

**The Uninvited Guest**  
*By Michael Danese*  
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The day's last rays are glistening off of the frozen pond. The clank-clank of a child's ice skates and playful laughter can be heard from the far side of the pond. The slight aroma from a fireplace is in the frigid evening air.

A few hundred yards away stands a single farmhouse, the source of the smoke scent. It's a modest house of log construction. The cedar-shingled roof is heavy with snow. A horse-drawn sleigh passes the house. There is more laughter sprinkled with the sound of sleigh bells and the clop-clop of hoofs treading on the snowy road.

The house has a large wooden door in the center and two windows on either side. Through one window the fireplace is visible, decked with Christmas stockings and candles. Off to the left is a well-decorated Christmas tree. There are small dolls, animals, candy canes, pine cones and several candle holders. A young, blonde girl, about 13 years old is lighting the candles as the darkness creeps into the house.

On the other side of the fireplace a man is sitting in a comfortable chair, reading a newspaper and smoking a pipe. He appears to be in his late forties, with dark hair and a beard. He's wearing small, round reading glasses, a brown coat and well-worn trousers.

Visible from the other window is the dining room. A blond woman, also in her forties is placing china on the table preparing for dinner. She is wearing an apron over a blue dress. She has a white smear of flour on her nose which helps to frame her wide smile. This happy mother is humming, and another young girl, about eight years old is singing and placing the silverware on the table. She is also wearing an apron and a blue dress. She has dark hair, pulled into a ponytail. She is singing the song that the mother is humming. The girl that was lighting the candles enters the room and helps to set the table.

A young man emerges from the back of the house. He is about 18 years old, tall and strong. He has dark hair and eyes, like his father. He is buttoning the top button on his shirt.

The dad, obviously entertained by what he is reading, sits up and says, "Harry, listen to this, in fact, (raising his voice to reach the other room) Clara, Pearl, please come in here, and ask your Ma too."

"Ma, Pa wants to tell ya something in the parlor!" yells Clara, the older sister.

A few seconds later Mary emerges from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron, "What is it dear? What's all the fuss?"

"All of you! Listen to this! Last month there was a big fair, a World's Fair actually, in Paris, that's in France Europe, and they had the most amazing things there!" he said, hardly able to contain himself. "They had carriages that can move without horses! I've read about them, but they actually had them there for people to ride in! And, they had big moving pictures, as big as a house, with people dancing! Imagine that! And, a contraption where you talk and it remembers

what you say and you can hear yourself! And, wait till you hear this – they have stairs that move! You just stand on them and it brings you to the top! I just can't imagine..."

"Wow, Pa, I hope I can see things like that someday!" said Clara.

"We heard about some of those things in school," said Harry. "Just imagine what life will be like when you're Pa's age! There will be carriages in the streets scaring the horses, and people riding on stairs everywhere!"

"I ain't riding on no stairs!" said Pearl. "It all sounds a bit terrifyin' if ya ask me!"

"Well, in this house we will be walking," said Mary. "Now come on girls, the turkey's just about ready!"

"Yes!" said Pearl, "We gotta eat right fast and get to bed so Santa can come!"

"That's right, Pearl, that's right, cause he knows that you've been a good girl this year!" said Pa. "Now go help yer Ma!"

A short time later they were all gathered around the table. Pa was at the head, holding Ma's hand, who held Harry's, who held Clara's, who held Pearl's, who held her father's hand.

Pa said, "Everyone bow yer heads. Lord, thanks for keeping us safe, and bless our family and our food, and we remember all of those from our family that went to heaven to be with you."

Together they all chanted, "Amen!"

In the distance there is a single gunshot. Ma says to Pa, "Horace, did you hear that?"

"I'm sure it was just somebody that got a late start preparing their Christmas dinner. Some hog's one step closer to the table..." said Pa.

"I suppose," said Mary, "but on Christmas Eve! Some folks just got no manners!"

"I'm hungry!" said Pearl.

Almost immediately there was a frenzy of food passed; turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, rolls, cranberry sauce, beans and peas.

A few minutes later, as Horace just finished smearing butter on his sweet roll, there was a loud banging on the door. "Who could that be?" said Horace.

"Maybe its Santa!" said Pearl.

"I'll see," said Harry.

Harry opened the door to find a man cold and snow covered. "Please come in, and Merry Christmas!"

The large man entered, removed his hat and shook the snow off of his clothes and boots. "I'm so sorry to bother you and interrupt your Christmas supper!" he said.

"Nonsense neighbor, nonsense, come in! Mary, get him some hot tea!" said Horace. "What brings you here, friend?"

"I, I don't mean to be a bother..." said the man. He was very large, perhaps 60 years old. He had long straggly gray hair and a beard to match. He was wearing all black. "Well, I was on my

way to have dinner with my family. I've traveled very far. My horse went lame down the road near the pond, so I had to shoot him."

"That's so sad!" said Clara.

"Yes...we heard the shot...oh heavens! Where are our manners! I am Mary!"

"And I'm Horace Buckley," said Pa reaching for his hand. "And this is Harry, Clara and Pearl," he said, motioning to the children.

"I'm Elmer Usher," said the stranger.

"Usher...Usher...I seem to remember..." said Horace.

"Mr. Usher, please come and sit and eat with us, we have plenty!" demanded Mary.

Usher removed his coat and Harry hung it up near the fire. He removed his holster containing a six shooter, and hung it on the back of the chair. He then sat at the table across from Mary. She looked into his deep, dark eyes, and in a second she saw something that sent a chill down her spine.

In a flash he jumped up and grabbed Clara from behind. He pulled out a large hunting knife and held it at her throat. Clara tried to scream and he tightened his grip. She began to kick, sending dishes and food everywhere.

"Enough!" said Usher, "You folks are gonna do exactly as I say, or I'll cut her open!"

"Yes, of course!" said Horace, "Whatever you want! Just please don't hurt her!"

"Good," said Usher. "Now, everyone sit down, all peaceful like. You," he said to Harry, "on the porch I left some rope. Go fetch it, and don't try nuttin'!"

Harry glances to Horace. "Do what he say, son..." Horace whispered.

Harry nodded then went to the door. He cracked it open and a chill filled the room. Pearl began to cry.

"Shut her up now!" barked Usher.

"How dare you yell at that poor child, you monster!" blurted Mary.

Usher pushed the knife closer to Clara's throat and said in a low guttural moan, "Shut her up NOW!" as he reached for his pistol hanging on the holster on his chair.

Harry quickly returned with the rope. He was shivering from the cold, or maybe just from fear.

"Tie up yer Pa, then the little crier. Use that carving knife in the turkey to cut the rope. And don't try nuttin' so help me..." commanded Usher. "When yer done with them tie up this one," he said pointing at Clara with the knife.

"Now tie up yer Ma," he said.

While Harry was tying her, Mary was sobbing and said, "Why are you doing this to us?"

"I'm gonna tell ya, as soon as I tie up the boy," said Usher.

When Harry was as immobilized as the others, Usher picked up a full wine glass from Horace's place at the table and swigged it down.

Turning to Horace, he put his face close to his and said, “Think back, way back, to when ya were a young’en. You don’t remember that name Usher? Never heard tell of it? Ever?”

“No, I mean, like I said, I’ve heard the name before...” Horace said.

“Well you’ll never forget it, I promise you!” interrupted Usher.

“This farm used to belong to my grandfather, William Usher, at least for a short time. He won it in a card game from your great grandfather, who apparently had a bit of a gambling and drinking problem.” said Usher.

“That’s crazy!” said Horace.

“Maybe so, but it’s true,” said Usher. “So the house was vacated and William moved in with his family, his wife, Martha, their two sons, and his little daughter, Dolly, who was just three at the time. A few months later, on Christmas Eve to be exact, your grandfather, Thomas Buckley, returned to the house. The Ushers were just sitting down to Christmas dinner when he burst through the door. He was drunk and full of the devil. He shot my granddad in the chest with a musket then slaughtered everyone else. Dolly died right there on that floor with her throat cut open. My father, Chester Usher was away fighting in the war. He was only 17 years old.”

“The war between the North and South?” asked Clara.

“No, many years before that, the second war with England, in 1812,” answered Usher. “He returned from the war to find his family gone without a trace, and your grandfather’s family living here. He was chased away without any answers.”

“How could that be possible, what about the law?” asked Mary.

“The *law*? That was almost 100 years ago! All of the modern conveniences we have today didn’t exist. There was no telegraph, or railroads, or telephones! The closest farm was *miles* away and town was a few hours ride! Old man Buckley told people the family moved back east. Everyone believed him, and why not!”

“Please untie me?” begged Pearl sobbing.

“Can’t do that,” said Usher. “So Chester, my father, spent years looking and then he finally learned the truth. He was a lost, angry soul. Finally he turned to God and became a pastor. He preached forgiveness as only a man that was truly wronged could preach. He died at peace. His big regret in his life was telling me the truth. I vowed to avenge our family and he forbade it. We became enemies, and he had me committed to an institution where I spent the past 45 years...until a few weeks ago. Throughout my life, this loathing for your family has been bubbling up, until now... I had a lot of time to think...to plan...”

“W-what are you gonna do to us?” questioned Clara with a quivering voice.

“Oh, I’m gonna tell ya!” said Usher with a glint in his eye. “When I got out I returned to my family home and waited. I found my old saddle and gathered some supplies and headed here when the time was right.”

“We’ll do anything you want...You can have the house...I’ll sign it over to you...just...please...please don’t hurt our family...our children...” begged Horace.

Usher punched him in the jaw, spraying teeth and blood onto the white linen. “Of course I knew you would say that, but it’s much too late! I don’t want your house! I *knew* that Christmas Eve

would be the perfect time, just like your grandpa did! The whole family would be here; the law and all of the neighbors would be occupied with their own families!”

Harry darted from his seat and went to butt him with his head. Usher side-stepped, and Harry’s face smashed into the table. Usher picked him up by the hair as his nose bled onto the table. He threw him in a heap towards the corner.

Usher ranted, “This is the way it all ends. *Full circle*. I apologize for slaughtering your family but I’m sure you can understand that this is something that must be done! It’s my *destiny*! You will witness the death of your family before you die, Mr. Buckley. That’s exactly the way your grandfather slaughtered my family all those years ago!”

At this point the entire family was screaming, crying and pleading, but Usher was strong in his stance. “Now it begins!” he yelled. He rushed to Clara and grabbed her by her blond hair and raised the knife to her throat as the family screamed. Just as the knife was about to pierce her skin, a shot rang out and a bullet exploded in Usher’s skull. His eyes bugged as he fell onto the table, spewing even more blood onto it. Another shot hit him in the chest as he lay there, splayed on the table.

The shots came from outside, through the window. A second later, a mountain of a man darkened the doorway. He was about six foot six, with bushy gray hair and a beard to match. He looked to be about 80 years old, but as fit as a man half his age. It was their neighbor, Jacob Butz. He brushed the snow from his coat as he dropped it to the floor, along with his snowy hat. He rushed over and untied Mary, then Horace, and they all untied the children. Pearl and Clara were still crying and screaming. Harry was fighting back tears as he wiped the blood from his nose.

“Oh, Mr. Butz, thank The Lord you came by when you did, I can’t even imagine what woulda...” cried Mary as she buried her head into Horace’s shoulder.

“Yes, Jacob, we owe you our lives. How did you know?” asked Horace.

“Well,” Jacob began, “I stepped out back for a pipe after dinner. Ethel don’t let me smoke in the house no more. Whilst I was out there I heard a shot. I walked towards the sound and I found a horse tied to a tree. I looked closer and saw the nameplate on the saddle, “Elmer Usher” and it rang a dull bell. I remembered the name tucked somewhere deep in my brain, but I just couldn’t get there. I went back to the house and asked Ethel. *She* knew. Her mind is like a steel trap! She remembered the Pastor Usher from lottsya years ago, and his son, Elmer that was tetched in the head. She also remembered talk about bad blood between your families goin’ back a long time. She said I should call on you and take my rifle, just to be sure. So Ethel is the *real* hero here! So, I moseyed down the walk and through the window I saw ole Elmer there knock Harry onto the table. I got a hitch in my giddy up at that point and I was gonna come in when I saw him raise the knife. Before I knew it I aimed my gun and hit him straight in the head!”

“I’m so very glad that you did!” said Clara hugging the big man.

“God showed us an important lesson on this Christmas Eve.” said Mary hugging her children. “We learned that there is nothing as important as our family, no matter what.”

“Right...and I would say that no matter how many contraptions are invented, and things get more modern, it’s sad to think that the anger of one man against another that began in the Bible times will always be with us...” added Horace forlornly, as he wiped the blood from his chin.

Jacob threw a blanket over the body on the table and tried to break the mood. “Everyone grab yer coats and boots and whatever food ya can and carry it to my house. The fire is warm and Ethel will be wondering where I was, especially after hearing the shots! She’ll be glad to see you all safe. We’ll get you guys cleaned up and put some snow patches on those wounds. We will have some sort of Christmas meal and be truly thankful. We can call the sheriff and clean this mess up tomorrow. Outen the candles on yer way out!”

“Will Santa come to your house instead, Mr. Butz?” asked Pearl coyly.

“You can count on it, lil lady!” Jacob said winking.

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