A Christmas Carol

by Ignaz Wisdom (ignaz)

Summary

IN PROSE. Being a Ghost Fic of Christmas. By Ignaz Wisdom. (This is probably not exactly what you think it is, but it's close enough--with, I hope, some surprises.)

Notes

This is set in 2011. I started writing it longer ago than I care to remember. Jes was a wonderful cheerleader and very thorough beta; all remaining problems are mine. Happy Holidays, Rymon fandom!
It never really got cold in Los Angeles. After fifteen years, he was used to it: 70 degrees in December, palm trees decked out in Christmas lights and molded plastic Santa Clauses wearing Bermuda shorts. Still, even after all that time, it never really felt like December to him until he was back at his parents’ home in Atlanta—and these days he never made it back any earlier than the day before his birthday. He was on his way now, leaving the E! building flanked by the two bodyguards they’d assigned to him ever since his first credible death threat. His phone was pressed against his ear.

“I’m at home until the 26th, then I’m in New York until the second,” he said.

“You’re going to New York the day after Christmas?” Simon’s voice was snide and incredulous.

“I need to be there a few days early to prep for the show.”

“Why? All you do is show up, have your hair done, and count numbers off a teleprompter. Here, let me: ‘Ten, nine, eight—’“

“That’s not all I do, Simon.” He paused, winced, and then added: “And I don’t get to do ten to midnight, anyway. Dick does. I get twenty to eleven. It’s in the contract.”

Simon laughed in his ear.

“It’s his show,” Ryan said, with deference for Dick Clark and annoyance reserved solely for Simon. “But I have production responsibilities. My name is part of the title. I have to be there—”

“Very well. If that’s how you choose to spend your holiday, that’s your prerogative. I’ll be jet skiing in Barbados. Your loss.”

Ryan tried not to scowl; it would give him wrinkles. “I have to work, Simon. I have responsibilities. You know, you could always come up to New York—”

“And do what? Meet up for dinner and a fuck?”

“You’ve traveled further for less,” Ryan muttered.

Simon sighed, deeply put-upon. “I could possibly stop over in Atlanta—”

“No,” Ryan said quickly. “Absolutely not. What would that look like, you coming to my parents’ house for Christmas?”


Ryan made a frustrated noise and shoved the Blackberry into his back pocket. He had no idea when Simon had got it into his head that they needed to see each other over Christmas. Simon had always been spoiled and petulant, but it had never bothered him before that they didn’t see one another between Christmas and New Year’s. They’d see each other not long after. And anyway, Ryan was given to understand that it wasn’t that kind of relationship.

Or at least it hadn’t been. He had to admit that the last few years had been strange for them. Less sniping at each other, for one. Maybe after eight years they’d run out of things to argue about.

And despite their being by no means “exclusive,” neither of them had been with anyone else since longer ago than Ryan could remember. He didn’t like to think of it as “settling down,” but from a
distance, that’s what it was starting to look like.

And he would have liked to have Simon with him for Christmas, just once. In all the years they’d been together—off and on—they’d never once shared the holiday, always going their separate ways to spend it with their respective families and friends. They would exchange gifts before or after, whenever they got a chance to see each other, and Ryan would typically go home to Atlanta while Simon would fly back to England or take his mother, brother’s family, and various friends somewhere warm and tropical. Either way, when Christmas came, they were always apart. Ryan had been more or less okay with it, and he’d always thought Simon felt the same way.

He had reached his car. He wished both the E! guards a happy holiday before getting in and driving off. He had a flight to catch. He could worry about Simon’s drama later.

As usual, the Christmas season started the second he stepped into his mom’s open arms back at the old house in Atlanta, breathing in the scent of gingerbread cookies and her familiar perfume.

His sister was already there, and as always, it was just the four of them: his little family, celebrating his birthday and Christmas the same as they’d done for years. Of course, there were years when things were different. Last year he’d taken them all to South Beach for the weekend. The year before that, his grandmother had been there. And there was a stretch when Meredith would bring home whatever guy she’d been dating.

Ryan never brought anyone home.

He ran for an hour on the treadmill on Christmas Eve morning, having decided years ago that even the combination of Christmas Eve and his birthday wasn’t worth throwing off his workout routine. Later, he and Meredith wrapped last-minute gifts at the kitchen table, Ryan stopping every few minutes to check his email. Meredith shot him a look every time he glanced at the Blackberry.

“There’s this thing,” she said, affixing a piece of Scotch tape to a corner of wrapping paper, “called a vacation. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

“I have stuff for New Year’s,” Ryan said, still distracted by an email, trying to pretend he didn’t hear the whine in his own voice.

“I’m sure they can manage without you for a couple of days,” Meredith said.

“It’s hopeless,” their mom said, swanning around the kitchen like June Cleaver. “He’s a workaholic. We’ll never cure him.”

“I’m done wrapping,” Ryan said to prove that he could multitask, indicating a newly trimmed box. The structural integrity of the wrapping paper and tape left something to be desired, but it only had to last about 24 hours anyway. He was satisfied.

“W’e’re going to take that thing away from you and hide it,” Meredith threatened.

Ryan cradled the phone to his chest and made an unhappy face. “But it’s my birthday,” he said.

“All the more reason,” his mom answered.

He hadn’t heard from Simon since their last call, but that wasn’t unusual. Simon could go on epic sulks that would last for days when he didn’t get his way. Ryan wasn’t worried about it, really, except that he knew Simon was in Barbados with Sinitta and her kids, and when that was the case he usually sent Ryan frequent updates ranging from photos of his godchildren to snide comments on Snit’s behavior or wardrobe choices. To get nothing but silence from Simon was putting Ryan
in a mood he didn’t want to examine too closely, but he wasn’t going to be the one to apologize first. He shouldn’t have to. Work was a priority for both of them, always had been—the first and most important thing in their lives. Relationships would come and go, but a career—an empire—was forever. That was security, safety, all the things Ryan wanted out of life, and Simon was the same. Neither of them would compromise their careers for a boyfriend.

Ryan went to sleep that night in his childhood bedroom, his Blackberry on the table beside him. He checked it again one last time before turning out the light: zero messages.

He startled out of sleep, pushing himself up with his elbows in the darkness, alert but disoriented. It took him a moment to pinpoint what had woken him so suddenly, but then it came again: a sound, distant but distinct, of metal clanking against metal.

He tensed, barely breathing, listening hard for the slightest noise. Someone in the house? He’d never worried about break-ins before, although he’d been more cautious since he’d had to get the restraining order against that stalker. His parents’ address wasn’t hard to find, and their security system was modest at best. Had somebody followed him here and broken into the house? Had he put his entire family in danger?

He was a second away from getting out of bed and investigating when he heard a heavy footstep on the bedroom floor.

The blood in his veins ran cold. Without thinking, he reached for the bedside lamp and switched it on, and then recoiled with a small yelp.

Standing at the edge of the bed, pale gray, translucent, dressed in a full tuxedo and covered with dust and cobwebs, draped with iron chains, was his friend and mentor, Merv Griffin.

His dead friend and mentor, Merv Griffin.

“Jesus,” Ryan blurted, “what—oh god,” he whispered, stuttering, unable to believe what he was seeing and yet unable to rationalize it away. Was he dreaming? Hallucinating? There had been something funny in that eggnog; maybe Meredith’s idea of a joke. But the vision in front of him was realer than anything his imagination had ever come up with.

And it was starting to speak.

“Hey, kiddo,” it said.

Ryan’s throat threatened to close, his eyes stinging with tears at the familiar voice, one he hadn’t heard in years and had never expected to hear again. “Oh my god,” he said quietly. “Are you—is this real?”

“Yeah, sorry about the getup,” Merv said, raising his arms with obvious strain and waving at the chains that hung from his body. They rattled and clanked against each other.

Ryan swallowed thickly and nodded, deeply lost.

“Quality cleaners are pretty hard to come by where I’ve been lately,” Merv explained.

Ryan kept on nodding. “Sorry I’m in pajamas?” he guessed, on the verge of crying.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” Merv grinned.

“Oh Christ,” Ryan said.
“I’d love to chat longer, kiddo, but time is money and we’ve got business to attend to,” Merv said.

“Business?”

“Unfortunate business,” Merv said severely. “I’m here to give you a message.”

“No way,” Ryan whispered, already anticipating what was coming next.

“You will be haunted,” said Merv, “by three spirits.”

“No way. Come on. Why me? I’m no Scrooge; I love Christmas. I know I’m not perfect, but I give money to charity, I gave my people time off for the holiday—”

“Your employees, sure. But what about yourself?”

“I took today off,” Ryan protested.

“Bullshit,” Merv’s ghost said. “You’ve been on that blueberry of yours since four in the morning.”

“Blackberry. And some things can’t wait! There’s stuff that has to get done before the end of the year—”

“Like what? Like spending Christmas with your family? Like spending some time with your lover?”

Ryan flinched. “We’ll see each other in January,” he argued. “We’ve got a long weekend planned in St. Lucia.”

“Uh huh. You and him and whatever twenty-year-old strippers your management sends along with you for cover.”

Ryan got angry. “You of all people should know—”

“I do know. I know exactly what it’s like to compromise yourself for your career. I know what it’s like to hide. I know what it’s like to put your work above everything else. More importantly,” Merv said, advancing on Ryan as he cowered under the covers, chains rattling. “I know what it’s like to sacrifice happiness until it’s too late.”

Ryan shuddered, remembering that he was arguing with a ghost. “I’m happy,” he said defensively.

“Like hell,” the ghost answered.

“How would you know?”

“Kiddo, I know you better than you know yourself. Do you remember when we first met?”

Ryan sighed, knowing exactly where this conversation was headed. “I was twenty. I was an idiot.”

“You said you wanted real relationships. Real love. A boyfriend, kids, the whole shebang. You didn’t approve of me sashaying around with the Gabor sisters while secretly porking the pool boys.”

“How could you stand me?” Ryan said. “Why didn’t you throw me under a bus the first chance you got?”
“You were a pain in the neck, but easy on the eyes.”

Ryan waved his hands helplessly.

“The point is, kiddo, there was a time when you wanted more than just a career—when other things were more important to you than money. And you might still be cute, but you’re not getting any younger.”

“I’m thirty-six,” Ryan protested.

“Thirty-seven,” Merv’s ghost said.

Ryan made a face. “All right, fine. What do you want me to do about it?”

“You will be haunted by three spirits—”

“Oh, god—”

“Are you gonna let me get through this or what?” Merv complained. “I don’t have all night.” He cleared his ghostly throat. “You will be haunted by three spirits. Expect the first tonight at one.”

“I’m really busy this time of year, Merv, can’t we schedule them all at once?”

“Will you shut up already? The second will come at two and the third at three. You got that?”

“Got it.” Ryan sighed. He really didn’t have time for this. He got little enough sleep as it was.

“You’re still young, kiddo. Your time isn’t up yet,” the ghost said in a softer tone. “But mine is. Gotta run.”

Ryan sat up straight. “Merv—”

“What is it?”

Ryan didn’t know what it was. He just knew that his friend was back, and he didn’t want to let that go. “Can—can’t you stay?”

The ghost grinned. “You think you’re the only miserable schlub who needs my help tonight?”

“Will I see you again?” The words were out of Ryan’s mouth before he could stop them; he meant them, sort of, even if the idea of being woken up by a ghost again scared the crap out of him.

Merv reached a hand out and touched Ryan’s face, the brush of his fingers like a whisper, like the faintest breeze. It warmed Ryan and chilled him at the same time.

“You won’t see me again, Ryan,” he said. “But I’ll be looking after you. I’ll always look after you.”

The ghost turned and walked towards the bedroom window; with each step, the window slowly raised.

“Usually while you’re in the shower,” the ghost added, and then he disappeared out the window, which promptly slammed itself shut.

Ryan jumped out of bed and ran to the window, to where Merv’s ghost had disappeared. He looked outside, scanning the yard in the moonlight, but there was no trace that anyone was or had ever been there. The new-fallen snow was pristine; not a single footprint could be found.
He backed away from the window, shaking his head. Of all the bizarre dreams to have … but it had been so real. He touched his cheek where he had imagined Merv’s fingers had rested just a moment before, but he could feel no difference.
The First of the Three Spirits

He woke with a start, limbs flailing in his tangled sheets, heart racing. The room was dark and he was alone. “God,” he said, breathing hard, coming down from the panic. He looked at the red digits of the clock beside his bed: 12:59.

He inhaled deeply and forced his breath into a slow, even rhythm. It had been a dream, that’s all. The freakiest dream he’d had in years, but still just a dream. It was Christmas morning and he still had hours left to sleep. Which he would get to, just as soon as he checked his email.

He reached for the phone on the bedside table, but the instant his fingers came into contact, he yanked them back. The Blackberry was on fire. It was practically glowing with heat.

“Hello,” he heard a strange voice say behind him.

Ryan whirled around in bed to see that he was not, in fact, alone.

The creature sharing his bed was human, of that he was fairly certain, but it was as transparent as the Phantom Merv had been in his dream—which he realized, with horror, was still ongoing. Ghost or angel, he wasn’t sure: it was young, almost a child; its hair and clothes were as white as the snow outside, and it radiated with light, which seemed to emanate from the crown of its head. It shimmered in its own radiance. It was sitting with its knees pulled up to its chest and peering at Ryan with interest.

“Shit,” Ryan said, leaping from the bed with such urgency that he didn’t quite manage to get his legs under him. He landed with a thump on his ass on the floor. “Oh my god.”

“There is nothing to fear,” said his visitor from the bed, its voice soft and placid. “I mean you no harm.”

“Who are you?” Ryan asked, still on the floor, inching further and further away from the bed. “What do you want with me?”

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Past,” it said. “I believe you have been expecting me?”

“Sort of,” Ryan admitted. He couldn’t claim he hadn’t been warned.

“Then come,” the ghost said, reaching over the edge of the bed and extending a hand to Ryan, still huddled on the floor. “There is much to do and little time.”

When Ryan didn’t move, the ghost stood up and reached for him, pulling Ryan up by the arm. It was surprisingly strong, and there was something else about it—as if, within its presence, Ryan was compelled to move wherever it commanded.

“Where are we going?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“You will know very soon,” the ghost said.

“I’m not dressed,” Ryan protested.

“Nobody will see you,” the ghost said.

“It’s the dead of winter.”
“It does not matter. You have no need to fear the chill.”

“Oh, crap,” Ryan swore, flinching automatically as the ghost led him through the closed bedroom window, the pair of them gliding through it as easily as through water.

It was the same snowy yard that greeted them on the other side, and yet it was different somehow. It was daylight, to start with, but something else was off as well. Ryan couldn’t put his finger on it right away.

The ghost had been right; Ryan couldn’t feel the cold. It was as if they were encased in a temperature-controlled bubble. Yet he started to sweat as he saw what the ghost had brought him to see: himself as a child, newly seven years old, chubby and bespectacled, bundled in the worst winterwear the early ‘80s had to offer, clumsily assembling a snowman in the front yard.

Ryan choked out a nervous laugh. It was one thing to look at old pictures of himself as a kid, but it was something else altogether to see the real deal, live and in the flesh—or whatever this apparition could be described to be. God, how he had hated that time in his life.

“That was a look, huh?” he joked to the ghost, but the ghost didn’t care.

“The child looks lonely,” it observed, and Ryan shrugged.

“It was an awkward few years.”

The front door opened then, Christmas wreath shaking, and his mother stepped out onto the porch, looking exactly as she had in the early ‘80s, wearing a red wool sweater and balancing his baby sister on her hip.

“Ryan, sweetie,” she called, “why don’t you come inside?”

The boy looked up at his mother. Ryan himself looked away, remembering, and wishing he could forget.

“Dad said he would help me build a snowman for my birthday,” the boy said.

“I know, honey. He’ll be back from work in a few hours,” his mother said. “I’m sure he’ll help you build a snowman then.”

The boy stepped back from his lumpy white creation, appraising it. He dusted the loose snow off his pants and tromped through the yard to the front porch.

“When I grow up,” he said as he climbed the stairs, snow boots stomping, “I don’t want to have to work as much as Dad. So I can spend more time with my kids.”

“I know, sweetie,” his mother said, and led him back inside the house with a hand on his shoulder.

The ghost looked at Ryan. Ryan looked back. “Now I work twice as much as he ever did when I was growing up,” he said. “That’s why I don’t have kids.”

The ghost shook its head. “That is not why you have no children.”

“It’s part of the reason,” Ryan said, defensive.

“Let us move on,” the ghost said.

At the words, the scene in front of them shimmered and changed. The porch and the house disappeared from view, and instead Ryan found himself staring at an all-too-familiar high school
disappeared from view, and instead Ryan found himself staring at an all-too-familiar high school chemistry lab.

“Aw, come on, high school?” he complained to the ghost. “Haven’t I been tortured enough for one night?”

The ghost merely smiled benignly and pointed.

There he was, a teenaged Ryan, slightly thinner but not much less awkward than he’d been as a kid, peering through his thick eyeglasses at a beaker.

“God, I hated chemistry,” the real Ryan said. “I did so bad in that class.”

“There were parts of it that appealed to you,” the ghost reminded him, pointing at the scene again.

His teenaged self was joined at that moment by his lab partner, a taller boy (weren’t they all), holding a beaker of his own.

Ryan flushed, then sulked. “Don’t mock,” he told the ghost, who only smiled enigmatically once again.

The lab partner leaned well into teenage Ryan’s personal space to compare beakers. Grown Ryan recalled exactly what that had done to him at the time.

“That young man is quite attractive,” the ghost noted.

“Stephen Duncan,” Ryan sighed. “God, he was gorgeous.”

“You were attractive, too,” the ghost said. Ryan glared at it, and it widened its eyes and raised its ghostly hands in defense.

“He played football,” Ryan recalled.

“So did you,” the ghost said.

“Barely.”

Ryan watched his teenage self fumble with the beaker and spill its contents on the table. Stephen wrinkled his gorgeous nose and laughed a gorgeous laugh.

“He later moved to New York,” the ghost said.

“I know.”

“I know.” Ryan sighed. “I Facebooked him. Should have hit that while I had a chance, right? If I had a chance.”

The bell rang and students began emptying the room. Stephen stayed behind, helping Ryan’s awkward teenage doppelganger clean up the mess.

“Are you going anywhere over Christmas break?” Stephen asked him.

Teenage Ryan froze for a moment and then recovered. Grown Ryan winced. It had taken him years after high school before he learned to stop freaking out every time a cute guy paid attention to him.
“Nah,” said teenage Ryan. “Just staying here with my family. You?”

“Nope,” Stephen said. “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

Teenage Ryan refused to even look at him. “Yeah, maybe,” he half-stuttered.

Stephen stared at him, watching him throw things into his backpack. Then Stephen reached into his own jacket pocket.

“Hey,” he said, handing Ryan a plastic-wrapped candy cane. “Merry Christmas.”

“That seems suggestive,” the ghost observed.

Teenage Ryan muttered a Merry Christmas back. Grown Ryan smacked himself in the face at the stupidity.

“It would seem you had more than just a chance,” the ghost said quietly. “Let us go.”

This scene faded, too, just as the last had done, the stale fluorescent overheads dimming and the room going black, only to lighten again on a living room, decked out for the holidays, filled with people laughing and chatting.

“Oh my god,” Ryan said.

He recognized the space as his old friend Sara’s apartment in Pasadena—and there was Sara herself, arm linked tightly with Ryan himself, at 21 or 22, he couldn’t really tell or remember. She was leading him through the room, face alight with energy.

“Ryan,” she said, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet. This is my dear friend—”

“Mark,” the real Ryan quietly said.

Mark took Ryan’s hand in his own and shook it. Firm grip and a warm smile. Ryan remembered; Mark would have been a few years older than Ryan was then, a few years younger than Ryan was now. Good-looking, fit, well dressed. Ryan had to give Sara credit; she’d always had good taste in gay men.

“Mark,” Sara said, “this is Ryan,” and the younger Ryan smiled back, his real smile, and that was all she wrote.

The scene flickered in front of them and accelerated, the players’ movements faster and faster until a burst of white light obscured everything. When the light faded, Ryan and the ghost were standing in another living room at another Christmas. Two days before it, actually, if Ryan remembered correctly—and this wasn’t a Christmas he was likely to ever forget.

The lights were low in Mark’s house, with just the Christmas tree and a few candles illuminating the room. They were on the couch together, Mark sitting, Ryan reclining with his head in Mark’s lap. Mark’s fingers carded through his hair.

“You know what I love most about you?” Mark asked quietly. Ryan hummed in response. “I love that no matter how bad a day I’ve had, when I see you, you never fail to make me smile.”

“Not my cute butt?” Ryan asked.

“That’s a close second. Hey.” He slipped a small box into Ryan’s hand. “Merry Christmas, Ry.”

The real Ryan almost couldn’t bear to watch, but he felt the ghost’s hand on his arm, like a chill
breeze, and he opened his eyes to look.

“What is this?” the younger Ryan asked.

“Key to the house.”

“I already have a key to your house.”

“You have a spare key. This is your key. I want you to move in with me.”

The Ryan on the couch sat up and stared at the brass key. “Mark. I—I don’t know what to say.”


“I can’t.”

Mark looked steadily at him, unsurprised, and then ducked his head and looked at his hands.

“We’ve been together for three years. You spend more nights over here than at your place. You have at least half the closet. You’ve met my parents. It doesn’t make sense to pay for two places, Ryan.”

“It makes sense for me,” the younger Ryan said.

“Why? Because you need your space? Because my taste in window treatments sucks? Because your apartment is so great? Because I gotta tell you, Ryan, your place is kind of a nightmare—”

“Because I can’t live with you, Mark! We can’t have the same address,” Ryan said. “What would—what would that look like?”

Mark’s eyes were cold. “To the neighbors? I’m pretty sure they’re okay with a couple of fags living next door. Or do you mean to the bottom-feeders in Hollywood you so desperately want to work for?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for trying to have a career,” Ryan snapped and stood up. It wasn’t the first time they’d come close to having this argument, just the first time they’d run into it head-on. “Maybe you’d like it better if I just stayed here all the time like a kept boy.”

Mark stood angrily. “Those aren’t the only two options!”

“They are for me! I work in Hollywood, I can’t be like you, I can’t work in an office all day—”

“Why not? You don’t seem to have any problem working in a closet.”

“Screw you.”

“Yeah, sure. You’ve been screwing me since the day we met. All I want is just to be with you, be a normal couple. It’s 1999, Ryan. You’re twenty-five years old—”

“Twenty-four,” Ryan snapped.

“For like twelve more hours, whatever. The point is, you’re an adult. This is who you are. Get over it.”

“You know damn well it’s not that simple,” Ryan said. “It’s not me I have a problem with; it’s out there, where I’m trying to make a living. This isn’t easy for me. But I can’t change the way things are.”
“Yes you can,” Mark said. “Or you could, if you wanted to. But you’d rather lie and get ahead than be honest about who you are.”

Past Ryan didn’t answer, just stormed to the front hall and grabbed his jacket. Mark followed him, with present Ryan and the ghost close behind.

“You know, I knew you’d say no,” he said.

“Then why did you ask?” Ryan shouted. “Just so you could bawl me out? Merry Christmas to you, too.”

“Maybe I wanted to be wrong. Maybe I wanted to believe that you’d prove me wrong, that maybe what we have meant a little bit more to you than what the jackasses at the radio station think of you. Maybe I was hoping for a Christmas miracle,” Mark snarled.

Past Ryan just looked at him, silently. Present-day Ryan remembered all too clearly the anger, the tightness in his throat, choking off anything else he might have said.

He watched as his past self put the house key firmly down on the table by the door, then left through it, slamming it behind him.

Mark still stood in the dark, empty hallway, staring at the closed door. “Goodbye, Ryan,” he said to it. “I hope your work brings you all the happiness you deserve.”

He locked the door from the inside and disappeared up the front stairs.

“Take me home,” Ryan said to the ghost.

The ghost didn’t speak, but the dim lights faded, and in a moment Ryan realized he was back in his childhood bedroom, back in his bed, under the covers. And he was alone: gratefully, terribly alone.
The alarm clock by the side of the bed buzzed, and he jolted awake, lifting his head off the pillow and peering at the digital readout. 2:00 AM. Whose idea of a joke was this?

He reached over and silenced the alarm, realizing at that same exact moment that there was someone else in the room.

“Not again,” he sighed, rolling over onto his back and throwing an arm over his eyes.

Then he pushed himself upright, opened his eyes, and switched on the bedside lamp.

There was someone else in the room, but for the moment a more pressing matter was that this wasn’t the room in which he’d gone to sleep. It looked like Christmas itself had thrown up all over the place. Ivy and holly and who knew what kind of green leaves had grown all up and down the walls, red berries mixed in throughout; everything was covered with a sheen of glitter; and in the center of the room stood a long dinner table, piled high with every manner of food, like a holiday buffet on steroids.

In the corner, in what looked for all the world like a throne, sat a giant.

And not a typical giant, like Joel McHale or Adam Lambert, but a true giant, some eight feet tall and with the girth to match; the figure was so wide around the middle that it could not have squeezed through the bedroom door. It was dressed in a regal-looking green robe, had a thick, dark brown beard, and would have been utterly terrifying if not for the cheerful, almost child-like smile on its face. Ryan wondered if it was PC, with giants, to use the word “jolly.”

The giant beamed at him. “COME IN!” it bellowed. “Come in, and know me better, man.”

Ryan hesitated. On the one hand, he was already in, unless the giant simply meant for him to come closer. On another hand, he wasn’t so sure about the “getting to know him” part. Not that he hadn’t had worse offers.

Ryan approached the giant with tentative footsteps.

“I AM THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT!” the giant boomed. “Never seen the likes of me before, have you?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Ryan had to admit. “Look—Mr. Ghost. With all due respect to you and the no doubt excellent work you do, I more or less know how this is supposed to go. I just made the rounds with your colleague from Christmas Past, and I appreciate the message, truly, but—”

“TOUCH MY ROBE!”

“Uh,” said Ryan, wondering if this was some kind of come-on. “Okay …” He reached out and grabbed a small handful of the massive swath of fabric covering the ghost’s shoulders.

In an instant, the room and all its lavish furnishings were gone. Ryan and the ghost stood instead on a familiar driveway in front of a familiar house in Beverly Hills. Ryan frowned. “This is Ellen and Portia’s house,” he said. “Why here?”

“SHALL WE GO INSIDE?” the ghost asked. It seemed incapable of toning down its voice.

Before Ryan could answer, he found himself inside the spacious dining room, site of so many
dinner parties, where he’d spent countless nights talking over glasses of wine with Portia or Ellen or both. It was where they’d had brunch after Ellen and Portia’s wedding.

Now it was filled with people—Ellen’s mom and brother, Portia’s mom, various family and friends Ryan had met over the years—animated and boisterous over a holiday feast. Ryan and the ghost eavesdropped for several minutes, watching as Ellen’s mom helped her daughter-in-law carry dishes from the kitchen, as Ellen topped off her wife’s glass of wine, the two of them sharing a conspiratorial smile. Ryan pursed his lips, recognizing the feeling in his chest: the same pang of envy he remembered feeling years earlier as he stood by in a small crowd of their closest friends and family and watched them get finally, officially, legally married.

“I get it,” Ryan said. “Gay people in Hollywood can be out and happy. That’s what I’m supposed to take away from this, right? Like I don’t already know?”

The ghost put its giant bear paw of a hand on Ryan’s shoulder in what was probably meant to be a comforting gesture; the weight of it forced Ryan to stoop. “WE CAN GO, IF YOU WISH,” the ghost offered.

“I’ve seen enough,” Ryan said, his eyes still lingering on the sight of Ellen and Portia, fingers entwined under the table as they shared Christmas dinner with their loved ones, until the image faded to black.

But this ghost wasn’t done with him yet. A moment later, they were outdoors again, but no longer in Beverly Hills. It was colder, and it took Ryan a moment in the dark of night to recognize their surroundings.

“San Francisco?” He looked skeptically at the ghost. “Was the last scene not gay enough?”

“COME!” The ghost led him—dragged him, really—up to the window of a house Ryan was fairly sure he’d never seen before. Together, they both peered through the glass.

Inside was another brightly festive Christmas scene, albeit less lavish than the one at Ellen and Portia’s Beverly Hills spread. The tree was strung with popcorn and multicolored lights and surrounded by gifts. Three red and white stockings hung on the mantle over the fireplace. He had to squint to make out the names on them, and his heart sank as he read the name on the first. It sank further when Mark himself entered the room, ten years older but if anything even more attractive than he’d been when Ryan last saw him. The passing years had been good to him.

A moment later, a little girl in a red dress skipped into the room and went immediately to Mark, grabbing his hand in her own two tiny ones. “Daddy-Daddy-Daddy,” she said, smiling and practically shaking with urgency, “can we open a present now, please?”

“It’s not Christmas yet, baby,” Mark said, smiling down at the little girl.

The girl bounced up and down and stood on her toes, nearly climbing up Mark’s arm. “I can’t wait!” she cried. “Please, Daddy? Just one?”

“Yeah, Daddy,” said a male voice from the doorway. Ryan startled to realize that another man was standing there, leaning against the doorframe and smiling as he watched Mark fend off the giddy pleas of what Ryan could only assume was Mark’s daughter. His daughter with … this other guy. This other guy who was calling Mark “Daddy,” this other guy who looked like he could have been Ryan’s doppelganger from 2002.

Ryan felt his shoulders tense. He stretched out his neck and tried to relax. “Jeez,” he said as an aside to the ghost, “typecast much?” But the ghost didn’t seem to understand or care that Ryan’s
ex had replaced him with a nearly identical model.

Why should the ghost care? Why should Ryan care? After all, he had been the one to break up with Mark. And it was a decade ago. He was over it. It was just funny, that was all, that Mark had found a new boyfriend who could have worked as Ryan’s stunt double. And that Mark had, apparently, decided to make a home and a family with him. It was funny.

Their little girl—Mark’s little girl—had flopped down onto the carpet in front of the Christmas tree and was rolling around on the floor, giggling with glee.

“After dinner, Kelsie,” Mark was saying. “You can open one after dinner. Now quit rolling around, you’ll wrinkle your dress. Go put your shoes on, okay?”

“Okay!” the girl jumped to her feet and sped out of the room, pausing only to give a brief but intense hug to the other man in the doorway.

With the child gone, the man in the doorway sauntered over to Mark, who welcomed him with an embrace and a warm, closed-mouth kiss.

“Do you want to open a present after dinner, too?” Mark asked his lover, a familiar tease in his voice.

Ryan turned away from the window. “I can’t watch any more of this,” he said, wiping quickly at his eyes, but not quickly enough. The ghost offered him a handkerchief the approximate size of a bath towel, which Ryan accepted with a small nod of gratitude.

“Kids are a handful, huh?” Ryan asked the ghost. “All that energy. All the attention. Must be exhausting. No thanks.”

The ghost didn’t reply.

Ryan gave it a plaintive look. “Can we go home now?”

“OUR TIME IS NOT YET DONE,” the ghost answered.

The window before them and the home around it faded, turning into a fine mist right in front of Ryan’s eyes before vanishing from view. The cool San Francisco night warmed, the air thickening with balmy heat. Ryan nearly stumbled as he realized where they were: Barbados, in the villa at Sandy Lane, where Simon was spending Christmas, just as he had for the past six years.

Ryan himself had been here more times than he could count. They had made a point of coming here at least once each winter to get away from L.A. and London and have some time together, relatively alone. They’d spend their days riding jetskis across the blue ocean and their nights in the same bed, making up for weeks and months working on separate continents.

Simon was always more relaxed here than anywhere else, at least inasmuch as Simon could ever relax—he still carried on working during their “holidays,” communicating with London and Hollywood via phone and laptop, and Ryan was just as bad if not worse, so he wasn’t in any position to demand that they turn off the computers for even a weekend. But it was in Barbados, and only in Barbados, that Simon seemed to really let go of all the things that troubled him, all the dark clouds that hung over him elsewhere.

And there was the man himself, sitting on the deck overlooking the beach, staring pensively at the sea beyond with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. He wore nice slacks and a white shirt unbuttoned most of the way down his chest—dinner attire, since rumpled—and Ryan ached, with every fiber of his body, to touch him.
He left his ghostly companion behind and approached, quiet on his feet although he knew that Simon couldn’t see or hear him—even though he knew that this was nothing more than a dream. He stood next to Simon, watching him set down his drink, look out at the sea, and stroke his lower lip with his thumb, a habit he’d had for as long as Ryan had known him.

As Ryan watched, Simon picked up his phone, which had been sitting on the table next to him. Ryan leaned in close to see what Simon was doing. He had the text message menu open and was reading the last exchange the two of them had had before Christmas—before their terse phone call as Ryan had headed out for the break.

They’d developed a pattern, not long after they’d first met and become friends, of sending each other a constant barrage of texts—sometimes as many as 30 or 40 a day—serious or completely inane, it didn’t seem to matter. Ryan would get them on the radio, on camera, in the middle of meetings, and it was often a challenge to keep a straight face.

Simon was fiddling with the keys as if composing a new message in his head. He typed an “H” and then paused.

Ryan waited. “Hello”? “How are you”? Simon wasn’t the kind of guy who said “Hey.” Or maybe it was going to be “How the hell could you be so stupid as to spend your Christmas working and avoiding me when you could be here in a tropical paradise, drinking Mai Tais and making hot sweaty love with your boyfriend?”

Simon closed the text window, put the phone aside, and looked back out over the beach again.

He was prone to inexplicable black moods, fits of depression that set in without warning and without real cause, but Ryan didn’t have to question the source of this one.

They both turned at the same moment at a sudden commotion behind them. Stumbling and giggling, Sinitta opened the sliding door leading to the deck and poked her head out. “Simon, love, we’re going to play a game—will you come inside if you’re all done pouting?”

Simon answered in the same eternally aggravated way he always had with her. “I’ll be just another minute,” he said, snatching up his phone and looking at it as if it was the most engrossing thing in the world.

“All right, we’ll wait.” Sinitta said, but Simon didn’t pay her any acknowledgment, so she went back inside without him.

Simon fiddled with the phone for a moment longer, refreshing his email once before navigating back to the text menu and Ryan’s name. Ryan peered over his shoulder and watched as Simon hesitated for just a moment before typing and sending his message.

Happy Christmas

Then he shut the phone off with more gusto than the little thing really needed, stuck it in his back pocket as he stood, and went back inside the villa, leaving Ryan outside with just the ghost for company—just the ghost, a cacophony of chirping insects, and the sound of waves rolling up on the beach.

Ryan looked at the closed sliding door for a long moment before he felt the ghost’s eyes—if ghosts could be said to have eyes—watching him.

Ryan cleared his throat. “I’d be here if I could. I mean, really here, in person. If it was in any way possible ...”
The ghost gave no answer at all.

A moment later, the scene flickered and vanished, and Ryan was back in his bedroom at his parents’ house again, with the ghost—and his festive accoutrements—nowhere in sight. The house was quiet, the room just as it had been before this madness started. It was as if nothing had happened, as if this really had been nothing more than another extension of his bizarre dreams—which, after all, it was.

Ryan exhaled a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding and looked at the clock by the bed: 2:59. The digits blinked over to 3:00. Ryan stared at them for a moment, at the shiny plastic front of the digital alarm clock that caught the reflection of the moonlight through the window—and the reflection of the draped and hooded figure looming directly behind him.

Ryan turned around and his blood ran cold.
The Last of the Spirits

It stood no less than ten feet tall, hideously foreboding and utterly silent, the being inside—whatever it was—concealed by a hooded jet-black cloak, tattered and torn and reeking of rot. Its face, if it had one, was invisible; all of it was shrouded—except for one single, outstretched, skeletal hand.

As Ryan faced it, it began to move toward him with what seemed like preternaturally slow steps, that horrible bone hand still reaching out for him.

The last two ghosts had been fine—scary, okay, but really not that bad, as far as ghosts went—but this one radiated such powerful negative energy that Ryan froze in terror. He couldn’t have fled for anything in the world.

The creature came closer, silent still, and Ryan’s legs gave out, leaving him collapsed on the bedroom floor staring up at the monstrous apparition.

The creature came to a stop when the bottom of its robe hit Ryan’s feet. Now too terrified to crane his neck and look up at it, he pulled his knees to his chest and bowed his head. He started to beg.

“Oh god. Oh god, please. I don’t need this. I really don’t need this. Jesus, Merv, Christ, someone please make this stop ...”

No sound came from above, and after a moment, Ryan was compelled to look up again. The skeletal hand was no longer reaching for him. Instead, it was pointing with purpose at his closed bedroom door. There was an eerie glow emanating from under it, in the small space between the bottom of the door and the hardwood floor.

“That way?” Ryan asked the spirit, his voice shaking. “You want me to go through there?”

The ghost gave no answer, but its pointing hand did not waver.

“Don’t you—can’t you say something?” Ryan pleaded with it, some part of him hoping that hearing the creature speak would ease his fear. The silence was almost as terrifying as the sight.

But still, the ghost did not make a sound.

With some effort, Ryan got to his feet. The spirit did not move and Ryan stumbled a bit, trying not to touch it. He approached the bedroom door, turned the knob, and stepped through it into what had formerly been his parents’ upstairs hall.

It wasn’t his parents’ home that he found on the other side of the door. Rather, it seemed to be the bedroom of a teenage boy—and there was the boy, apparently, about 13 years old, sitting on the bed with his face in his hands, quietly crying. Next to him sat a woman with one arm around the boy’s shoulders and her other hand squeezing his knee. Ryan didn’t recognize the boy, but when the woman turned her head, long blonde hair moving out of her face, he realized with a start that it was his sister—at least twenty years older than she was in reality, but most definitely Meredith. She was smiling, a bit sadly, her face the same but for a few added lines and creases. She began rubbing circles on the boy’s back, and when the boy lifted his head Ryan felt a second surge of recognition at the sight of the face, pink and streaked with drying tears, so similar to Meredith’s—and to his own. His heart caught in his chest and he nearly smiled.

“It’s going to be fine, sweetie,” Meredith said to the boy.

“Don’t tell Dad,” the boy said, almost harshly. He’d stopped crying, but his voice was still shaky.
“Your father won’t care. Don’t take this the wrong way, but we both suspected this for a while. Parents have a way of knowing these things.”

“Oh, god,” the boy said, scrubbing at his face with both hands.

Meredith squeezed his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s all fucked up—”

“Language, Tyler.”

“And I didn’t want to be like this. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to work in Hollywood like you and Uncle Ryan.”

“You are normal, and why can’t you work in Hollywood?”

“Because they don’t let fags in front of the camera, Mom!”

Meredith’s face turned dark. “Don’t you ever use that word again. Do you understand me? And there are lots of successful gay people in the industry—”

“Oh, really?” Tyler demanded. “Then how come Uncle Ryan still has to pretend to like girls?”

Ryan started as a small child appeared in the room’s doorway, a little blonde girl in a purple tutu, no more than seven. She skipped into the room, grabbed a Rubik’s cube from the desk, then flopped onto the floor in front of Meredith, twisting the cube in her tiny hands. Without looking up, she asked, “Why does Uncle Ryan pretend to like girls?”

“Because if people knew he liked boys he’d get fired and he wouldn’t have a job and he’d lose all his money and have to live in a box on the side of the road,” Tyler said, leaning down to snatch the Rubik’s cube back from his little sister.

“Tyler—”

“He could come live with us!” the little girl chirped, looking up at her mother, apparently not bothered by the loss of her toy. “He could sleep in my room!”

Meredith sighed, pasted a patient smile on her face, and bent over to stroke her daughter’s hair. “Amy, sweetie, Uncle Ryan isn’t coming to live with us. He’s just fine in his own house. But I’m sure he’ll be glad to know that he can sleep in your room the next time he comes to visit. Now run along and play—your brother and I have something we need to talk about.”

“Okay,” Amy said reluctantly, pushing herself to her feet and scampering out of the room. Ryan watched her go, his heart aching.

He took another step further into the room, closer to the bed where his sister and her son were still sitting. He looked around him as he did, noticing the standard detritus of a teenage boy’s bedroom: comic books, karate trophies, toys and knickknacks leftover from childhood, posters for bands Ryan had never heard of—likely because, in his world, in 2011, their members weren’t even born yet. Much like his nephew and niece.

*His nephew and niece.* His head swam. He’d always known that Meredith would have children. She’d always wanted children, like him, but unlike him, of course, she would actually get the chance to have them. She would find someone, date and fall in love a normal person, get married like a normal person, have children like a normal person—children who looked like her and
possibly like Ryan, children who looked up to her and Ryan, who came to them for help and guidance and support. None of which, at least in this instance, Ryan was in any position to give.

The wall over Tyler’s desk was plastered with pictures: family photos—Tyler with his mother, his sister, and a good-looking man Ryan could only assume was his father (Meredith’s husband! He had a brother-in-law!)—and snapshots of Tyler with friends. Among them, Ryan saw at least three photos of himself—aged considerably but not badly, he was gratified to note—alongside Tyler at various ages. In one, a younger and much shorter Tyler had both arms wrapped around Ryan’s middle. They were dressed casually with mussed, windswept hair, apparently at some sort of carnival or amusement park. Both of them were grinning like idiots.

“Tyler,” his sister said, still sitting with her son on his bed. “Uncle Ryan lives his life a certain way. But that’s not the way everyone has to live their lives. It’s not the way you have to live your life.”

“Why does he do it?”

Meredith looked away. “He grew up in a different time. He started his career at a different time. Back then, things were … not like they are now.”

“That was a million years ago. Why does he still do it if things are so different now?”

Meredith sighed and ran her fingers through her son’s hair, looking away. “I don’t really know, Ty. Sometimes when you start lying about something so big, and you do it for so long, it’s hard to find a way out of the lie.” She squeezed his shoulder and looked back at the boy. “I don’t want that for you.”

“Me neither,” Ryan whispered to his sister and nephew.

He felt a rush of cool air behind him and turned involuntarily. The spirit had opened a door, one that Ryan was certain had not been there a moment ago, and stood still beside it, arm extended, beckoning Ryan to step through. With one last plaintive glance backwards at his family—his family yet to come—Ryan acquiesced and followed.

They stepped into a large, ornate room, lavishly furnished, with the shades pulled and the light dim. A handful of people milled about, speaking occasionally in quiet tones, one on a tiny mobile phone. There were three women in nurse’s uniforms and one in a white lab coat. Medical equipment he couldn’t positively identify stood, mostly abandoned, throughout the room. Men in business suits conferred over paperwork.

In the center of the room was a large hospital bed with a single occupant, an oxygen mask over his face and various tubes and wires running from his body.

As Ryan stepped closer, sickness and dread washing through him, he realized that he recognized the man in the bed as Simon.

But not the Simon he knew, the one he loved—this was an older man, a much older man, in his 80s at least, and obviously gravely ill. His sunken eyes were closed and his skin was gray; his hair, or what was left of it, was white. Ryan watched his chest rise and fall, listened to the rasp and rattle of the oxygen being dragged in and out of his shriveled, weakened body. Compulsively, Ryan stepped forward and tried to reach for Simon’s hand, lying still and frail at his side, but his own hand passed right through Simon’s as if it were made of air, not flesh and bone.

He felt the cold brush of air that was the spirit, standing behind him, heavy black robes dragging behind. “Is it his lungs?” Ryan asked quietly, gazing at Simon’s sickly pallor. “Is it cancer?”
The spirit did not answer.

Ryan took a breath that caught like a sob in his throat. “This is how my grandparents died.”

The spirit did not reply.

An older woman, elegantly dressed, occupied the seat at Simon’s bedside. It took Ryan no time at all to recognize Simon’s old pal Jackie, whose appearance hadn’t changed much at all in the intervening years. Botox really was a miracle.

In the bed, Simon stirred. He opened his eyes and after a moment was able to focus them on Jackie, who promptly leaned in to hear whatever Simon had to say. With obvious effort, Simon raised his hand and pulled the oxygen mask away long enough to rasp the question: “Where is he?”

Jackie’s manicured fingers stroked his shoulder soothingly. “He’s on his way, darling,” she said with a reassuring smile that Ryan wasn’t sure Simon could even see. “He’s on his way. You just rest now. Take it easy.”

Simon placed the oxygen mask back over his mouth and his hand fell to his side once again. Jackie patted it gently. “Rest,” she said again, still smiling bravely. “And don’t worry about a thing.”

Simon’s eyes closed. A moment after, Jackie’s smile wavered and disappeared, replaced by a look of anguish. She bit her lower lip, patted Simon’s hand once more, and then stood and paced across the room, punching keys on the tiniest phone Ryan had ever seen.

Casting a glance back at Simon, who had apparently fallen back into unconsciousness, Ryan followed, close enough to overhear Jackie’s conversation.

“Yes,” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“You absolute shit,” Jackie said under her breath, quietly enough that Simon, even if he were awake, could not hear.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing happened. But it could be any day now, any *minute* now, and where the hell are you?”

Long silence on the other end of the line. “You know I can’t—”

“Yes, you bloody well *can*.”

“Jackie, I have work here. I can’t just take off and abandon my responsibilities—”

“What about him? Is he not a responsibility? Is he not the least bit *important* to you, perhaps?”

“You know—you know he is. But I can’t leave. I can’t be there.”

“Why not? Because there were rumors about you two thirty years ago?”

“Jackie, I—”

“He’s asking for you. He’s asked for you every day this week. And every time he asks, I have to tell him that you’re on your way.”
“Why would you tell him that?”

“Because he’s fucking dying, Ryan.”

The quiet on the other end of the line was deafening. The voice, when it returned, was choked with tears. “You think I don’t know that? You think I wouldn’t be there if I could?”

“I know. I know, because you could be here now and you’re not. Because you’ve got your bloody work and because you can’t stand the idea that someone might think you care about him more than you care about work, and because someone might notice and suggest that he’s more than just an old friend to you, and god knows we can’t have that happening, can we?”

“Jackie—”

“You can be on the next plane to London, Ryan, or you can go to hell.”

She ended the call, her hand shaking. She turned around to look back at Simon, who remained asleep in the bed, chest still rising and falling.

The real Ryan leaned against an empty wall, staring vacantly, eyes watering. “Yeah,” he said under his breath, “I am a complete prick.”

He blinked and the scene was gone. He found himself in another unfamiliar room, struggling to get his bearings amid the strange surroundings. It was a very long room, opulently albeit oddly furnished, like something out of a science fiction movie. At the opposite end of the room from where Ryan stood with the ghost was a wall made entirely of glass, floor to ceiling, overlooking the sea and the starless sky above it.

Two armchairs stood in front of the window, facing out to the ocean, both in use, although from his vantage point Ryan couldn’t see by who—or, for that matter, by what. He could hear the occupants engaging in hushed conversation, but he couldn’t make out the words. Slowly, almost unwillingly, he began to walk towards them, and the voices became clearer.

“So?” said the one—male voice, louder than the other, exasperated—”I haven’t got all night.”

The occupant of the other armchair was silent for a moment, then: “I don’t know what you want me to say,” came the reply, and Ryan felt the hair on his arms rise as his stomach clenched. It was his voice—but not his voice, like his but not the same. Rougher, hoarser, older. Of course he knew what his voice sounded like—he talked for a living—and he knew what he sounded like when he wasn’t on the radio or on TV, when he was alone and could let himself be vulnerable, as this incarnation of himself so clearly was. But this voice was different. He’d heard himself, his older voice, through Jackie’s phone moments earlier, but the sound was distant and tinny through the long distance separating them. Now he was in a room with himself, or at least a version of himself—a possible version of himself?—and hearing this version of his own voice sent a chill through him.

He stepped closer to the pair of armchairs, and in the dimness he could finally see their reflection in the glass of the enormous window, and that of the people seated in them. In the first was a man he’d never seen before, not quite middle-aged but getting there, well-dressed and attractive but with an irritated expression. His fingers were drumming on the arm of the chair and one foot tapped on the seemingly pricey rug below his feet.

Ryan glanced away. His eyes locked on—yes, himself, his older self, and his breath caught in his chest. His alter ego looked to be at least 65, 70—well-kept, but far from his prime. His hair had gone silver and his face was lined with the marks of age that no injections from a plastic surgeon
could chase away. He wore an expensive-looking suit of a designer Ryan couldn’t identify, at least not from this angle, and held a snifter of dark amber liquid in one wrinkled hand, which sagged under the apparent weight of the glass, threatening to spill its contents onto the rug. In a moment Ryan realized that this was his house they were standing in. He also realized that the age and pain on his other self’s face was not caused by age alone.


“I never,” said the older Ryan, looking out the window, “never thought—god, I’m such an idiot. I trusted you. I …”

“Save it for your therapist. Do we have a deal or not?”

“What do you want?” Ryan could hear the bile in his own throat.

“Nothing. Well. Maybe not nothing. You should hear what TMZ wants to give me. And they don’t even know about the photos …”

“What,” Ryan’s older self said again through gritted teeth, “do you want?”

Actual Ryan watched the younger man’s reflection in the window. His expression was cool and smug. “Ten million.”

Ryan and his alter ego both inhaled sharply at the same moment. “Ten million,” the older Ryan repeated.

“That’s the going rate. Of course, if you make me wait, the cost might go up.”

“And what makes you think I’m just going to give you ten million dollars?”

“Would you rather have the entire world knowing you’re gay? That you fuck guys? That you always have? That every girl you ever pretended to date was a beard? That you’ve been bullshitting everyone for fifty years? How do you think they’ll like that—your audience, your listeners, your investors? I’m not shy—I’ll tell them everything. Everything you do. Everything you like—”

“Stop it,” the older Ryan said, forcefully enough that his companion fell silent. “You know this is blackmail, don’t you?”

The other man smiled. “It’s entertainment, baby.”

They were silent for a long minute, the younger man staring at the older, the older looking out the window, his face a mask of anger and anguish, and Ryan glancing back and forth between them both.

Then the older Ryan spoke in a low voice. “I can’t move that kind of money all at once.”

Actual Ryan sucked in a breath.

“Fine,” said the younger man after a moment. “Out of respect for our friendship, I’ll let you split it up.”

The older Ryan closed his eyes. “I need you to leave now.”

A beat of silence and then the younger man stood fluidly, stretching his arms over his head. “Two
mill by the end of the week, okay? And don’t try anything, Ryan. I promise you’ll regret it.”

He walked away from the armchairs and the window, passing millimeters from Ryan’s own body—if the word “body” could be used—with no notice and disappearing through the darkened doorway at the other end of the room.

The older Ryan remained seated. “I already do,” he said when the other was gone. He raised his nearly forgotten drink to his mouth and swallowed its contents in a single gulp, then set the empty glass on the floor and covered his face with both hands. His shoulders twitched and Ryan realized he was watching himself—a sad old man alone in the dark—weeping.

“Well, thanks for the warning,” Ryan said softly, addressing the spirit without looking at it.

But before he could turn to see where the spirit had gone, he felt the floor shudder under his feet. A second passed and then it gave another, more powerful jolt, and in the next instant it was crumbling beneath him, the entire room collapsing around him with a deafening roar as if falling into a sinkhole. He shouted despite himself and reached out for something to hold onto, but there was nothing, and more nothing, and then he found himself landing heavily in a chair in a nondescript room, surrounded by people he didn’t recognize, dressed mostly in black, talking amongst themselves in hushed tones. The scene had a funereal air, and Ryan startled again, realizing why. A gripping sense of doom, thick and heavy, settled over him. He looked around: the spirit was nowhere to be seen. Not that the guy—the ghost, the thing—ever answered questions anyway; wherever it took Ryan, it was silent as death.

Whose death?

“Listen,” he said under his breath, as if the figures milling about within earshot could actually hear him, “wherever you are, I know how this ends. I’ve read the story, I’ve seen the Mickey Mouse version, I know how this goes. Can we just—stop?”

But the ghost still did not appear.

Ryan eased himself from the chair into which he had fallen and picked his way carefully around the room. The room was unfamiliar and the faces on the people were as well. The setting was lavish but cold, ornate yet clinical at the same time. If there was a casket or an urn—and there must have been—he couldn’t see where it was.

A moment later he caught sight of people he recognized. The faces were older, of course, but there was no mistaking Simon’s brother Nick and his wife. Ryan’s heart twisted in his chest and he involuntarily breathed out the word “No.”

So this was it. This was Simon’s funeral. And so far, Ryan himself was nowhere to be seen.

He ached as he had earlier, at Simon’s deathbed: grief so strong it struck him like a blow, and self-loathing at his own inadequacy. He had assumed, on the rare occasion when he thought about things like the future of their relationship, that Simon would die first. He had fifteen years on Ryan and, despite all the health smoothies and gym memberships, still smoked a pack a day. But the visceral reality of it—of being at Simon’s funeral—was nearly unbearable.

“There’s going to be another biography,” he heard a stranger say nearby.

“Another?” said her companion. “How many biographies does he need?”

“This one is unauthorized,” the woman said. “Not a puff piece like the last one. Non-fiction. All the gory details. Jay’s just been waiting for him to kick it so they can publish.”
“Nobody to sue?”

“Nobody who’d bother.”

The man shook his head and Ryan, listening in, winced. He’d managed to page through the biography that had been published right after the debut of the U.S. *X-Factor* and found it unreadable—strangely so, given how fond Ryan was of the subject matter. In fact, by the end, he sort of hated Simon. He knew that the effect was deliberate, if not about Ryan specifically. Simon had wanted to present a very specific image of himself to the public—Simon Cowell, avid heterosexual—and he’d found the right so-called journalist to do it.

Who would have sold him out at the end of his life, when he was beyond self-defense? Ryan wasn’t Simon’s first boyfriend, not by a long shot. But everyone before him, and most everyone in Simon’s life for as long as Ryan had known him, had always been loyal.

“Though they may have to hold off a bit longer,” the woman continued. “I hear there’s an ‘issue’ with the will.”

“Oh?”

“Some ex-boyfriend who thinks he didn’t get his due.”

The man shook his head again. “Poor old bastard.”

“That’s life in the glass closet for you.”

“And death,” the man agreed.

Ryan turned away. He made his way through the room, passing by unnoticed. He recognized a few more people here and there, and then he blinked hard at the sight of someone he had not expected: his own assistant, aged decades but the face still clearly hers. Of course she knew and liked Simon, but if Ryan himself wasn’t there, why would she—

In the same moment, Ryan finally saw the casket, some several feet away, open at the top. From where he stood, he couldn’t see inside, but he shuddered anyway. Slowly, inevitably, he walked toward it, bracing himself as much as possible against what he expected to find there.

He had been wrong, so very wrong.

When he looked into the coffin, it wasn’t Simon’s face at all—it was his own. Older, lined with age, ravaged by illness, cold and still and waxen in death—his face.

He turned away, mindlessly, and found the ghost there, close as a lover. The dank, moldering smell of its moth-ridden black robes filled his nose. He brought his hands up involuntarily, flailing at the fabric as it enveloped him, surrounding and suffocating him. The robes gave no purchase, but seemed to turn to dust as he clawed at them, but they went on and on—there was no way out, no escape, no light, and no air. Not even enough breath to scream.
The End of It

Ryan woke up, gasping and struggling to sit up, tearing at his bedclothes. The room was dimly lit with cool, blue light; the night was receding and sunrise couldn’t be far off. A look at the clock by the bed told him it was 7 AM. He was alone and the room was undisturbed.

He threw the sheets off his legs and took a survey, confirming that he had all the limbs and digits he’d gone to sleep with and that he was alive—still alive, with all the oxygen and light he could need. He laughed, half a sob. He was alive.

He struggled out of bed, shaking, and made his way to the bathroom. Nobody else in the house seemed to be up yet. He splashed his face with water and looked at his face in the mirror—the same face he’d had yesterday.

He went back to his room and dressed quickly, running his hands through his hair—no time for a shower, no time for anything. He grabbed his jacket, bag, phone, and wallet, and without stopping to think, ran down the stairs to the front door.

He opened it wide and felt cool, fresh air on his face. What was he doing? Had he gone insane?

A black car turned the corner onto his parents’ street and slowed in front of the house. Ryan blinked at it, trying to clear his head. The car pulled into his parents’ driveway and stopped.

The back door opened and Simon stepped out, looking as stunned as Ryan felt.

“Hello,” Simon said, not quite smiling, still with the shell-shocked look in his eyes.

The car’s driver got out, removed a suitcase from the trunk of the car, and brought it up the walkway to where Ryan was standing in his parents’ doorway. He set it down just outside the house without so much as glancing up at Ryan.

The driver went back to the car. Simon, staring at Ryan, fished a bill out of his wallet without looking at it and handed it over to the man, who got back in his car and drove off. Ryan spared a moment to hope that it was at least a fifty.

“Hello,” Ryan answered at last, as Simon started towards him, and a moment later they were in each other’s arms and Ryan felt right again for the first time in weeks.

“And just where were you going at seven in the morning, darling?” Simon asked, breath warm against the side of Ryan’s neck.

Ryan chuckled into the collar of Simon’s light jacket. “You jerk. Have you even slept?”

“Hardly. I had a series of very strange nightmares—”

“You don’t say,” Ryan said drily, and held him tighter.

Simon came to New York with him for the New Year’s Eve show the day after Christmas, surprisingly complacent about letting Ryan’s career take center stage for once. Ryan did his best, between their respective work obligations, to show his gratitude.

Things had changed, or were going to change, in a big and irrevocable way, but they weren’t ready to talk yet about what it all meant. Neither of them was looking forward to having that
conversation, either with each other or with their publicists, so instead they took the slow and low-
drama approach of simply going about their business without any public announcements. If
anyone noticed that they were sharing a suite in New York or that only one bed was being used, if
it was just the two of them out for a quiet dinner without their usual crowd of extras, if they smiled
at each other in public more than usual—if Perez Hilton still gleefully defaced photos of them with
Microsoft Paint—their new unofficial comment was “no comment.”

And—what the hell, a little scandal might be good for the show. The network may have been less
than thrilled with Ryan, but he had a contract—his name was part of the show’s name—and Dick
Clark, longtime friend and never shy about controversial television, had his back.

It was all strange and new, and injected a dose of excitement and novelty into their relationship,
not to mention the preparations for the show. Ryan never tired of doing the New Year’s Eve
show, wouldn’t give it up for the world, but after seven years the routine was getting familiar.

Maybe his ghosts should have mentioned that little downside to maintaining status quo: it was
downright boring.

Having Simon nearby—in New York! With him! In their hotel!—and knowing that blogs were
buzzing and their contacts at People frantically hassling their publicists for information gave Ryan
a buzz he hadn’t expected. It was one thing to have a secret that could never, ever be divulged; it
was another to have one that was just dying to get out.

On December 31, while Ryan was up to his neck in rehearsals and last-minute details, Simon flew
Sinitta and her kids in and took them around town, sightseeing and shopping. Ryan and Simon
had exchanged harried goodbyes that morning before going their separate ways, and although he
got the occasional text message with a photo of various New York landmarks, Ryan didn’t expect
to see Simon again until well after midnight, when the show was done and he could get back to
their hotel room.

Ryan was humming with excitement all night long as each segment of the show came off without
a hitch. Gaga was great, Beyonce was outstanding, and around 11 Simon sent a picture of himself
holding a tiny Lego doppelganger that Snit’s kids had put together at the Lego store. It was
warmer than usual, and Ryan riffed easily with the performers and with Dick, and when sly
references to Simon were made he laughed them off, hoping the effect was more “mysterious yet
professional” than “painfully awkward.” This was still new to him. He wondered how long it
would last and whether they’d have to go official before he got used to it.

At 11:58, as he filled the air until the ball could start to drop, he was startled to actually see Simon,
live and in the flesh, standing unobtrusively amidst the cameramen, producers, PAs, and other
spectators in front of the stage above Times Square. Simon was staring, watching him at work
with the quietly satisfied look on his face that was as close as Simon ever got to admitting that
Ryan was good at what he did. Ryan glided past the surprise of seeing him and, right on schedule,
threw to his cohost in the crowd below.

He caught Simon’s eye and looked at him sharply, asking the silent question: What are you doing
here? But Simon just gazed back with that same pleased, innocently enigmatic look. Ryan shook
his head in disapproval but couldn’t help smiling. Then, without thinking about it, he cocked his
head, indicating the small set of stairs at the edge of the stage. Simon’s eyes followed his and
widened at the sight of the stairs before looking back, inquisitively, at Ryan.

Ryan’s cohost threw back to him with just over a minute to go, and he babbled more about the
crowds and the excitement before it was time to cue Dick Clark’s countdown to midnight.

As he did, he saw that Simon had moved to the edge of the stage and had one foot on the first
step. A few of the people who were actually meant to be there were eyeing him with a mix of consternation and amusement, obviously recognizing him and in all likelihood knowing what he was up to.

In Ryan’s earpiece, Dick counted down from ten. There were half a dozen other people on stage with him, but right then Ryan didn’t need to worry about them; at this point, the eyes of America were on the descending crystal ball and the digital countdown above it. Even the cameramen in front of him were taking a break. He stepped forward, to the edge of the stage, and took two steps down until he and Simon were nearly at eye level.

“Happy New Year,” Ryan said, the words muffled by the roar of over a million people shouting Three! Two! One!, and then they were kissing, sweet and closed-mouthed, as the first notes of “Auld Lang Syne” began to play through the loudspeakers, as the cameras panned over the crowds and two thousand pounds of falling confetti.

Maybe it was cheating, kissing Simon like this when he knew perfectly well that nobody was broadcasting it—but at that moment, it wasn’t about the cameras, not about the world and what they might or might not see. At that exact moment, it was about the two of them, in a world all their own—about new years, and new beginnings.

He kissed Simon again on the stairs, half on and half off the stage—like so much of their lives, really. “Are you ready for this?” he shouted to Simon over the din.

“As I’ll ever be,” Simon shouted back, and if that wasn’t completely encouraging, Simon then leaned in and kissed Ryan again. “This is all a bit mad, isn’t it?”

Ryan looked around them, at the confetti falling and other couples embracing and more than a handful of the New Year’s Eve crew giving them enthusiastic thumbs-up, and laughed. “In more ways than one,” he yelled back.

Reluctantly, he let Simon go and went back to his mark on the stage. “Auld Lang Syne” had wrapped up and Sinatra’s voice began to reverberate over Times Square. In a moment it would be time to get back to work, to prompt Dick for his final speech of the night and introduce the next act, to wrap up the party and send everyone home. A girl from makeup popped onto the stage and gave him a quick once-over before disappearing again. Ryan looked for Simon and found that he’d retreated further into the crowd, getting out of the way of whatever came next. He was still smiling.

I’ll make a brand new start of it
In old New York

Ryan smiled back at Simon, smiled at the cameras, smiled to himself as they started up again: the show must go on.

Later, in the wee hours of the morning, Ryan stumbled back into his hotel room to find Simon asleep in bed with the lamp still on. Ryan didn’t blame him. He went through his evening routine quickly and quietly and was in bed next to Simon in ten minutes, pulling the covers up to his chest, leaning over to press a quick kiss to Simon’s clothed shoulder. He reached for the lamp and then froze at the nearly silent yet distinct sound of … laughter. Very distinct, very familiar laughter. In fact, in Merv Griffin’s life, they had called it giggling. In death, Ryan wasn’t at all sure what it would be called.

He frowned and turned out the light.
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