

## Ghosts of Fairport

Jacinta trudged home through the streets of downtown Fairport, clutching her presents against her as if protecting them from the cold and the wind and the chill of an Eastern Canadian winter. Christmas seemed to come earlier each year, and not in a good way. It seemed like every year the stress and the worry seemed to outweigh what little joy there was to be derived from the festive season to an ever-greater degree. Or maybe it's just because I'm getting old, she thought.

Judging from the press of people in Virginia square there weren't many that shared her sentiments, or if there were they simply were not letting that put them off trying to fit in as much last-minute Christmas shopping as possible before December the twenty-fifth. Everywhere she looked Jacinta could see mothers with young children, gangs of teenagers, and the occasional family, in the process either of entering or taking their leave from some shop or other, more often than not carrying bundles of gifts much like her own in their hands. She had lived in Fairport for approaching fifteen years now, and this looked like the busiest Christmas yet.

She wondered why it was that there seemed to be more people in town every year at this time. Was it because of a sudden influx of people? Fairport was certainly one of the fastest-growing towns on the Atlantic coast but Jacinta suspected that was down to how well the economy was doing rather than any material rise in population. Maybe the advertising companies were just starting to do their jobs better and more and more people were getting suckered into parting with their hard-earned pennies; like her for instance.

She chided herself. With two children and a job that barely allowed her to keep a roof over their heads the last thing that she could afford at the moment was the spending spree from which she was just returning. Oh well, it's just once a year, she thought. Except that it wasn't. There was Lauren's birthday; and Stevie's.

Jacinta stopped herself before she even let herself start down that road, knowing where it would lead. She had promised herself a while ago that she would start trying to live for the moment, to stop letting her worries concerning the future colour her enjoyment of the here and now. It was just difficult to change the habit of a lifetime; not that she hadn't broken it once or twice before. Like when she went and got pregnant for the first time.

Jacinta slowed down and stopped as the pedestrian crossing on the corner of State and Main went red. Thinking of her children made her look inside her bags at the presents she had bought for Lauren and Stevie. She smiled slightly at the shawl she had bought her daughter - it wasn't a million miles away from what her own mother had given her on her thirteenth birthday. The expression widened into a grin when she looked at Stevie's Spiderman doll. The kid would be made up with that - he had pointed it out enough times in the window of Sloane's Department Store every time they went past.

She sobered when she looked at the other presents in her bags. There was a woollen jumper and a silken scarf. *I'm so sorry we can't come this year, dear, but you know your father.* Her mother's apology sounded even hollower inside her head than it had on the telephone. 'This year', implying that the situation had changed since last year, or the year before that. She wondered why she even bothered asking her parents to join her for Christmas lunch anymore. England was far away, true, but was it really too much to ask for just one family visit in fifteen years? It wasn't like *they* couldn't afford it.

Have a lovely Christmas too Dad, she thought.

Jacinta cursed under her breath when she saw that the lights had changed from green back to red again whilst she had been ruminating. She couldn't understand why she was being like this suddenly. It was still a week before Christmas for God's sake - if she was like this now, what would she be like when the day itself came? Easy now girl, she told herself, keep it together for the kids. They were what was important. If she were honest with herself, they were really all that was important in her life right now.

"Jacinta!" a voice called.

Jacinta whirled around as she was hailed for the second time.

"Jacinta Seagrove! As I live and breathe - it's you, it really is you!"

From across the street a petite feminine figure, head topped with flame-red curls, broke out of the crowds and started waving madly at her. It took several moments for Jacinta to recognise the face, a few moments more to put a name to it, and no time at all to rush across to her when the lights finally changed in her favour.

It can't be, she thought, it's impossible. She had not seen the woman who had just shouted her name for almost fifteen years, but she had thought of her often during that time. Surprise faded to be replaced by wonder, as Jacinta got closer and realised that the face of her old roommate at Lincoln College had hardly changed at all. It seemed that the intervening years had been much kinder to Melissa Warner than they had been to her.

Melissa smiled warmly as she drew close. She put her arms out expectantly.

"Well... don't I even get a hug? I know you're British, but come on - it's cold out here!"

Jacinta hung onto her shopping for dear life as she was enfolded in what, for a woman of five foot two, was a surprisingly strong bear hug. As she stepped back she was struck once more by just how little the woman opposite her had changed since the last time she had seen her. She could remember that day as if it were yesterday, a cold morning much like this one, when they had both been standing on the steps of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, their eyes brimming with tears, each thinking that it was the last time they would ever see the other.

"Hey what's wrong honey?" Melissa's smile had faltered as she saw a sudden shadow pass over Jacinta's face.

She shook herself. This was the last thing that she wanted, collapsing in front of one of her old friends. From what she could remember Melissa was the type to make your problems her own rather than run away at the first sign of trouble, but even so, she wanted to at least try and keep it together for now. Besides, it was a long time since she had last seen Melissa and people changed. God knows, Jacinta was a very different person now from the carefree student she had been when they had first met each other all those years ago.

"Nothing" she said, trying to sound as if she meant it, "It's just stress. You know - Christmas and all that."

Understanding appeared on Melissa's face.

"Of course, your baby; I mean he or she must be, like, a teenager now right? Sorry - I've just realised that I don't even know if it turned out to be a boy or a girl."

"A girl and a boy," said Jacinta, smiling at the sudden look of confusion on her friend's face. "It wasn't twins. I got married a couple of years after that and Jack and I had a second child."

"Jack - he's your husband right?"

"Ex-husband." said Jacinta and added quickly, to forestall the apology that was shaping on Melissa's lips, "It's better that way, trust me, both for us and for the kids."

Especially Lauren, she added silently. There were a lot of reasons why it had never worked out between Jack and her, but in Jacinta's eyes her former husband's inability to relate to a child that wasn't his own was perhaps the most significant. That really wasn't something she felt like going into greater detail about just now though.

"And how are *you*? What's Melissa Warner doing way out here in Fairport?" she said, a warm but subject-changing smile on her face.

Melissa put an arm through hers and they walked together along the sidewalk as she spoke. She was well, she told Jacinta, still unmarried and childless. She had, somewhat unsurprisingly, found no use for her degree in Experimental Psychology and had gone travelling for a few years following graduation. After that she had followed her dream of becoming a journalist, writing freelance for a while before accepting a lucrative post working for the Boston Globe. Jacinta shook her head, who would have thought that Melissa – the scourge of the establishment in her time on the campus newspaper – would end up at an institution as conservative as the Globe. She said as much to her friend and was greeted with a peal of laughter.

"I know, what a sell-out, huh? In my defence I see myself as the great reformer – although don't tell my editor that! What about you though? We both know that you had more skill with words than I could ever have dreamed of. Any luck with the writing career?"

Yeah heaps, thought Jacinta, and all of it bad. But all she said was "I'm working on it I suppose. It's tough setting aside enough time, what with work and the kids and... You know."

Melissa nodded understandingly and Jacinta caught herself staring at her friend's face. She realised that she was trying to find some trace of crow's feet under her eyes, wrinkles or other blemishes and was unable to do so. Melissa seemed to realise that something was up though.

"Hey, have I grown horns or something?" she exaggerated the motion of feeling her forehead so that Jacinta couldn't help laughing before she replied.

"No, it's just that, well, can you tell me what lotion it is that you're using? Whatever it is, it's working - you look great! Seriously," she added when Melissa started shaking her head modestly, "you look like you haven't aged a day in fifteen years."

A cloud passed over her friend's face when Jacinta said these words, although she couldn't work out why. If anything she had understated how Melissa looked - there was a shine in her eyes and a glow to her cheeks that actually made her look healthier and prettier than she had ever been as a student.

"Oh it's nothing. I guess I'm just getting plenty of fresh air and exercise at the moment. Have you ever tried yoga?"

Jacinta nodded her head to say no, sensing that her friend wasn't quite telling her everything. While superficially everything seemed to be well with Melissa, she couldn't help feeling that something was not quite right. It was in her eyes, which occasionally seemed to look past Jacinta, as if checking for something on the street behind her. That seemed to be the only thing that was different about her old friend – the haunted look that appeared on her face from time to time as they spoke. Jacinta was unwilling to press her

about it, well aware that there were things that she herself did not wish to share straight away. The difficult stuff could wait, right now all that was important was enjoying just being in each other's company again after so long.

So they spoke for a while about other things as they stood there on the street corner. They talked about former acquaintances, ex-boyfriends and family, although Jacinta said little about that particular topic – just enough for her friend to gather that it was another taboo subject for the moment. As the minutes passed and the morning chill grew more pronounced Melissa asked her if she would like to grab a coffee but Jacinta declined.

"I've got to get back to the kids," she said apologetically.

Melissa nodded understandingly, and then put a hand to her head in a gesture of mock horror.

"I almost forgot. There's a do I'm going to this Friday at Simon's place. You simply have to come - all the old gang will be there. You remember Simon don't you?"

"Simon *Worthington*?"

When Melissa replied in the affirmative, Jacinta whistled through her lips. Of course she remembered *that* Simon. He had been a bit of a nerd at Lincoln, a serious somewhat old-fashioned young man who had nonetheless had no shortage of friends owing to his family connections. The Halifax Worthingtons were old money – one of the richest families in the Maritimes and major players on the Nova Scotian political scene. While Jacinta had never been particularly close to him, she remembered that he and Melissa had always been quite tight. They had even dated for a time. *He says the sweetest things* she remembered her former room-mate telling her once when she had cornered her to demand an explanation for the latest piece of gossip.

While Jacinta had no particular problem with seeing Simon again, or anyone else from her university days for that matter, she had reservations about going to the get-together. Sensing her hesitation, Melissa reassured her.

"Hey honestly, it's no big deal. It will all be really informal. But listen," she scabbled around in her handbag for a few seconds before pulling out a small card and scribbling on the back of it with a pencil stub, "even if you can't come you should definitely contact me – it would be great to really catch up. Ignore all that," she said, pointing at the front of the card, which appeared to have her business numbers on it, "call me on the number on the back - that's where I'm staying in Fairport."

Jacinta took the card then looked at her friend. Melissa just looked back and smiled. Sometimes words weren't necessary. They hugged.

"Don't be a stranger." whispered Melissa as they broke apart.

She waved once then turned to walk off. Jacinta stood on the sidewalk for several moments just watching as her friend faded back into the mid-morning crowd. A wash of emotions whirled inside her after the meeting. One emotion came to the fore and she identified it with a note of surprise: pure joy. She looked down at the small card that had been pressed into her hand and smiled to herself. The she turned and began the long walk home.

A short distance away a man folded a newspaper that he had been pretending to read for the last half hour. His eyes, blank and cold, followed Jacinta as she walked away then looked in the opposite direction. A carpet of snow lay thick on the ground, preserving the footsteps of all the passers-by as they went back and forth along the

narrow streets. Yet in the direction that he now gazed, and in which a few moments earlier Melissa had taken her leave, the ground was unblemished. He smiled suddenly and it was an expression that was terrible to behold, for there was no warmth in it, only a kind of feral hunger. An elderly lady, passing by the man, took an involuntary step back. His smile remained fixed as, quite deliberately, he tossed his newspaper on the ground at her feet. His eyes challenged her to make a protest but she looked away and carried on walking, albeit at a somewhat faster pace than before. The smile disappeared and a look of contempt flashed across the man's face, fading into an expression of self-satisfaction. He put a hand inside his jacket, producing a tiny mobile phone from a pocket within. He punched out a familiar number on the handset, then smiled again as he waited for his call to be answered.