



# SECOND CHANCE

A Ghost story  
for Christmas

**TOM GOYMOUR**

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By  
TOM GOYMOUR

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Published 2016

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They say Christmas is a magical time of year. I used to think that it was just for kids and the adults were there to make up the numbers. I don't think that any more. But there is certainly something very mysterious about the great Christian festival. I am testament to that now for sure. Perhaps, deep down inside we all know this really but don't always care to admit it.

Maybe, that's what I was really doing when I went out that Christmas Eve – looking for something magical to happen. We had all heard the rumours over the years about what lies at the edge of the forest but I never found anyone who had ever come across the place . . . or its mythical inhabitants. Never that is, until that night . . .

## Second Chance

December 24<sup>th</sup> 1975

It's only a few degrees above zero but what the heck, I have to get out of this place. It must seem to them as if I'm not looking forward to any of it . . . Christmas I mean. When you are really depressed you can't look forward to anything, at least, not in the proper sense. So here I am, thirty-three years old and still living at home with Mum and Dad. Right now I've just about had enough, so I walk . . . and walk. This is what I always do when stuff really gets to me.

An hour or so will be enough, then I can return for that Christmas drink with my parents before they turn in for the night. Mum has spent most of the evening playing records on the stereo. Well, okay, I get it's her early Christmas present from Dad and she wants to play some Christmas music, but every single hit? I don't think Dad likes it so much either. I've got some of those recent releases ringing through my head right now. They are not so bad really . . . Mum and Dad. To be fair, they've kept me at their modest accommodation since my childhood, without question, and, deep down I know they care. But right now I need to be out of here.

My hands are deep in my pocket as I stare at the path sprawling in front of me leading out of the village and into the countryside. The glare from the street lights reflects even more as I realise the ground is starting to freeze and glints of hard moisture are throwing back the reflected light. Boy, it is cold now. The dwelling places become fewer as I realise I'm nearly out of the village but then I see the silhouette of a couple in their kitchen larking about and they seem happy. I stop for a second and I can hear them laughing. I think of who I might be spending some time with and having fun with right now . . . and I can think of no one. I've no close friends, I don't socialise much at all, I don't know how to any more ever since that time – *but no, let's not go there* I say to myself. Getting back into my stride I walk on.

I think of last Christmas, and the Christmas before and I remember how much the same they were – just me and mum and dad, then sister Ellie and auntie Jean came over for dinner. Ellie used to stay a couple of nights but she got married eighteen months ago and now she has a little one on the way. *Family*, I think, and of how I haven't got one . . . at least, not one of my own . . . I mean a partner and kids. I pull myself together saying to myself almost out aloud; *That was one night, years ago*. Now I get that nagging guilty feeling . . . you know the one – when you are full of self-pity inside, but you know there are so many worse off than you. I start to walk a little faster, now there is rain in the air – so cold.

As I hit the darkness of the countryside I realise that I am relying on the light from occasional passing cars to see by, but I don't care. I will come to the edge of the forest in about half a mile or so then I can turn back. I start to think about that late night Christmas drink and my belly rumbles, I'm hungry too. The rain turns to sleet, and I stand and watch it for a minute pulling up my collar. The sleet turns to small flakes of snow. Snow on Christmas Eve! When I was a kid I would have given almost anything for this, I would have swapped it for one of my best presents – maybe two or three! But now, I hate it, I'm cold and tired.

I am considering turning back when I see it: A light in the distance coming from the edge of the forest. I am intrigued and I go towards it to have a closer look as I don't recall there being anything there that would be casting such a light.

Then something strange happens, my feet start to feel numb and at the same time my boots slip and crunch . . . snow . . . but how quickly it has fallen! I realise the flakes are thicker now. I think it's getting lighter but when I look up I see that a white blanket already covers the fields and is reflecting the light. My mind takes me back to a similar night of many years ago, the snow laid heavy then. Again, I dismiss the memory as my curiosity takes over. So I walk on towards this light and as I get within about two a hundred and fifty yards of it I can see it is a porch light on what looks like a small building bearing a cross – perhaps a chapel on the edge of the forest! I look, and I think: It must have always been here, but why did it take me so long to see the light it looked so wrong, but now, it seems so right. I walk on – towards the light.

As I get closer I can see someone coming out of the porch. The figure hovers around a bit before going back inside the building. He hasn't seen me. (I think the figure is a man) I don't know why but I decide to go up to the doorway of the building. The cross on the apex of the red-slatted porch-way is now iced in white fluffy snow and hardly any of the roof slates are free of it. The door is slightly open and I can hear voices – singing – a choirboy is singing *Once in Royal David's City*. The sound is so clear and so perfect. Not knowing what I should do or what I think to it all I do what any sensible chap would do - I stand and freeze. After a few seconds I am faced by a small man dressed in robes, smiling towards me. He beckons me with his heavily robed arm, and by his dress, and the graceful movement he makes, and a faintly detectable cross symbol on the front of his robe I guess that he is a priest. I find myself following him into the building.

"Please, do come into the warm, you must be freezing."

I shiver. I am. I stand in the porch and look around me and for a second, just for one brief moment it seems familiar. Then the slightly balding foreign-sounding middle-aged man of small stature speaks again:

"Please take a seat and stay a minute, we must warm you." He throws me a firm smile.

I look around and immediately I have questions. The room is small, maybe twenty foot long at most and less in width. I had expected larger. Wooden benches stretch across half the room, there are candles everywhere but no

other lights. A raised platform sits at one end, this bears two taller candles – one each side. Adorning every wall are pictures, and what look like hand-painted icons. I vaguely surmise that there might be a back entrance or an alcove of some sort as there is a curtain pulled across between two small stone pillars. But, something is wrong and I have to ask:

"That singing I heard, where was it coming from?"

The small man that I can now see is of dark hair and slightly yellow-tanned skin turns his head with a grin and points to a small box in the corner of the room.

"We don't have the room for a choir, and there hasn't been anyone wanting to come to here to sing for a very long time." He laughs out loud and throws his hands into the air and I realise all the sound had come from that box in the corner.

*This sure is a strange little place* I think to myself, and I wonder what he is doing here, but I don't get the chance to ask before he speaks again.

"Tell me, What brings you out on this very night of Christmas." He speaks with a purposeful tone that I find immediately captivating.

"I've just been walking, I don't live far away," I reply, and I see that he looks at me as if he doesn't find that explanation plausible, so I continue: "I'm from the village . . . my folks are at home, I'll be heading back there soon."

"You live with your parents?" The small man of faith asks.

"Yes, it's all good though." I don't know what else to say but then he hits the nail when he tells me that it *isn't* all good! He says it can't be so or else I wouldn't be here now! I take a moment to try and think how to respond and he turns in his seat and looks towards the curtain as if expecting something. Then he says,

"Would you like some hot soup?" I crumble with a smile. I don't need to answer him, he is already calling to someone and I realise we are not alone.

"Susan, Susan." He calls, "Can we get some soup? We have a visitor."

A woman appears, she is a very attractive woman – perhaps in her mid-thirties. She hands me a cup of broth and points to a plate in the corner asking me through her gesture if I would like any bread with my soup. She smiles as I say I would. When she has given me the roll of bread she

disappears behind the curtain between the stone pillars without having spoken a word. Somehow, now I feel slightly more at ease.

All this time this Priest guy is looking me hard in the eye and I sense that he knows something of my story.

"Life has been difficult for you at times hasn't it." I sip my soup and try the defensive answer.

"Well, yes, suppose at times, but hasn't it been so for all of us." I try and grin as I speak these words. He leans forward and says;

"No, David, what I mean is your story contains something deeper than most, something that perhaps has caused you to lead your life the way you do."

*Jesus! That was freaky . . . how did he know my name? Then I start putting two and two together and making five . . . he must know my parents – he knows I still live with them!*

Then the little man of mediterranean descent preaches to me:

" God is always there for everyone, our sins can be forgiven. We all need to talk through our problems."

Now he is just coming out with all the stuff you might expect from a Catholic priest. So, I start to get a bit tetchy and defensive. Why do I need to tell him any more, he seems to know enough about my business already? I don't need to do this. I don't have to be here. I came here by choice.

"I'm not much one for talking," I say, "God and Me, we have our little chats." I reply.

Then he asks:

"What do you like to do in your spare time?" I find this a strange question but I answer him all the same. I tell him about last week when I did ten hours straight on the X-box. While I talk he presses both hands together in the praying position and rests them on his clean-shaven chin, nodding his head knowingly. I'm thinking well it's okay for him to spend hours doing his boring stuff, I mean, you're not telling me that he hasn't ever had one of those prayer marathon things . . . what do they call them . . . Vigils isn't it? What's wrong with any of it . . . playing or praying?

I find myself telling him more stuff and it feels like he is judging me. *Thou shalt not judge* I seem to remember being an important Christian value. Now I

am thinking I will leave. I don't feel comfortable opening up to this guy any more.

Then, suddenly, he reaches forward and places his hand on my non-soup drinking arm and says something that stops me in my tracks.

"You've lost someone haven't you. It may have been a long time ago, it may have been a brief affair, but the pain is always there."

And then that piece of your life that you never want to remember, (we all have it somewhere – that time of raw emotion when something has gone terribly wrong), for me it comes rising back to the surface of my mind. How does he know? I put my soup down on the nearby table and I feel a sense of sweet surrender.

I actually want to tell him now but I can't get any words out.

It was one night twelve years ago. You know, I didn't even know her name, I just knew that things were never going to be the same. I felt so bad about it afterwards I could never get myself in that situation again.

"Listen." Says the priest. "I have to go now, but I'm going to leave you in capable hands. Susan!" He calls, and she comes. He crosses the room to a coat stand and puts on a long dark overcoat and scarf, and so I look across towards the woman smiling back at me.

The woman waits until we can hear the clunk of the chapel door shutting behind him then she tells me to finish my soup because we are going out. I look surprised and she grips my shoulders, gives me a shake and tells me It's Christmas and we are going to party. I am a little taken aback, but something about this woman makes me feel much more comfortable than I felt with the mediterranean guy.

I ask her to tell me about the place as we walk out of the chapel and through the now deep, snow-filled clearing. She swishes her scarf around her neck, throws her head back and laughs and tells me it is just a Chapel on the edge of the forest and that everybody has seen it . . . except me! She laughs again and it starts me thinking. Then she tells me about Father Rodrigues and how you can't take everything he says seriously and how he thinks he knows it all. I agree with her and she says she doesn't trust him. I start to preach a little to her about how I think everyone should do what they like with their lives as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else and that Father Rodrigues is just

another priest set in his ways who thinks he knows it all because he can always play the 'God' card. She stops and faces me and her expression changes. I can see that she is cross as she tells me that Father Rodrigues has helped her and that I really better remember that. We walk some more but miterer of us speak for a while.

Her coat is old-fashioned and I notice she had pulled on a woolly hat but the hair that flows out from the side of it is fine and fair. I am losing my battle with her . . . the battle I have fought with myself over the years never to acquaint with another of the opposite sex. But this woman, Susan . . . where is she taking me?

I am about to ask her when we hear a thud and a clank. We both look up and see we have reached where the road, pathway and grass verge have been fused by the covering of snow with no visible division. Clearly this is what has caused the collision. A car has skidded into a cyclist who is now lying on the floor. The car engine revs loudly, the driver spins the vehicle and successfully makes a quick one-eighty, and in no time has left the scene. He leaves a man down on the cold white. She looks across and tells me we have to get to places and need to keep moving. I look at her, I am horrified so I point to the man and I say we have to check him over. She says I must be quick but do what I have to do.

I pull the cyclist to his feet, he is fairly shocked but unhurt, I offer him a cup of hot soup feeling sure we could oblige but also secretly hoping he would turn down the offer. He did. We continued on our way and I asked her why she didn't want to stop and she said that she left it up to me because her job is to get us to the party. Right now I feel a little let down by this girl, she seems keen on taking me somewhere, and strangely, for the first time in a long while I feel grateful – happy even . . . but the guy could have been really hurt.

The memory of someone getting hurt on a snowy night haunts me. What a girl, what a night! And I let it slip through my fingers. I can't bear to think about it any more so I try and change my own subject by asking how much further it is to go. She says not far, and as she turns and smiles I glimpse her face as we pass near a street light. She looks different – perhaps more attractive than I had first realised, and not as old.

We have walked around the woodland and now are nearly back in the village – my village, I realise I am losing my bearings, but everything is looking different swamped in the Christmas snow. She tells me that the time is nearly upon us, and I agree and say that Christmas Day must soon be here. Looking me in the eyes she says she doesn't mean Christmas. I don't get time to ask her what she does mean as she pulls me back sharply into the shadows. I follow her gaze. She points. A dark figure is standing back in the trees about seventy-five yards away, I can't see who it is but this girl, Susan, seems suddenly a little frightened and says how she can't trust him. I ask in a normal voice if she thinks she recognises the figure and she places her hand over my mouth and whispers back that we must remain frozen to the spot and not make a sound, and that he must not see us. I obey, letting her take control. The figure approaches and I wonder if he has seen us. She tells me it is him and if she is seen she doesn't know what the future will hold for her. I think she is being a bit dramatic. She just looks at me, only her eyes speak, but now I'm not understanding what they are saying. Then he calls out. He *has* seen us. She wastes no time in grabbing my hand and together we break into a run. I look back and see that he is chasing after us. This is pretty weird and I'm not understanding but as she grips my hand tighter somehow I feel safe with her.

"Susan, wait, you must be sure my child." I know the voice, and it sounds desperate. She doesn't reply, we just run on, deeper into the forest moving faster with every stride. Everywhere around me seems a little brighter now but she is very worked up about the mysterious Father Rodrigues and she says again how she doesn't trust him and that now there is no turning back and we have to get away.

"For all our sakes be sure." He calls out, but Father Rodrigues is falling back. This time I think he sounds almost triumphant. I tell her that he has given up as she drags me further and faster, her breathing is laboured now and she can't reply. Relentlessly she hauls me along with the effort of a woodman pulling a yule log through the snow.

I start to hear music and now my head hurts, she tells me it isn't far now. The sound is a distant beat but it is becoming quickly louder. Her head is down and she won't look at me, and it seems like she isn't going to ease off

until we get there. I tell her it is all right and that the little priest is way behind us, but she just pulls me harder. All I can feel is the rush and the rolling bolt of thunder, spinning my head around as now it pounds. There is now the distant sound laughter coming from the building that lays in front of us. Pop music is blaring out, and now I see a light – the light that is guiding us and I realise that we have walked round in circles.

I recognise an early Beatles song as it rattles through from verse to chorus. I see the doors are open. Finally, she eases her grip and now she slows a little. She lets go of my hand and walks in front – almost skipping on the crisp fresh snow as she turns back and beckons me in.

'Oh no you don't' I say, figuring if we are going to this party then I want to be the first in. I leap in front of her and I am standing in that porch again . . . the porch that seems strangely familiar. I look into the room beyond and see that there are dozens of people dancing and laughing – having fun. A band plays where I expected to see an altar and the room is much larger. The party is in full swing and the people there are dressed strangely, *a bit out of date* I think to myself. Still, being here . . . it seems so right. I enter the room gazing from left to right just trying to take it all in.

We stand side by side in the doorway and I have a moment to unload what else is bothering me, so I remind her that she said Father Rodrigues had helped her and yet she doesn't trust him. She turns and looks at me with her woolly hat still pulled down to her eye line. She says he taught her to have faith but sometimes she still isn't sure and if he gets things wrong tonight she would never be able to forgive him. I don't get her, but all the same I answer as best I can, saying sometimes you just have to trust others . . . if he does get it wrong, surely everybody deserves a second chance!

The band start up another 'oldie' and I get a shiver running down my spine, what a night this is turning out to be. I ask her if she knows this one but I get no reply. I turn to my left . . . and she is gone! I look around and figure she must have darted into the action ahead of me, so I go in and start scanning the corners, the table seats, the dance floor. I look for half a minute or more before I then see her, outside in the porch again, and she makes her way back in.

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I got a funny feeling when she walked into the room, She looked so beautiful. As she strolled over to me I felt so happy, what a very special time for me this is. Then, just when everything seemed to be turning out to be so good it returns – that flashback – the place in my mind I don't want to go to – not now, not ever! But I can't help it. As I recall, it ended much too soon:

*I should have stopped her taking the stuff instead of laughing it off and then watching while a couple of low-lives moved in on her. Well, what was I supposed to do . . . claim her as mine and get myself beaten up? It was easier to play along, I thought she'd be all right, surely she would, but I was wrong, I was so horribly wrong. She puked up, and they just laughed. I laughed along too at first until I realised she wasn't moving. She just laid there on the dance floor and nobody thought anything of it. The two guys left her . . . I was going to move over to help her . . . wasn't I? I'm sure I was, but then there was another guy . . .*

I freeze as the memories flood back to me. I remember saying to her 'I don't even know your name' and she just smiled and said this was 'our night.' I try to remember the third man. It is not clear, but something about tonight is helping me to remember.

I recall the small guy standing over her, and I'm sure he knelt and whispered something. Then, as soon as I looked up, he was gone!

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Now, she walks over to me, she reaches out and holds my hand. I am shaking. I look her in the eyes and she says

"Don't you remember me?"

For a moment I can't answer her. I stare around, trying to see beyond the room and its incessant noise. My mind looks out through the walls . . . to the snow laden forest beyond where we were standing not long ago. I peer into her eyes and I feel so fresh and full of life again, but I can't answer her:

"Where are we?" I ask of her, gripping her arms.

"Don't you know?" She replies.

I can't respond.

She smiles up at me,

"It's late December - back in '63" she says.

Still I can't reply.

"Now," she says, "everybody deserves a second chance. You better come good my man, my life depends on it!"

My attention is diverted towards someone the other side of the room smiling at us both . . . a much younger looking Father Rodrigues is raising his glass.

"Merry Christmas" he calls out "To this one . . . and many more to come."

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### **Author's note:**

The inspiration to pen Second Chance comes from a ballad by The Four Seasons released in December 1975 looking back at one very special night for a young man 12 years earlier. My spooky seasonal tale has its own spooky twist on what might have been. There is a message for all of us in this story.

[Oh What A Night](#) is the song, and these are the words. Did you notice some of them are woven into the story itself?

Oh, what a night

Late December back in sixty three

What a very special time for me

As I remember, what a night

Oh, what a night, you know I didn't even know her name

But I was never gonna be the same

What a lady, what a night

Oh, I, I got a funny feelin' when she walked in the room

Oh my, as I recall it ended much too soon

Oh what a night, hypnotising' mesmerising me  
She was everything I dreamed she'd be  
Sweet surrender, what a night  
I felt a rush like a rollin' ball of thunder  
Spinning' my head around n' takin' my body under

Oh, what a night  
Oh, I, I got a funny feelin' when she walked in the room  
Oh my, as I recall it ended much too soon

Oh, what a night  
Why'd it take so long to see the light  
Seemed so wrong, but now it seems so right  
What a lady, what a night

I felt a rush like a rollin' ball of thunder  
Spinning' my head around n' takin' my body under  
Oh what a night  
Oh what a night  
Oh what a night  
Oh what a night

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If you have enjoyed this short story then please tell me what you enjoyed about it. You can reach me here:

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