

# Let Me Tell You About Friday

by  
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The sky was grey, the snow hard -- mostly ice after the freeze, thaw, freeze we'd had this week, and I was trudging home.

Not walking, trudging. It was the end of a long day, week, month, year and I was drained.

Friday night. December 21. No more work, not more anything but holiday and family and rest until the new year rolled around. Please, gods, I was thinking, let there be rest.

So I trudged. From work to the subway, from the subway to the streets, through the ice-snow filled streets to our house, up the driveway, up the stairs which we really need put a rail on before someone slips and kills themselves, across the cold porch to the thick wooden door with the over-sized brass knocker.

At which point I realized that this evening was not going to go as planned.

Our door is not wood. Our door is an insulated metal core door with a rather nice cut-glass window through which I could usually see the light shining from the kitchen where my wife, on the nights she got home first, would be making dinner and giving our daughter her snack.

And we certainly didn't have a knocker, brass or otherwise.

I stepped back from the door to check the house number and nearly tripped on the thick cobbles that were now beneath my feet.

Being a well educated, literate man, I am pleased to say I managed to stop myself before finishing the exclaimed, "What the f--"

The fog in the street was thick and yellow and the gas lamp at the far end of the dim, narrow alley I was standing in gave little light save what gleamed off the brass of the door knob and the pale flesh of the face where the knocker had been.

I stumbled back, staring at the round, white face with its wide, unblinking eyes and wide open mouth frozen in what would have been a howl had any sound come out and stumbled back once more, this time losing my balance and landing hard on the cobblestones.

The wide eyes followed me down, the, the wide open mouth closed to a thin, hard-pressed line. I glared up at it. "Three years at least," I said. "Three years since I've heard word one and you pull this on me now?"

The face vanished leaving a brass knocker that retreated back as the door swung slowly inward,

hinges screeching and crying at the effort. Inside I could see a dark hallway and a single candle, sitting in a holder on a small table just inside the door, its small flame flickering as the cold evening air invaded its hallway.

"Dammit, Charles," I yelled, "don't pull this on me."

Now, for those who know my history, there is no need to explain that about seven years ago I made an error that ended with my cursed to have a ghostly visitor every Christmas, but I should add that, for the last three years, no visitors have come. All has been silence and I, being rather busy, was beginning to enjoy it. And now this.

I thought about running away. More out of pique than anything else, really, but where would I go? Back down the dark cobblestoned alley that was even now slowly filling with that thick yellow fog that had engulfed and nearly smothered the pale light of the lamp and was creeping ever closer, its tendrils reaching out toward me and caressing my leg like the tender explorations of some blind, tentacled undersea creature searching for its next victim?

I got to my feet and stepped quickly inside.

The door swung shut behind me much quicker than it had opened, the hinges screaming with the sudden motion and making me wince even before it slammed shut, leaving me in a long dark, musty hallway.

"Straight out of *A Christmas Carol*," I muttered. "Not even original."

I picked up the candle and held it close to the wall. The wall paper, brown or perhaps faded red, was stained and stinking with with moisture and mold and age. It had once had a pattern of some sort but it was faded beyond recognition. The ceiling above had once been plaster, but was chipped and cracked in a dozen places I could see in the small circle the candle lit. I lowered it. "Well, now what?"

At the far end of the hallway a thin bright line of yellow light appeared as if a dozen candles together were fighting off the darkness, and sending what light they could out under the sill of a door in search of reinforcements.

Holding the candle arms-length in front of me to show the cobwebs I was sure would be there but which never appeared I moved slowly down the hall, the boards groaning and popping under my weight to announce that surely, at any minute, the floor would open itself into a pit and I would be cast far down below into the darkness and the grasps of the creatures who lived in it.

"Great," I muttered. "Even my sentences are becoming Dickensian. We're going to talk about this, Cousin Charles!"

The floor held my weight though it bent beneath my feet and protested every step with squeaks and complaints. I reached the door, grasped the knob, turned and pushed. It didn't move. I did it again, and

it still didn't move. I was seriously considering putting my shoulder to it when a calm voice which did not belong to my cousin Charles Dickens, from within said, "try pulling."

I did. The knob came off in my hand and someone inside snickered as the the door swung open away from me, exactly as if I'd pushed it.

I dropped the doorknob on the floor and walked into the room in a state of medium dudgeon. The inside was lit by those dozen candles I had over-described earlier and a fire in the fireplace besides. A table sat in the middle of the room between two wingback chairs whose front faced the fireplace and whose back was to me and on that table stood a rather dusty bottle of what could only be a very good, very old whisky if the dust on the bottle and the colour of the alcohol within were any indication.

"Two hundred years old," said someone.

I walked widely around the chairs. As I suspected, one of them was occupied.

"Good evening," said the man sitting in it. "Have a drink."

He was slightly built and not tall, to judge by how much of his head was below the top of the chair. The light of he fire cast into dark relief his pale face and sunken, hazel-grey eyes. His hair was wavy, though not overly long, his clothes dating from somewhere in the 19th century, and his health, to judge by appearances, was not at all good. I stared at him until I remembered a picture I had seen.

"Poe," I guessed. "Edgar Allen."

"Correct." said Poe, smiling.

I thought about it for a while. "I was really expecting Charles Dickens."

"I know."

"I mean, the face in the knocker, that's his shtick."

"I know," repeated Poe. "He asked me to put it there, since he couldn't come himself."

"Why couldn't he?"

The light from the fire flickered on his face, changing his expression from gentle to maniacal as the flames shifted. He pointed to an empty glass on the table. "Help yourself and have a seat."

I opened the bottle and poured a rather high glass full. I raised it carefully to my lips and sniffed. Peat, oak, dust, and beneath it all, a burning that made the hair in my nostrils curl and sent a shiver of anticipation through the rest of me. I inhaled the bouquet one more time, then took a swallow.

The heat from the whiskey slipped through me like a firestorm through California brush. I stayed stock still, waiting for the first rush to pass before I attempted to find the chair. When my eyes cleared, I sat down."

"Charles is sorry he couldn't make it," said Poe. "He and Davies are trying to teach Lovecraft how to write a ghost story."

I shuddered at the thought. "What did they do to deserve that?"

"Lost a bet with Samuel Clemens."

"Poor them." I leaned back in the chair and took another swallow of the whisky. The firestorm raged higher and my eyes took longer to clear. "So," I said. "Where have you been."

"Dead."

"Not *you* you," I corrected. "All of you. I haven't seen a ghost at Christmas in three years. Where have you been? And why all this set dressing?"

Poe sniffed. "There is no point in doing a haunting if you aren't going to do it right. A good story needs atmosphere."

"Which has always been your speciality."

"It has," agreed Poe. "Even if Dickens had to put in that face in the knocker." He sighed. "Always overdoing it. Terror is brought about in small increments, building to an inescapable climax of horror. Not given away with faces in door knockers."

"So to answer the first question?"

"Well you have been busy," said Poe. "Working, children, writing. We decided to wait until you recovered your equilibrium."

I snorted in spite of myself. "And I've regained it now, have I?"

"Oh no," said Poe, his voice suddenly very tired, very sad. "Not at all."

"So you're here...?"

Poe leaned back in his chair, his features changing in the light of the fire. His nose becoming more prominent, his eyes more sunken. "To speak to you of sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Sleep," he said again. "And dreams. And nightmares."

"Nightmares?" I repeated. "I don't even remember my dreams, let alone any nightmares."

"You don't need to remember your nightmares," said Poe, steepling his fingers and fixing me with a gaze that seemed to be trying to crawl into my skull. "You're living one."

"I am not!"

"Really? You go each day to a job that you love but are terrified you will be fired from because of your lack of focus. You come home every night and pick at a computer, goofing off when you should be repairing that 250 page error of yours in Cold Magics. You don't sleep enough, you don't spend enough time with your family, and you haven't really left the house for more than a few hours in a dozen months."

"I've been busy," I protested. "I have a tone to do, and I only have so much time to do it."

Something has to go."

"So you don't sleep."

"So I don't sleep."

The master of horror leaned forward, the fireplace light dancing in hazel-grey eyes that looked piercingly into my own. "Ballocks."

"What?"

"Ballocks," he repeated. "Don't fool yourself. Sleep is what makes a man function. Interacting with people makes a writer interesting. Having relationships makes the relationships you write interesting. Ballocks."

"And you have a suggestion?" I demanded.

"I have the solution," said Poe. "Sleep."

"That's it? that's all you've got? Sleep?"

"Well, yes."

"That's it? I've been cursed to be visited by ghosts, threatened with an eternity in hell, threatened to be made into a critic, which might well be worse than the eternity in hell, and I've been nearly skewered on the blade of a man whose been dead for five hundred years and "Sleep" is all you have?" I shook my head and raised my glass. "Really, and you the master of--"

I stopped the glass short of my lips. The smell of whisky was gone. The new smell was thick and coppery. I put the glass down, watching the red liquid that now filled it slop over onto the little table.

"I don't think you understand," said Edgar Allen Poe. "We have taken a personal interest in you."

"We?"

"This conversation is going to get very dull if you keep repeating what I say." said Poe. I shut up. he continued, "You are published and we approve. We approved enough to share that bottle with you," said Poe, "And if you can imagine how hard it is to pry whisky from a group of writers you will understand how much approval that is."

He leaned back in the now cobweb-covered much abused chair. "Without sleep, things change. All things become harder. All moods become more violent." From somewhere in the room I heard a flapping of wings. "All joys slip away to nothing. And more importantly, writing becomes difficult."

"I've noticed."

"So get sleep," said Poe. "We are awaiting your next book, and would hate for it to be delayed further."

I stood up. "So that's still it? Get sleep?"

"Yes," Poe stood up himself. "And congratulations on the book. We're all very impressed."

"Oh. Good."

Poe went to the door of the room. "Oh, one other thing?"

"yes?"

"If you do not get sleep, it will be the death of you?"

"And how do you know that?"

"Because I have been told that, should your habits not improve, myself and Lovecraft get to take turns haunting you until you sleep no more."

I shuddered. "That's mean."

"Yes," said Poe, smiling. "Why do you think they sent me?"

With those words, the walls vanished, the room vanished and I was staring at a cut-glass door with a light shining from inside. I unlocked it, then opened it up and stepped inside.

Poe haunting me? And Lovecraft?

That was it, I was getting sleep if it killed me.