

# THE SISTERS' GHOST

by

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Another Christmas story for my daughters

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She poured another Baileys, pushed back her chair and stared at the plate. Her thoughts were melancholic. Not depressed but wallowing in reminiscence – Christmases past with the family, that coziness made more precious by its absence this year. Mom long gone and Dad – the final link to her origins – granted his release last month. Good for him. For years he'd been muttering "long past my best before date". It's what he'd wanted. And by the time it came she'd been ready, resigned to the precedence of his needs over hers.

Michael was good to her. Helping her through it, and a lot more besides. Pity he wasn't here. No Tara either – not that she'd expected her after the blow-up. She was half hoping to get invited there, at least for today. But that was expecting too much. She didn't forgive easily that girl.

Now Michael, he was different. You could have a raging fight over breakfast, you'd know you were in the wrong, but by lunchtime he'd call with an apology, making you feel even worse arguing it was *his* fault not yours. He was good for her, no doubt about it, showed her how to be a better person.

Not for the first time she thought about what a good father he'd make. He was being a good son right now, spending Christmas day at a retirement home on the other side of the province with his gaga mother for God's sake. Did that say something good or bad about their relationship – his preference for a demented old lady on the biggest holiday of the year? She chose to think it was good. But, surveying the remnants of her makeshift lunch -- half-eaten turkey breast, tasteless packaged stuffing, forlorn vegetables and canned cranberry sauce – she couldn't help feeling abandoned. Not exactly a family Christmas, devoid as it was of partner, parents or progeny.

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Tara struggled with the nursing bra. How the hell to do the thing up? She snapped at Nabil to take the baby, milk dribbling down his tiny double chin, head lolling disconcertingly. Once she had the benefit of two hands she figured it out and sank back in the chair. She felt guilty, sitting by the fire in the rocker, waited on hand and foot by Nabil and his family. This may be her first, he may be only a week old, and she *was* smitten by this whole new kind of love that seemed to come out of nowhere, but surely there should still be room for other things in her life. Christmas

day for instance. She loved Christmas day. Usually it was she who did most of the work, received most of the praise. She listened to the chatter of her in-laws' cleaning up in the kitchen and it felt like this year's Christmas had been stolen from her. She always reveled in being the provider, getting things done. In her family she'd been the one who'd taken over the Christmas kitchen once her mother was gone. Even before that she'd always been the sous-chef and bartender, ensuring everyone got enough alcohol to make things run smoothly, but not so much that they embarrassed themselves. Her role today, wanted or not, was apparently to tend the needs of a new lifeform, begin the next line of providers, and produce a budding new Christmas sous-chef. Important, she realized, but not enough to sate her restlessness.

Why was she so tense, she wondered? Or was she just out of sorts? Curried butter chicken for lunch was delicious but not really **her** tradition. They'd put up a tree for her – spruce not pine unfortunately – but none of her ornaments were on it, laden with memories of Christmases past. A new ornament every year had been her mother's tradition and she'd religiously carried that on, until this year. Hardly surprising really, what with the kerfuffle around the birth and then the rush to be with Nabil's family. Maybe it was post-partum depression, all these negative thoughts. The doctor had warned her about it, but at the time she'd poo-pooed the idea: "I'm just not that kind of person." But without doubt something was troubling her.

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Now she *was* depressed, sitting on the couch, listening to Grace Jones' husky voice blend with the patter of west coast rain. She gulped back the last of the Baileys and returned to the sparkling wine. She was near to tears. Inexplicable tears. Grace Jones was at that Leonard Cohen moment in the song.

*Kiss today goodbye,  
The sweetness and the sorrow,  
Wish me luck, the same to you,  
But I can't regret, what I did for love,  
What I did for love.*

She had done it for love, love for him. Tara didn't know that though. Tara didn't understand. She was just angry, furious. Her mother wouldn't have understood either. Thank God she was long gone by then. They'd never got on at the best of times with her 1950s suburban view of the world, her war-time experiences the pinnacle of her life. After Churchill it was all downhill. Resentment at the modern world turned to embitterment by middle age and she'd buried herself in busy work around the house, in the community and with that dreaded local Conservative Party. In the last years, energies spent, she'd just become outright unpleasant. It all ate away at her from the inside. A sour old lady for whom cancer seemed like a karmic end. She'd never understood how her father had put up with it. Not once did he utter a word of criticism about her, at least not to her or Tara, nor at the end.

She wondered whether her sister *really* knew, or did she just suspect? She'd been in the house, but asleep at the time. "Afternoon naps are the most efficient for me and the baby" she always said, sounding like their mother at her most officious. She wasn't like Tara, or her mother. Less oriented to achievement, more into the empathy thing. Perhaps that's why she'd got into counselling. For her, having a baby would be about a lot more than efficiency. That is, if she ever decided to have one.

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Tara's discomfort found a focus. Not necessarily the source, but a place it could land for a while. Would she be a good mother? What was 'being a good mother'? Replicating that homely feeling of security generated by her mother? How would it change her and Nabil's marriage? How would Nabil be as a father? The emotionless absentee that was her father? In front of 'baby makes three' lay a swamp of uncertainty. She was supposed to navigate through all this with Nabil. But she knew his limits and working through emotional turmoil was not his strong suit. He'd get all insecure on her and start thinking she was going to leave. When it came down it, she didn't have anyone she could share her fears with, to help set her course through the swamp. No one. And anyway, who could she possibly talk to on Christmas day? They'd all be busy with their families, eating too much, likely drinking too much and in no mood for anything but fun.

In times past she would have called her sister. She was good at helping her through crises. But not now. Not after the confrontation at the funeral. She'd shut that door. Sometimes she thought that maybe she'd been overly hasty, too quick to judge. But she couldn't go back on it now. She'd said it so clearly: "I want nothing more to do with you. We're finished." Her sister had never admitted it, but she knew her well and she'd had that tell-tale quiver in her lower lip every time she'd denied it. Tara was sure she had. But what if she hadn't? What if she'd destroyed the last link with her family on the basis of a misunderstanding? This Christmas day angst was the heavy price she was paying, for now she grasped the source of her unease: the broken link with her family, brought into sharp relief by Christmas.

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She'd emptied the bottle of sparkling and was unashamedly into the gin and tonic, well down the road to maudlin. When night came she'd replaced Grace Jones with Norah Jones and plugged in the Christmas tree lights – they were the kind that twinkled and either annoyed or delighted depending on your mood. Now on her second generous gin, they annoyed. She was imagining a dark future, one without children in which Michael was gone and she was a lonely spinster.

By all accounts she was drunk. Michael had called and they'd had an awkward exchange, his mother in the background conversing with herself, he trying to generate holiday spirit clearly not felt, and she not sharing what was really on her mind – hiding behind an amiable façade, just like her father.

What *was* she feeling? Childless? Yes, she thought, that was likely it. All day she'd kept coming back to what a different Christmas it would be if shared with one or two little ones: their wide-eyed wonder, the indulgences, the good moods, their day awash in love and attention. She'd even created names for them – Ben and Eleanor – and given them ages and clothes – a red Santa suit for big brother Ben and a fireman's uniform for little Eleanor. At one point she'd had them squabbling over presents under the tree, just to ground her fantasy in a touch of reality.

She extracted herself from the depths of the couch where she'd gradually descended during the evening. Sitting up straight and steadying the room's rotations she announced, to no one in

particular and in the rubbery speech of the drunk, “Enough. Time to bring this Christmas to a close.” No good was coming of her mawkish self-pity. She unplugged the annoying lights and headed for bed.

Her phone rang. She grappled for it on the table, impulse and habit compelling her to stop its ring before it woke Michael. But Michael, she quickly realized, was not there. She looked at the screen. Christ, it was Tara! Shocked sober she did the calculation: midnight here meant it was three in the morning back there. Something was wrong. Tara’s last words “we’re finished” came rushing back to her.

A stage whisper was hissing from the phone “Sis, sis, are you there?” She wasn’t sure she wanted this conversation, not now, not after so much to drink, not weighed down by already maudlin thoughts. She certainly wasn’t ready to ride out a renewed round of accusations and condemnations from Tara.

She greeted her sister with a sleepy “Hello, yes it’s me.” What she got back was an outpouring from someone clearly in need. She listened while Tara breathlessly explained her whispering – she was in the bathroom at Nabil’s parents and everyone else was asleep. She announced that she, Tara, was now a mother, making her, the sister, an aunt. She rushed onwards, the words tumbling out in fractured phrases, her breath ragged and the whispered tone urgent. The gist of it was she feared for the future of her and Nabil, wasn’t confident she could live up to the expectations of motherhood, and had an irresistible urge to share these insecurities with her only remaining family member.

There was instant relief that this wasn’t to be a further inquisition into their father’s death. The relief was quickly replaced, however, by compassion for her sister’s state of self-doubt. Through the fog of drink she dragged her professional self to the fore. She probed and calmed in equal measure until at last Tara was breathing regularly and able to converse coherently. She moved her away from endless lists of all the potential calamities of parenting. She asked questions with empathy. Gradually she got her thinking about the positives – the wonder of creation, the purity of dependence, the tiny perfection of fingers, toes, of everything. Eventually Tara moved beyond

the need to be consoled. Indeed, she was off on her own reverie. She was celebrating the unconditional love that enveloped her new life with baby. How it flowed from every pore of her being, like some primordial imperative. She veritably glowed on the other end of the line with the glory of this unbidden love, how it gave you energy where before there had been none, infused everything with a new clarity of purpose and made you feel like you'd never be alone in life again. So eloquent was Tara in extolling these virtues that not only was her own self-doubt banished, but her sister's too. She instilled awe in her, verging on revelation, about the potential wonder of her own mother and child bond, should she choose that path.

The sisters found themselves far from the tensions and denunciations of their recent past. Neither really wanted to spoil it with any recognition of that past. But it couldn't be avoided. So, with a sort of apology, Tara gave voice to the ghost in the conversation. She granted that she was ready to move on from whatever had happened that afternoon. The toll of the last few months of excommunication had been too much, the support she'd just got from her last living family member was proof enough of her own foolishness back then. How could they deprive themselves of such sibling support, Tara asked? Her sister agreed. More than that, with a few drunken tears she confessed to a new-found attraction to motherhood, perhaps supplanting her historical ambivalence. And with that they were reconciled.

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Exhausted by the exchange with Tara she stood alone in the bathroom contemplating family, her life with Michael and the concept of a child of her own. She stared at her birth control pills for a long time. Finally, she tossed them in the waste basket. Having ended one life she would start another.