

Ebenezer



JoSelle Vanderhooft



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EBENEZER

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For Kim, as ever



PROLOGUE



Marley was dead.

Not dead as doornails or coffin-nails, although it made little difference. Her boxes had been closed with long brown stripes of packing tape, her velvet sofa and zebra-gaudy beanbags loaded into the back of a We-Haul-It van, her dishes stacked in glistening bubble wrap, her shower caddy plucked from its customary nest between the haphazard shampoo bottles and crumbling soap bars in the mildewed shower.

She had even removed the drooping aloe from the windowsill where its stalks had hung brown and useless like the legs of a dead spider. How you could kill such a hardy desert plant, Ebenezer could not have said, but it must have taken diligence, time, concerted effort.

The metaphor and its attendant irony were not lost on her.

Marley was dead, and snow was falling like static. Ebenezer watched it from a couch warmed only by a laptop. The ancient radiator hummed uncertainly; a pipe banged like an aneurysm somewhere deep within the chipped walls. Her index finger had left a smear of oil on the touchpad.

No call, no email, no text message, no whisper, and no tweet. A month, the calendar insisted, each black X a little tombstone. A month, and Ebenezer sat staring at the dust in which the sofa's outline vanished a little more every time she looked.

How did one measure time, she wondered. In seconds, or the dark spaces between them? In the hours that tumbled past like snowflakes, or in their weight on her shoulders. The clock ticked steadily with the

storm's pattern. Ebenezer glanced over at its nook. Seven-thirty. Seven days exactly. It could well have been seven years.

Marley was dead—to her, anyway.

The alarm shrieked through the silence, assuming once again that she had gone to bed. Ebenezer sighed and hit it. Christmas Eve morning.

What did she have to show for it?



Act I

Cold Was Cheap



Scene I

An Excellent Woman of Business

Ebenezer was a small woman, five-foot-four and frail as newspaper against December. The snow blasting down 94th and West End made her walk at angles and huddle deeply in her coat—torn, dirt-flecked and handed down like a family history of depression, it had seen far better days. Cabs were too expensive, subways and buses too close; and Ebenezer had a fear of all those bodies, and the eyes placed in them. The streets being no less populous but far more open, she walked each day to her collections job—rain, shine, gale or, in this case, ice blizzard.

The wind ripped through her mud-brown hair, even the babies' fists of tangles, and squinted her already slitted gray eyes even further in a face the color of winter itself. Her scarf fluttered uselessly, half off her narrow shoulder, half hanging down her chest. She had lost her fifth pair of street-stall gloves last week and could not budget for or bother about a sixth, her rent not being controlled and rumbling to increase after the new year.

She was shivering all the time, and something bad was following her.

Ebenezer could not have said just what it was, save that it felt like a breeze beneath her collar, prickling when it should have tickled. That it resembled ripples in the corners of her sight that resolved to quiet air when she turned her head. It was as if night had come down cold and three hours early and brought with it the full weights of the planets. A heaviness had stalked her now for years, weighting down her arms and dragging at her ankles, transmuting everything to leaden chill. Some days, even rising from bed and walking to the kitchenette felt like dragging three miles of iron chains.

Today, those miles felt to Ebenezer as though they had elongated well past five. As New York City rumbled past beneath the gathering clouds, she felt slow and clumsy—if an accidental elbow or an ill-placed foot were to send her sprawling, she doubted she would rise until sometime past spring.

A breath of winter blasted through the streets, rumpling Ebenezer's maxi-coat up to her shins and overwhelming her with the smells of cold sidewalks and construction, bodega daisies, car exhaust, and, oh, so many bodies. And something else—metallic, sharp as the there-but-not-quite bite of ozone.

Something flickered again at the edges of her vision—pale as mold spots, linked like manacles. Ebenezer's heart kicked against her back. She turned...

Only the gray street looked back at her.

She rubbed her temples, blinking. Stay here. Stay together, damn it.

The feeling came again, as if someone were staring at the back of her head. She sighed. Merry Christmas.

She snorted, troubling the head cold she had been fighting off since Thanksgiving. Fuck it all.

Ebenezer worked in a frequently re-purposed office between a condemned mission that flooded in every rainstorm, and a Thai restaurant specializing as much in water-stained carpets and plastic tiger lilies as it did in peanut sauce. The windows were a bit too clean and whole for this stretch of 51st Street.

Here, five times a week for six hours a day, Ebenezer sat sandwiched between the bare slate walls of a cubical, hitting the keys of an equally nondescript computer that, while too clean, was not particularly modern.

After punching into this beige-carpeted farm, she hung her tattered coat and scarf in a colorless break room where the Pepsi machine perpetually displayed an out-of-order sign. Her arms goose-pimpled and her nipples shriveled underneath her fleece sweater as she entered the floor. Coats—especially coats as unsightly as hers—were forbidden in the office, yet the thermostat never seemed to rise above 40 save for during the summer months.

As she walked her chair up to her desk, Ebenezer shivered and mulled upon her theories with a scowl—a broken heater, a cheap landlord, or a boss who simply did not care, each translated into greed and disregard, and the holiday needed no help in being worse.

As she eased into the rickety computer chair, the heaviness persisted. The thought of sitting silently and allowing it to pull her down through the gruel-gray

carpet was the most alluring notion she'd had in days. But it was five past ten, and the computer needed fingers to make it dial, a voice to give the task a point. Ebenezer slipped the headset over her hair and with it, a resolved: A part. The only one you'll play. So, play it well.

The women to either side had not said hello. True, Ebenezer knew no more of them than Left's blond perm and Right's black comb coils, but she still felt angry at their silence.

She brought up her call list and, as she did five days a week for six hours each day, transported that feeling into her work. In this she found her four years of acting school, the loans for which still pendulomed over her, more useful than the breathing exercises and the near-psychotic dissociation her more sensitive coworkers used to get them through the afternoon.

Like all those beneath the perforated ceiling tiles, Ebenezer's business was misfortune—debts medical and, therefore, as unavoidable as they were unpayable. Many on her list today seemed to understand the mathematics; machine after machine recorded her monotone request for a call back and the helpful 800 number. Some rang and rang into a telling silence; others were picked up on annoyance, sometimes rage.

How dare you, you fucking bitch? I don't have it! Stop calling me! another wailed before the dial tone filled her headset. *Christmas Eve!* they said with one outraged voice. *Christmas Eve, Ebenezer! Have a heart!*

But I can't, Ebenezer told herself as one woman wept down into silence. It was an expense she could not cover if rent and groceries were to be paid, an expense she could not cover and go on. They, of all peo-

ple, should understand, she thought as she cut short a call that was spiraling into a death threat shot through with shards of misogyny. Like every other part of life, a job had a script, and it had to be followed, even if the words were sharp and felt wrong in your mouth.

As for its being Christmas Eve, well, what did they expect? Your debt doesn't take holidays, she thought, and promptly filed the remark in the ledgers of her mind for later use.

Her fingers chattered briefly on the keys, nails the purple of a fresh bruise. She knew her intrusions were less welcome than those of a politician scrabbling for a vote or a chirpy recording selling sham car insurance. But humanity was just as much her business as it was for these other callers.

A knock on the cubicle's rim, and her supervisor's chubby face appeared, followed shortly by the rest of him. Despite his knotted hair and the sweat perpetually pearling on his shale-colored skin, Fred Carter was a Santa Claus of a man who seemed to have misplaced his sleigh and reindeer and a good deal of his mirth. Still, he was much better than his bosses Trent and Cindy, who made a fine art out of glares and veiled threats.

He stepped in as far as his girth and polite distance would permit and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. How he could sweat in this polar office was anybody's guess and gossip.

"All right there, Ebenezer?"

Ebenezer had crafted a smile and a response for such occasions. She showed both now—"Doing great, thanks!" followed by two rows of teeth.

Fred, however, sometimes had a *Miracle on 34th Street* gift for seeing through bullshit. As he edged in farther, Ebenezer suspected now was one such time.

“I just wanted to thank you for working Christmas Eve,” he started with all that Utah Mormon charm Ebenezer suspected got him mugged regularly in Manhattan, not to mention mocked by his ward members. “We really appreciate your help.”

Somehow, she doubted Carker & Tulkinghorn really did. And how a guy who said things like “appreciate” and “thank you” got into debt collection in the first place she couldn’t fathom.

“It’s no problem,” she said, hoping through her smile that three sentences would make an end of it.

But Fred leaned against the filing cabinet as if settling down for a mug of hot chocolate.

“And I just wanted to let you know that it’s all right! Everybody’s numbers have been down this month. It’s just that time of year, not you.”

Except it was, and they both knew it, as did her paycheck. As did her rent and every ramen package on her counter. As did Marley, seven somethings gone and disappointed.

Ebenezer’s smile, however, had a staying power all its own.

“Yeah, I know. But all I can do is try my best, right?” That seemed to be the spell for banishment.

Just like that, Fred leaned closer and dropped the bullshit, too.

“Ebenezer, I really mean it. Sometimes it’s just a bad month. And that’s what I wrote in the evaluation.” He looked left-right, as if he had farted. “You do good work.

Real good. You're an asset to the shift. I said that, too. Just so you know."

He smiled and reached out as if to touch her shoulder, and then withdrew his hand back to his pocket.

Ebenezer felt like she had just ingested a lump of charcoal. Of course, she should have known this was coming, she thought. Twenty closed cases in November and only fifteen so far this month. Of course she should have known. Of course she would be told today.

It's Christmas Eve, Ebenezer! twenty debtors chorused in her head.

And then, the Santa-smile returned, Fred was pressing a mauve-and-teal-striped candy cane into her hand.

"I brought them special for the afternoon shift." His hand traveled to his brow again, and Ebenezer immediately thought better of unwrapping the treat. "Try not to let it get you down, okay? It'll all work out. You have a merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," she replied, as if a key had been wound, a mechanism tripped.

Then, as awkwardly as he had come, Fred Carter waddled off to deliver more glad tidings to the shift, more promises of firings not to come, more hideous buck-a-dozen sweets.

Ebenezer dropped hers in the wire trashcan and returned to her call list. Merry Christmas. Fuck it all. She punched the scroll button as if it were at fault.

Martha Cratchit was the next name, and Ebenezer groaned as she dialed. Of all the people on her list, Cratchit had to be the least creative and, therefore, the most frustrating. Each day since December first the

same excuse—*I don't have it*. No embellishments, no begging, no stories changing fast as salmon leaping through bright water.

Ebenezer was already in a foul mood, and as she punched in the last two digits, she decided her patience had run out.

The receiver was picked up on the second ring; Cratchit was also apparently too stupid to invest in caller ID.

“Hello?”

The blistering, just-been-slapped whine was definitely hers. Ebenezer immediately felt her anger rise.

“Ma’am, this is Ebenezer calling from Carker and Tulkinghorn. Yet again.”

Cratchit sighed. Ebenezer imagined a bonbon of a woman in a muumuu and housecoat, skin like melting wax, pinching the bridge of her bulbous nose.

“You people just don’t stop. It’s Christmas Eve!”

“No shit, really? Too bad your debt doesn’t take a vacation.”

She heard shuffling, as if Cratchit were pushing through a pile of newspapers.

“This is real inconvenient. My kids are—”

“And I’m sure they’d love to know all about how you mismanage your money.”

“And I told you people not to call me—”

“There’s no law against—”

“—at home. I know my rights.”

“Then you know there’s no law against calling people who owe money.”

“I tell you, I can’t pay now. What’s the point of calling?”

“Because, uh, you owe my client? Are you that fucking stupid?”

“Look, I’m not working now. I’m sick. I got diabetes and a heart—”

“Well, at least that’s some new excuses.” Ebenezer looked down at her fingernails. One had broken between home and work. Shit.

“—which you know all about, since that’s the reason I have these bills.” Cratchit sighed, and again Ebenezer imagined the bulbous nose, the large fingers scissoring the bridge. “Don’t call me again. I’ll pay when I can, and that’s the best I can do.”

“Well, ma’am, the best you can do sucks!” Ebenezer bit her nail, twisting off the excess. “Not that it matters, though. I’m calling the police, and when I do, they’ll issue a warrant for your arrest.”

Cratchit tried to start several sentences at once, each ending in a squawk.

“It’s Christmas Eve!” she kept repeating.

“Like that means anything. You’re eight months past due and no payments, not even interest. That means you’ll serve two hundred days, minimum.”

Again several half-born sentences.

“I’m *sick*,” Cratchit protested at last. “I’m sick. I’m on insulin, ACEs, and two things for depression. I tell you, I can’t work and I can’t pay now!”

“Well, ma’am, then I really hope you like prison. That’s where you’re going if you don’t pay your bill.”

Of course, it was all nonsense—yesterday Ebenezer had told one man she had a court order; the day before, she’d threatened to call one office worker’s boss. But while she had to stay within the law’s bounds—

well, story-telling sometimes got results from the ignorant or easily cowed.

Cratchit apparently was both. Now she was making a sound like down pillows might make if they could cry.

“I’ve got two little kids...” Ebenezer thought she heard her say.

“Whatever. Pay your debts or get off my fucking phone.”

The tears flowed freely then, and Ebenezer imagined the leakings of that bulbous proboscis with a shudder.

“I’ll pay you when I can. Stop calling me. I mean it.”

A click. The dial tone like a tomb’s echo.

Ebenezer ended the call and sighed.

“And a very Merry Christmas to you, too.”

She thought she saw a flash of Left’s blond hair peeking over the cubicle’s rim, but when she looked, she only saw a cluster of ornaments hung up last week in some useless attempt to make the cube farm festive. Shrugging, Ebenezer scrolled to the next name.



Six hours passed like the growth of glaciers. There were more hang-ups, more machines, more ringing into silence, and many not-at-homes. Of those who answered, four cried openly, five swore like cabbies, and two actually made plans to pay. Well, two more for her record, Ebenezer thought as she clocked out with not so much as a glance from anyone in the farm.

Outside, the snow had not let up a bit, but at least the street was somewhat warmer than the office. Tired

of her cold apartment and its waiting shelves of instant noodles, she blew into a sad McDonalds and splurged on a cheeseburger, chicken nuggets, French fries and, a little worried about her bleeding gums, a heaping salad. The bill was not quite too much for her ever-reducing salary; still, the coming rent bump meant even fast food would be a luxury before spring.

But she could pay her bills. There was always temp work, waitressing. Maybe a commercial...

But Ebenezer shook the thought away as she pulled at her soda. The audition lines were long enough even at non-paying companies, and even they had stopped calling. Everybody had a resumé, a talent, a dream dropped from twelve stories. The cube farm had taught her that much. This Christmas Eve was bad enough without over-thinking.

Her hands felt like two locked safes as she bagged the cheeseburger for later and stepped out again. It was only five o'clock, but the storm made everything look darker, stranger. Snow, fog, and gloom sat heavy among the ropes of tinsel and gave the Christmas lights wrapped around the bare branches such a sinister cast Ebenezer could well understand why they were sometimes known as "fairy lights."

The weather shrouded the higher stories and distorted the Salvation Army bells. Even the scents of sugared almonds, coffee, and hot chocolate were faint, frosted with chill and ozone and the mélange of asphalt, granite, dirt, and sewer that was every New York street. At every side on Ebenezer's path, people raced the weather, clutching great bright packages and sacks of fruit and sweets, or floral arrangements protected by

puffs of plastic. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere and nowhere at once, a separate species bound on journeys she could not follow.

For awhile, she struggled through the crowds, looking for distraction and excuses not to return to her apartment and its many ghosts, but the coffee shops and stores overflowed and the bars and restaurants cost too much. Eventually, the heavy numbness and boredom drove her back to her building's cracked steps and broken elevator.

Twisting her key in the stubborn lock, Ebenezer paused, listening for the familiar sounds of running water and the television's hum—the Discovery channel or something. Her favorite. She could almost hear the actors' voices—*could* hear them!

The lock clicked, and she hoped—a misunderstanding, a bad dream; it had to be.

The door swung in on darkness. Still and empty, as she'd left it, the dust outlines of furniture still scarring the floors. The answering machine flashed like a cyborg's eye, the only sign of life here.

The first caller ID showed a Utah number—her mother, who would only want to offer money Ebenezer knew she did not have and words she did not want to hear.

The next was an obvious telemarketer. Then Bell, inviting her to some dreadful Christmas party for the fifteenth time and asking her to “hang out,” the tone of her voice long past annoying. Ebenezer deleted each without listening then poured herself the final glass of red wine from the bottle Marley had generously forgotten.

She tried to watch the television, but its five channels were all families, warm apple cider, and second chances. After the fifth angel seeking his wings and the fifteenth Christmas carol, Ebenezer found the shopping network and let it run for noise.

The bed was currently a mess of laundry, books, and all the disarray of a relationship cut off. Even had it been made and its sheets fresh, Ebenezer had no desire to sleep there. Again she curled up on the ratty love seat that had followed her from Salt Lake City. The blankets—also Marley’s leavings—still smelled like her, and roses. As she had done for seven days or seven years, Ebenezer forbade herself to cry, but the pillow still felt damp. *Marley*, she remembered. *Marley*.

Marley crouched at their—at *the*—tiny stove, triumphant over dill-sauced salmon, dumplings, sweet potato pone, the whole wide culinary world.

Marley at the television, cursing one president out and weeping another in.

Marley in thigh socks and a negligee, waiting for Ebenezer to find a vase for a dozen Valentine’s Day red roses.

Marley’s skin—lampshade-pale and freckled, from an Irish mother, she’d explained on their second date.

Marley taking her first taste of sashimi, her bony fingers graceful and expert with the porcelain chopsticks, the laughing O of her red lips. The way they had kissed and kissed after, in the cab, and then in the bed that became theirs.

Marley looking on empty space with all its scuffs and blank walls and pronouncing it “the perfect place.”

Marley red-eyed and keeping her words as close as tax forms.

Marley, her face blotched like a globe, half-sore with shouting. *Yes, that's the problem, Ebenezer! You don't talk! You never tell me anything, goddamn it!*

Marley's lips firm as a minus sign seven days or seven years or seven centuries ago, the flatline of her voice. *Don't call. Not now. Maybe not ever. I don't know.*

I don't know.

Over and over, Ebenezer turned these memories like stones. Again they became a carousel of light and sound and the smell of every rose. She turned and turned, half sleeping, half-awake, but all certain.

Marley was dead as doornails, door locks, dusty corners, dank streets, dark theaters, and debt, debt, debt. Dead as the city murmuring with Christmas-time yet unaware its great heart had stopped.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Ebenezer told the silence. "None of it."

The unseen weights hung low and heavy on her limbs. Outside the window panes, snow fell like knives.



Act II

The First of the Three Spirits



Scene I

Bear But a Touch of My Hand Here Upon Your Heart

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Ebenezer knew all too well how everything should have been. She had written out the plan and repeated it nightly, a prayer to a god who seemed far less certain than ambition. Work hard up through university, star in every play, study and train and one day—one day, someone will notice and say, “You! Yes, you! I want you. You just shine so brightly.”

Ebenezer had been waiting to be seen for twenty-nine years. With thirty just around the corner, in all its sag and loneliness, her prayers were more fevered than ever, and her sleeps more fitful—more like reveries, in fact.

The carousel of light and memory turned her round and round and touched her down at last in the dark living room.

Dark?

Ebenezer blinked and turned her head. The television's eye looked back at her, striped gray-and-orange

from the lamps outside, where the snow was still coming down like static.

Strange. She shifted the quilts away, shivering as her toes touched the chilly floor. Kneeling, she rattled the power button and frowned when the set did not respond. She checked the plug, still tight within the socket, and the DVD player's clock—00:00. No light peeked beneath the front door, and the windows in the building across the alley were all dark and still. A power failure on the entire block?

"But why are the streetlights on?" she said out loud. "How long have I been asleep?"

The snow fell so fast and the storm was so fierce, it could have been fifteen minutes or five hours. Her nose pressed against the glass as she searched the streets for vehicles and passers-by, counting a minute out by way of Mississippi. Sixty seconds passed, then sixty more. Nothing rustled past but gale-blown snow, not even a newspaper or haphazard trash bag.

She felt a chill that had nothing to do with the gasping, ancient radiator.

"What the hell is going on?"

The smell of sweet sage tickled her throat. A hint at first—no more, perhaps, than a trick of memory. Confused, Ebenezer looked away from the alleys below and sniffed the air. Faint, but yes, desert sage, then rabbit brush, cottonwoods, sharp juniper berries, and over all—over all—noon on red sand and striated sediment.

A cold, wet feeling prickled in her wrists, and she turned slowly, as if knee-deep in dreaming. She wasn't sure she was not.

Darkness crept behind her, restless down the walls like hair falling and falling, a shiver under every door—bedroom, entrance, and bath. In the latter, a crawling in the pipes like the legs of some great millipede.

Horror clawing in her chest, she staggered to the window and the amber glow of streetlights beyond as plaster grains pelted the toilet, the range top, the barren hardwood floors. A skittering overhead; her eyes turned upwards, where the ceiling distended like a stomach upon which great seams of night spread like veins. Darkness trickled softly from them.

Something rustled in her hair and scampered down her face; Ebenezer ripped at it, screaming loud enough, she hoped, to wake up.

Her fingers scrabbled against sand.

She held one shaking hand aloft to catch some then rolled it in her palm. Yes, sand, and as near as she could tell, sand red as rust. She brought it to her nose and sniffed—hot.

It slithered from her palm and into the great pile accumulating in the center of the floor. Fed by tributaries from all parts of the apartment, it vaguely resembled—Ebenezer squinted—a stone pillar?

In the bathroom, the light fixtures smashed to the floor with a sound like wings and bones. Ebenezer found her courage and grabbed on tight.

“Whoever...whatever you are, stop it! Stop it now!”

Just like that, the sandfall did. And, just like that, the street lamps all snuffed out. A chuckle, rich and low as earth, cut short her second scream.

“My, my, Ebenezer. Seven years out, and you’ve forgotten me so easily?”

Ebenezer's voice sputtered and collapsed. The lights kicked on again, high and bright as the parcans above a stage. Sure enough, these fixtures hung like beetles above her. She squinted, finding herself the object of a spotlight. Beyond its circumference, the apartment had vanished save for the column, which glowed even redder now in the theatrical light.

Now I know I'm dreaming.

Hesitant as a sleeper, she stepped from the spotlight circle and edged toward the construct. She stalked around it like a vulture, studying each fissure and cranny with an actor's attention. She knew the story about a pinch being enough to startle someone from a nightmare, but having dreamed of many pinches, she decided another kind of touch was necessary. She brushed two fingers across the pillar, found it cool and smooth from erosion.

The stone moved with a sound like a shifting fault line, and Ebenezer jumped back as if scalded, only half aware the follow spot had found her once again. A woman now stood in the pillar's place—or something like a woman.

As Ebenezer stared, the light on the stranger shifted to a pleasing honey glow. Her hair was a tangle of sage and tumbleweeds with cactus blossoms, morning glories, and the occasional wagon wheel and chrome fender caught up in its whorls. Her body was a study in red-veined sandstone and the bones of dinosaurs, polished, sleek, and naked as noon. Ebenezer blushed away from pebbled nipples and taut belly, turning her gaze instead to the blue-sky eyes.

"You know who I am," the sandstone woman said.

Ebenezer knew the answer in her bones.

“Utah,” she whispered.

“Its genius, yes.” The desert-woman smiled, her mouth full of sego lily petals. Her laugh was as warm and rich as her scent, which engulfed Ebenezer like a weather system.

“But...” she stammered. “How...?”

The desert-woman held aloft one lime-striped hand.

“You spent your summers wandering through my valleys, and your winters saddened by the white death enshrouding me. You hiked along my spine and picked sparkling rocks from my hair. As you slept, I soothed you with cricket song and stars, and when you wept, my hand lay always on your head.” Utah looked at her with eyes as clear as mountain streams. “I heard you. Even across this blinking continent, I heard you. And I came.”

Ebenezer’s mouth closed, opened, closed. She briefly envisioned Martha Cratchit then shooed away the image.

“But why...?”

One finger grazed her cheek, and it was rough and warm and so very red.

“You often looked into my eyes and showed me hope. But now your face is thin, and want is written on your brow in ash.”

“I remember,” Ebenezer looked away. “If this is a dream, it’s a sad one.” *Like everything*, she wanted to add, but it sounded like bad melodrama.

“Not all sad,” the Genius of Utah said as if she had heard anyway. Her tumbleweed hair shifted as she lowered one great hand. “Come with me.”

“Where?” she asked suspiciously.

“Where else but home?”

Ebenezer halted in mid-step.

“It’s not home anymore. Here is home now.”

“And where is here, exactly?”

Ebenezer looked around the stage. At all points, it expanded into carmine shadow. She recalled the warehouse where she had performed three years past, which a now-deceased company had converted into a black box.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But it isn’t *there*.”

Utah smiled, and not unkindly.

“When you can’t find yourself, where better to look than in the past? And home is not one place, Ebenezer. Home is your history. No matter how far you range away, you cannot forget it or divorce it. You cannot leave it behind like a candy wrapper any more than you may discard your heart and keep on walking.”

“But I’ve left it before!” Ebenezer snapped. “And I had the best reason there is!”

“I know. I’ve watched you try to drop your past in a trashcan over and over, and watched you go back and pull it out again just as many times.” The spirit shook her head, as if her pity were interlaced with something more. “Now, won’t you come home with me? The pie is getting cold.”

“What pie?”

But the heady air now swirled with the smells of pumpkin, whipped cream and allspice, and something...

Something like a Utah winter.

“My time is as long as your history,” the genius said. Her voice was clear as mountain air.

Another glance at her surroundings was enough; there was no going back to her apartment. As if grasping a rattlesnake, Ebenezer took the offered hand.

The lighting shifted, and the empty theatre dissolved.



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