carol watched enthralled as a small procession of children solemnly entered the room, each carefully carrying a steaming platter, followed by Sam and her partner who herded them around the table. Bringing up the rear was a plump, older version of herself, proudly carrying a tray with a large turkey on it. A tall man, with a shock of curly greying hair, helped her place it in the centre of the table before giving the older Carol a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Is everyone here?" he asked, as chairs were pulled back and the older children helped the younger ones into their seats. "I hope you're hungry!"

"Who is that man?" asked Carol, as she watched her older self smile up at the man by her side.

“Beats me,” said the Ghost. “But judging by the way you’re looking at him, I’d say he’s the love of your life.”

“But I’ve never met him!” exclaimed Carol.

“Not yet,” said the Ghost. “Now hush and watch.”

“Let me help you,” said a middle aged woman, reaching out to steady the tray.

“Thanks Tracy. Your poor mother is getting too old for this,” said the older Carol, laughing.

“Nonsense Mom. You don’t look a day over fifty,” teased a man to her right, who must be Tom.

“Yeah. And I don’t feel a day over eighty,” smirked Carol.

“Move over and let the professional take over,” said Tom, taking a carving knife off the table.

“Wait, Tom. First a toast. Everybody! Get your glasses,” said Tracy, raising hers. “We’re so happy that you could all make it tonight. I propose a toast to the cook and her loyal assistant. And as always to absent friends. Merry Christmas!”

“To absent friends!” echoed the family assembled around the table. “Merry Christmas!”

“This is great,” Carol said, beaming. “This is terrific. Look at them. They’re all happy and healthy. It’s just great.”

“It doesn’t get much better,” agreed the Ghost over her shoulder.

Hearing the Ghost, Carol felt a twinge of fear run through her. This wasn’t really happening. Maybe it would never happen. Carol wanted it so much. She’d never wanted anything that badly. The ache of it was like an icy hollow in her chest.

“Can’t you tell me if this is the one? If this is my future?” pleaded Carol.

“Nope,” answered the Ghost. “Sorry, Carol. No can do.”

The bright lights and noise were fading like a washed out aquarelle as the scene started to melt.

“Don’t stop now!” pleaded Carol in a panic. “Don’t you have anything else to show me? A happy medium somewhere? I mean is that it? Either I lose out or I hit the jackpot? And maybe whatever I do won’t make any difference because we’re going to blow up the planet anyway? You can’t leave me like this. It’s not fair!”

“Who said it had to be fair?” echoed the Ghost from far away as the

colours and voices blended into a kaleidoscope, encompassing other images, other voices, that swirled around Carol.

Marla picked up a phone. Sam opened her arms for a hug. Grandma sat smiling at the Christmas tree. John reached out and cradled her in his sleep. Tom walked away from the nurse. A woman bent her head in prayer in the rain. Carol: old, young, slim, plump, made up, fresh faced, in heels, in high tops, in sensible pumps. Carol: working, cooking, shopping, stuck in traffic, yelling at a reporter, rocking a baby in the dark. Carol saw a hundred different images of herself swirl and dance and melt around her. They spun faster and faster, blending into each other until Carol was suspended in a bright white light. The only form left was the dark outline of the Ghost standing by her side.

“What can I do? Tell me what to do!” beseeched Carol, shading her eyes.

“You still looking for directions?” asked the Ghost. “What do you want? A quick recipe for a happy future. A twelve step programme to make it all work? Grow up why don’t you? The only thing I can tell you is what you already know: Shit happens and in the end you’re gonna die.”

The light was softening, decreasing until it focused into a small bedside lamp. Carol was in her bedroom. The Ghost stood silhouetted at the window.

“Wait! This was meant to be for my own good wasn’t it? What’s the use of dragging me through a past I can’t change to a present I fuck up, just to show me a future I can’t do anything about?” asked Carol.

“My, my, my,” sighed the Ghost. “You don’t even know when you’ve learned something.”

“What the hell do you mean?” despaired Carol.

“Listen up, cuz I’m not gonna say this twice,” said the Ghost, with just a hint of warmth in her deep, low voice. “The past is past and you can’t do anything about it. If you try, you just waste your life looking over your shoulder. As for the future - you can hope for it, plan a little for it, but don’t get too enamoured by it. You can waste your life just waiting for it to happen. Face it Carol. The present is the only life you get.”

“The present is the only life you get,” repeated Carol carefully, letting the words echo around her head. They rolled back and forth, spinning slowly across her mind like coloured snooker balls on a billiard table; gaining momentum and new direction as they bounced off each other. The present is the only life you get.

“The present is the only life you get,” said Carol, savouring each syllable.

“Yeah. And what you gonna do about it?” asked the Ghost.

“Do?” Carol echoed.

“Don’t you see? The present is the only thing you can *do* anything about. It’s the only thing you can actually change. But I’ll tell you a secret: It you take care of the present, the past and the future will take care of themselves.”

Carol watched the words spin and bounce, in and out of the pockets of her mind; searching for meaning, knowing it was just a heartbeat away. The present is the only life you get. Right here. Right now.

“I’ve gotta leave now,” said the Ghost. “You gonna be OK.?”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna be fine,” Carol said, feeling a lightness in her heart, as if she were being gently lifted by party balloons.

The Ghost turned and passed out the open window. “Merry Christmas Carol Edwards!” she called back as she floated over the lawn.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” said Carol, leaning out the window. “If you’re the Ghost of Christmas Future - there’s just one thing that I really want to know.”

“What’s that?” asked the Ghost from across the garden.

“If I cut down to five a day can I still keep smoking?” asked Carol happily.

“I swear, woman,” laughed the Ghost. “You still full of shit.” And with that she rose straight up and disappeared into the black canopy of the night sky.

“Merry Christmas to you too,” whispered Carol, smiling.

## STAVE FIVE

### THE END OF IT

Carol stood at the window and watched the clouds drift across the sky. The moon gave them a silver iridescent glow and Carol was awed at how achingly beautiful the night was. The present is the only life you get. There was John, and Tracy, and Tom, and Sam. She was down one housekeeper and her upwardly mobile job had just hit a career ceiling. She had a piano bill to pay. Laundry to take out of the washer. A tree to buy. Mince pies to make. John, and Tracy, and Tom, and Sam. Her sister and brother-in-law, and niece. Carol felt a surge of joy as she realised that her parents were still alive. And they were all coming over for Christmas dinner.

“So what are you going to do about it Carol?” she asked out loud.

She sat on the edge of the bed and smiled. She had to resist picking up the pen and notepad on her night table and making a list. Somehow she knew that wasn't the point.

The clock's green digits read 12:00. It was Christmas Eve. The night before Christmas. Carol concentrated hard. She knew it was just out there, waiting for her. The present. A Christmas present. Hidden just beyond where her mind could reach, the doubt and confusion like a last ridge to climb before the landscape opened up into a wide vista.

“Momma?” said a sleepy voice behind her. Sam's skinny little frame stood silhouetted through her nightgown in the glow of the bedside lamp. Her face was still heavy with sleep as she hesitated in the doorway.

Carol rose and picked her up like a baby, nuzzling Sam's hair with her nose. Sam clung to her mother, her body relaxing as it settled in her arms. Carol tucked Sam under the quilt and cuddled in beside her.

“I love you so much,” she whispered in her daughter's ear. “You're like a hot little croissant.”

Sam giggled and then turned, her face only inches away, her hot breath mingling with Carol's. “I had a nightmare,” she whispered.

“So did I,” Carol whispered back.

“Was it scary?”

“Real scary,” said Carol, stroking Sam’s temples.

“Me too,” said Sam, her eyes fighting to stay open.

“What was your nightmare about?” asked Carol.

“I couldn’t find you,” said Sam, yawning. “I’d lost you. I was all alone and I’d lost you. What was your nightmare, Momma?”

Carol kissed her cheek. “The same. I was alone and I couldn’t find you. I’d lost you, and Tracy, and Tom and Daddy.”

“It was just a bad dream,” said Sam sleepily. “It’s almost Christmas. Santa Claus is almost here. Santa Claus is going to bring me my presents. Will he bring you a present? Do grown ups get a present?”

Carol didn’t answer. She saw herself climbing a ridge. The brambles were thick and pulled at her legs, slowing her down, but she had almost reached the top. A few more steps, and she would see the horizon. Carol listened as Sam’s breathing slowed down to a regular soft rhythm. Her hand reached out and cupped Sam’s as she watched the tiny rise and fall of her chest. She turned the small fingers over and looked at Sam’s palm. It was pink and soft with lines so lightly etched it was almost smooth. She lifted Sam’s hand and kissed the faint blue veins at the child’s wrist. Her lips felt the pulse that ran up Sam’s arm and through her heart and beyond to every cell in her little body. It throbbed in a rhythm slightly faster than her own, like a counterpoint to her own living song.

Carol closed her eyes and sank back into the pillows. She didn’t know exactly what she was going to do. But for the first time in a long, long time it didn’t matter. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and she knew she would be getting the best present in the world. The only present you ever get.

-THE END-

