

The Ghost of Christmas Past Quits

**A Short Story
by Linda Kasten**



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After working 177 years for Agent Jacob Marley in a yearly Christmas gig, the Ghost of Christmas Past had grown tired of living in history. Ghost Future and Ghost Present, the slothful bums, basked in laziness and didn't understand the need to expand their team's service or the need to escape their mundane eternity, but Christmas Past suffered from boredom and wanted to be more productive during his eternal punishment.

If Marley couldn't scare up additional stints (politicians didn't count) to show deserving earthly fools their wayward behaviors, Past had decided to submit his notice and apply for a more rewarding profession.

How was a fellow supposed to earn a decent living only working a month out of the year, anyway? Even after Christmas Past had encouraged Marley to expand his business into Halloween and score some creative haunting spots where they could frighten kids into being good, Marley had acted annoyed and shrugged it off.

Christmas Past had been desperate enough to storm into Marley's Spirits Interventional Agency office and face his boss, shaking his spindly ghost finger at him and demanding he rustle up some extra jobs.

"Why so surprised? You look like you've seen a ghost." Past snickered when Marley jerked back in his chair, tangling himself in his chains. His inadequate office reeked of mustiness. The scars along the walls spread like lightning strikes from ceiling to floor, the cracks large enough to house bugs and their nests.

"Ahh, Humbug." Marley grumbled and tried to shoo Past from his excuse-for-an-office.

"I'm not leaving until you start howling for new gigs."

The spot where Marley's eyebrows would have frowned shifted. "And where do you think three washed-up ghosts are going to work? Huh? Where exactly?"

"Isn't that why you're the agent and we're the clients?"

"You think it's so easy, go try it yourself."

"I gave you suggestions. Didn't you follow any of my leads?" Past paced the floor, his footprints leaving indentations in the ghostly gold carpet.

"Which one...the stupid idea about taking over the Easter Bunny's role? Pa-lee-ze. That was just as bad as your idea to scare trick-or-treaters."

"That wasn't the only suggestion."

Marley fell back in his chair and looked at Past with flaming eyes. "Well, Cupid is completely out of the question. You can't scare people into loving each other."

"How do you know? Have you ever tried it? And what was wrong with that green leprechaun midget? We can all use that pot of gold. Or...or that fluffy creature they pull out of the ground every year...you know...the dog and pony show. We should even get a bonus from that one. They'll never see *our* shadow. Early spring guaranteed year after year..."

"Forget it. There's no money in any of it." Marley scooted his skeleton-less body closer to his desk and pressed a key on his antiquated desktop's computer keyboard. "You had your chance, and you blew it."

Past nodded his head and bit his pale lip, recalling the one option he'd rejected. "Ghost labor laws would have put you in prison over that one. And I told you, it's impossible for the three

of us to handle the world's population of politicians. You can show them the error of their ways all day every day and get nowhere, and poor Future would never get a turn. We'd be better off beating our heads through a wall."

"That's all I can offer. Now, if you don't mind. I've got work to do."

"At least someone does." Past paused before dejectedly disappearing through the rickety door barely hanging on to rusty hinges.

Marley's problem was he lacked vision and ambition, a deadly combination. He failed his team of past, present, and future ghosts time and time again. Christmas Past wanted more, and Marley's oblivious attitude told him it was time to burn his contract.

Christmas Past returned to the haunted three-story Gothic stone mansion, now a mere blight on the London landscape with its broken windows and chipped paint, the vacancy he and his 'brothers' had filled as their new residence after the last landlord had evicted them over late rent payments, the fourth time in the last year. Past flitted from room to room, stewing.

Then he hunted for a piece of paper, dug up a Bic pen, and scribbled in one-inch high letters catty-corner—I resign. He signed his name while the rest of his crew begged him to reconsider.

"How is this going to work with you gone?" Christmas Present whined, pacing across worn floorboards. "This is supposed to be a ghoul's team effort." The decaying wood planks never whined against his ghostly weight no matter how hard he stomped.

"Just think of it as divorce, only I don't need visitation rights."

Present and Future gasped. "You can't mean that!"

Past shifted his white tunic, now yellowed over the years, in need of a high-efficiency Maytag. "Nothing personal. If you two know what's good for you, you'll get out of this dead-end job, too."

"And do what? You must be bat crazy." Future flitted about all aglow with a vision to show Past his mistake, but, unfortunately, they had no past, present, or future because they *were* past, present, and future. "Who do you think is going to hire an ancient spirit? They want young blood these days, not old blokes like us."

Past folded his resignation letter and stuffed it inside an old envelope he'd pulled from a dumpster in the alley. "That's what job recruiters are for."

"You have no skills. You can't make stuff up, either. They'll see right through you." Future had become too cynical in his old age.

Present scoffed. "Your complexion may be wrinkle free, but that hair and that gown will have to go. You can't go on job interviews looking shabby."

Past fingered his white ponytail and brushed his hands down the sides of his swampy-smelling tunic. "Nothing that makeup, a little sprucing up, and a shopping spree won't fix."

"Ha. How you gonna pay? With your dashing horrid looks?"

"I don't believe Cinderella had to pay her Fairy Godmother for a ballgown. I'll get her to help."

Future looked at Past with great concern. "You realize that's a fairytale. There is no Fairy Godmother."

"What is *A Christmas Carol*?"

With that, he flew from the house in a fury, swept across the stormy night, and reentered Marley's office lobby, his drenched tunic shedding water droplets on the nasty gold-stained carpet. Past didn't care whether he frightened Marley into a second cardiac arrest or not. This wasn't going to take long.

He whisked through the door and caught Marley leaning over his desk, snoring like Dracula during his rem cycle. The room exploded when Marley's chair slammed against the back wall upon the disturbance. The wall stood only a foot away, so understandably any movement in a rolling chair would end in a collision and additional wall cracks.

"What...what...who's here?" Marley rubbed his eyes into focus. "Oh, you again. Can't you knock first?" Marley shifted his ball and chains to the other side of his chair with a resounding clank and groaned. "Look, mate, can you at least close the door before all the heat gets out? It's chilly in here, and I'm low on firewood."

"You're an old cuss. I'll make it quick."

He slapped his letter on the desk. "I quit."

Marley stuttered. "You can't quit. This is a permanent position."

"Not anymore." Christmas Past pounded on Marley's desk and pitched his prop of fresh green holly into Marley's trash bin. He was tired of carrying the ridiculous flower around. It made him itch and sneeze. "And from now on, my name is Oscar Goodall."

A robust snicker spooked the room with twinges of thunder and lightning. "Goodall? Really?"

"What's wrong with a good English surname?"

Looking exasperated, Marley tossed the letter aside. "Never mind. Mark my words, you'll be back begging for your old job. And just so you know, that means you have to start at the bottom pay scale and work your way back up. You'll also lose all your benefits and holiday pay..."

"Hahaha. Holiday time was all we had. No loss there." Oscar broke into a splash of creepy laughter and stumbled from the office, drunk on hilarity. But excitement gripped him and sent tingles all over his invisibility with such intensity, he had to calm himself before summoning the Fairy Godmother.

Oscar hated to admit it. Writing a resumé for the recruitment company with dazzling, irresistible, unexaggerated, and shockingly impressive detail took guts, and, unfortunately, he'd lost his innards long ago to maggots, the glutinous thieves. Sitting at a desk in the city library after his brief visit to see the Fairy Godmother, he stared at the form on the computer screen and trembled, an unusual reaction for him because he normally made other people tremble, not himself, but this job-hunting business had its own degree of uneasiness.

Name: Oscar Goodall. *So far so good.*

Age: *Women lie all the time. Easy peasy. 55.*

Address: Hanging Sword Alley, London. *Living in the vicinity where Jerry Crutchers used to reside should garner extra points.*

Education: Continuing Credits in Social Work.

Profile: Worked for a successful entrepreneur interested in helping lost individuals restructure their lives. *Hope that's enough. Isn't keeping it short all the Twitter rage?*

Experience: *Not so easy to explain but better stay vague.* Tour guide through past events which allowed client to understand mistakes and adjust tactics and strategy for future goals.

Skills: *Finally, another easy one.* Scare people into seeing the errors of their ways. *Better delete that.* Understand people's motives, patient, good listener, problem-solver, consistent — all while staying invisible in a supportive background capacity.

Reason for Leaving: *Keep it simple, stupid.* Tired of living in the past, not enough hours, and stagnant salary.

Salary Requirements: Anything will improve current earnings. Negotiable.

He held his breath, closed his eyes, and clicked the mouse to “submit” the form.

He trickled his boneless fingers across the library desk, then tapped a pencil with rhythmic percussion, earning a stern warning from glaring library patrons. He sank back in the plastic chair and adjusted his dress shirt, the color not as bright as he expected, but the Fairy Godmother had whipped up a white long-sleeve stiff linen dress shirt, a color that washed him out, but beggars can't make demands. At least she adorned him with a paisley purple and black tie to complement his black dress slacks. He reached the back of his head—a nervous habit—to flick his long, straggly white hair aside, but he forgot his new haircut had left his strands no more than an inch long now.

“Are you done?” A frumpy middle-aged woman stood behind him, her bulging belly vibrating as she waddled up beside him. Her curtness rang in his hollow ears with unpleasant tones.

“Does it look like I'm done?” he replied. After dealing with Ebenezer, he had learned how to handle grumpy, pushy people.

“As a matter of fact, it does. And didn't you read the sign? Thirty-minute time limit.”

Oscar had not seen the sign, having lost his spectacles years ago. He squinted and examined the time on the computer screen. “I have five minutes left. Move on.”

Just as the woman mumbled in incessant profanity, Oscar decided to check on his resumé's status to verify its receipt. He had no money to purchase a cellphone—still a device Oscar found puzzling—and had to rely on email. Setting up his Gmail account had proven to be his most frustrating hurdle. Who had dared to use Christmas Past for an email address? What imposter had stolen his title? A matter he must plot to remedy.

Pulling up his Gmail account, he crowed—earning a choir of shushes from his neighboring computer users—when finding a request for an interview. The notification directed him to confirm the appointment arranged for the following morning at eight o'clock at the University College Hospital.

Splendid.

He slapped his hands together in a private high-five, signed off the computer, and left the library but not without glowering at the rude woman who thought she owned the place.

The following morning, after a sleepless night (ghosts didn't require rest — reserved only for the wicked), Oscar floated on cloud nine, thrilled beyond words with his first prospect to free himself from a rut.

He entered the hospital's sliding doors with other visitors, his own weight insufficient to trigger the automation. Approaching the information desk, he asked the woman where he might find the Social Work Department, his designated interview location. After riding the elevator, again with fellow hospital passengers, he found the basement office. Luckily the door stood ajar, the interviewer possibly awaiting his prompt arrival. Having five minutes to spare, it should be testimony to his conscientious nature. He took a moment to adjust his attire and straighten his tie before taking another step.

As soon as he entered the soft green-colored room lined with cabinets and bookshelves, making Marley's office look worse than hideous, the woman behind the desk flung around in her swivel chair.

Oscar would have gulped a boulder if he'd had the anatomy to do so. He gawked at the woman, resurrecting the long-forgotten sensation of nausea from his human years. He subdued a shriek threatening to howl through the walls. This gave him his first taste of what it was like to be horror-stricken, a response unheard of for a ghost.

But before him sat the rude and pushy woman from the library. A sinking feeling dropped through his spineless self and filled him with disappointment. What a waste! He'd had such optimistic hopes, certain this job would be a perfect fit.

Her icy stare held him silent.

"You," was all she said.

"What irony," Oscar replied. Should he try to explain his behavior or just turn and depart? Neither of them moved. Perhaps she was wondering how to dismiss him. She wouldn't let rudeness stand in her way, or would she?

He had spoken last. He waited.

"You can't seriously think I'd hire you." The woman's witchy laugh echoed everywhere.

Having nothing to lose, Oscar challenged her. "You'd be a fool not to." He leaned over her desk. "You will not find anyone qualified to handle people the way I can."

His arrogance cut her cackles, the room suddenly noiseless. Her face drained of all color, much like Oscar's everyday complexion. "If you handle people the way you did yesterday, you aren't fit to push a broom."

"So, you take no responsibility for your own rudeness."

"When people ignore the rules..."

"You made assumptions and did not give me a chance to explain. Instead of politely asking when I'd be finished or if anyone else was about done, you turned bossy. The question shouldn't be whether you'd hire me. The question should be, would I want to work for someone who has no social etiquette?"

Shocked, she stared at him, speechless.

Oscar was just warming up. He took a seat in the cushioned chair beside her desk. He had the advantage. He would be remiss not to use his ability to help this woman, his first case as a social worker. He took a spin through her past, suspending time and rendering her unaware of his probe into her personal life. He winced and shook his head, certain he'd found the reason for her behavior. When satisfied with his journey, he allowed time to resume and the interview to continue.

"You are quite an arrogant fellow." She clasped her hands on her desk as if to guard herself.

He leaned closer and rested his elbow on the desk's edge. "You've had a rough go of life, haven't you? First your husband—"

"What do you know about my husband?" Her shock turned the tables.

"His tragic death could not have been easy on you and your children...especially with your youngest child and her constant medical care."

The lady pushed back from her desk, not sure what to say or think. He kept speaking, determined to expose the reason for her behavior, the layer that sits beneath her facade, the one she hides. "Then there is your mother and her failing health, the stress in paying your bills and keeping your children fed and clothed. You've sold everything you can, even your home computer...the reason you needed to use the one in the library. I guess that would make anyone anxious and cranky. And that doesn't even count your job here, the pressure to put in more hours with less pay and dealing with an administration that only cares about the bottom line and not your hard work."

The woman's chin quivered. Her eyes teared up. A choking sound gurgled in her throat. "How...how could you know all this? Who are you?"

Oscar fell back in the chair, reminded of the story he'd wanted to escape, the disturbing similarity and human suffering he thought he could avoid. He'd wanted to see a different world, discover goodness and kindness he felt had to provide a meaning to life he'd never had a chance

to witness. But it didn't appear his choice had gained him the freedom he'd anticipated. He hated to admit Marley was right. He could just see Marley flinging around his ball and chains in delight, unable to contain himself when Oscar crawled back, forfeiting his seniority.

In his midlife ghost crisis, he had taken a chance to find more excitement, more fulfillment, a cheerier side to the drab underbelly of the netherworld. He reexamined his motivation. Had he mistaken what he had as a good thing and just didn't know it?

"I'm the person who shouldn't be here."

Lumbering to his feet, he quietly rose and started for the door, wondering if an amusement park might have a more rewarding position. He wouldn't mind running a carousel or Ferris wheel, watch people enjoy special moments and make lasting memories. Tolerating a bit of bickering or cleaning up a child's puke seemed preferable to social work. How he had let himself get pulled into this career field mystified him. Customer service might be an option, as well as a tour guide.

"But, but..." the woman stammered, her emotions swelling from sadness to hope. "You should be here. You have such an uncanny ability to read a person's soul. I have never seen anything like it."

Oscar stopped in the doorway and mumbled under his breath, always a sucker for a compliment. "Yes, it's a curse I've lived with all my life."

"Can we start over?"

Intuition warned him. Like usual, he ignored it. He turned around and faced her once again, ready to explore his options, not ready to give up on humanity just yet. He could read people, evaluate them, and help them. Shouldn't he use those gifts? Shouldn't he take this opportunity to work on his own redemption?

"What kind of salary does the position pay? And I need every December off."