

THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

By Michael Hebler

*(Excerpt Two from Stave II: The Christmas Angel)*

Two horses, and their riders, sliced through the murky haze. The Spirit recognized each driver despite them speeding past. Both Jonathan and young Morgan looked to have aged to twelve and seven respectively, prime ages to take part in a dangerous race such as this.

"Faster, Morgan, Faster," taunted Jonathan, in the lead by mere feet.

"I'm catching up!" Morgan warned.

Then, from the place where the boys had emerged, Deidra's voice followed, "Don't go too deep!"

"And stay clear of the lake," added Morgan Senior as the two halted next to the Spirit and the Angel.

The Spirit remembered, "This was our new Christmas tradition. It was our family outing before any celebration."

Giddy at hearing their two sons enjoying each other's company, Deidra suggested, "I don't think they heard us."

"I do believe we have lost them," spoke Morgan, equally jovial.

The Angel interrupted the moment to insist, "Come." Then, at the speed of twenty horses, she and the Spirit rushed through the forest. They did not dodge a single tree or bush but glided through any obstruction to arrive at Jonathan's side.

"You'll never beat me!" The boy cheered. "I'll always be older and faster."

Young Morgan slapped the reins, dodging low branches, logs, and rocks as he sped faster. And the more the gap between the two boys decreased, the more Jonathan's playful

disposition soured. There could be no missing the gleaming determination in the boy's face.

He came upon a wall of wild shrubs. Jonathan waited until the right moment to veer onto the opposite side. Morgan could not react fast enough and separated from his brother, who then veered at an angle and disappeared in the mist. Morgan cried foul while Jonathan's laughter echoed provokingly, having no choice but to ride alongside the full length of the shrubs before pivoting around the barrier.

Under the Angel's guidance, the Spirit was not given a choice as to which rider to follow. It flew steadily at Jonathan's side, looking back into mist, now and again, worried to see any shadow of little Morgan.

It saw none.

Jonathan roared maniacal laughter in the Spirit's ear--a flagrant attempt to egg his brother--though the reproach had worked as a beacon once Morgan's voice cried from somewhere near, "Wait for me!"

Jonathan pulled on the reins. His mount came to a stop then he hollered in kind, "I told you, you couldn't keep up!"

But the Spirit experienced no relief. Though its memory of this shadow had yet to be realized, it did recall this forest and all of the dangers that lurked from old downed logs that camouflaged in the fog to scattered brush too large to see what lay on the opposite side. The Spirit became distressed at the idea that Morgan could become more lost with each passing moment.

It turned to make an inquiry to the Angel, but instead, the Spirit gazed upon a vague shadow of her existence in the distance. "Angel? What is there that I need to witness?"

Her image did not speak back nor move in the slightest, and even more remarkable than her mystery, was Jonathan's ability to witness her as well.

From atop his mount, the boy paused at the Spirit's side when catching sight of the dark silhouette looming in the mist. He questioned its existence with a kindly, "Hello?"

But the image, which easily might be perceived as the Angel of Death, did not respond...and perceived as such it was when the sounds of splashing water accompanied young Morgan's pleas for help.

Like mirrored complexions, Jonathan and the Spirit ignored the ominous image and darted their gazes in the direction of the distressed cries.

Jonathan snapped the reins and hollered his horse to charge. He followed the rising volume of the boy's cries in sync with panicked splashing to a rider-less horse stationed on the top of a small drop-off.

Upon the sight of Morgan drowning in a marsh, the Spirit was released from its counterpart's side. It swooped down the muddy cascade and soared into a position above the boy. Fear filled the Spirit so much so that in a moment of desperation, it ignored the barriers between their paralleled worlds and cried Jonathan to hurry.

Morgan went under, as though panic had placed its hand upon his head and pushed.

"No! Come back!" The Spirit pleaded.

At first, one might consider what happened next to be a miracle of the day when Morgan's head lifted above the surface upon the plea, only to then extend an arm as he looked into the Spirit's eyes to beg, "Please! Help me!"

The Spirit reached without thought and passed its hand through Morgan's; experiencing not even the slightest

sensation of touch. It tried again, hoping the first attempt was in error, but nothing changed.

"Please, Lord, no!" The Spirit beseeched.

"Take my hand! Jonathan!" Morgan implored before his head fell below the surface, and did not come back up for air as it had before.

The Spirit twisted to find Jonathan frozen at the water's edge, standing stiff as cold stone since his arrival. Of course, it was he whom Morgan had pleaded to and reached for. What initially was thought to have been a Christmas miracle had been unreal. The rules of the universe remained absolute.