

A Christmas Ghost Story

Many years ago, I worked as a research assistant at a university in one of those great red brick towns in the North of England, built on the back of cotton, wool and slaves. It was December, and I ventured out of my chill garret one morning to search for warmth, light and good cheer amongst the shops and hostelryes of the High Street. I was muffled up warm, for the sky was heavy with impending snow, and rhyme traced out patterns of mathematical chaos over the paving slabs. The street was busy with hurrying shoppers in their brightly coloured hats and scarves, and I slipped through the crowd making for my favourite bookseller.

A tram rattled past, and in the brief pause in the flow of people I happened to glance across at the building on the other side of the road. I must have passed it many times before, but somehow I had failed to notice it, despite its incongruity. Squeezed between brightly lit storefronts, the monumental sandstone structure was grey with the grime of ages. Tall pointed arches stood stacked, one atop the other like a house of cards. Ornate carvings, more esoteric than any that adorned any house of worship, scrolled across the stonework. Faint light glimmered from behind the narrow windows, filled with stained glass forming incomprehensible designs in cerulean and crimson.

It struck me that I knew of this building, for it was a part of the university where I worked, trying to chip away at the unfathomable mysteries of the Universe. It was a library, named for one of the Great Men of Science, but who, I cannot now exactly recall; or perhaps I have erased the name from my waking mind, to haunt my troubled turbulent sleep. Whichever it may have been, of a sudden I was gripped by an immense curiosity that I regret to this day, as I lay down these words with fingers twisted by arthritis. And so I resolved to venture within, for the great wooden door stood ajar, and a warm glow leaked through the narrow opening.

And so I strode, slightly nervously, for I did not know if I would be admitted, up those fateful stone steps that led to the entrance, which seemed, as I stood upon the threshold, much larger than it had appeared from across the street. The doors appeared heavy, I do not think I could have moved them, even if I had cared to try, but the gap between them

was easily wide enough for me to slip between (for in those days I was of much slighter build than I am now). I was not challenged – indeed I did not immediately see anyone within, but I was too busy gazing around me to notice the absence of life, for this library was like no library I had seen before.

Instead of the usual long wooden stacks of books, shelves packed with volumes, the warm flickering light illuminated a forest of stone columns, most capped with a statue of some august personage or noted luminary, supporting a high, vaulted ceiling. The books, large and leather bound, peaked out from behind the columns, and I was minded of hungry wolves peering at me from behind trees. Many of the largest volumes sat open on lecterns that took the form of great eagles (or other birds of prey – I'm no great expert on ornithology). Their pages were beautifully illuminated in gold, red, blue and green, but they were chained down, lest they escape and ambush over-curious scholars in a flurry of pages. There was an actual tree here as well: a great spruce with many candles upon its boughs was the main source of illumination. It was at this point that I became aware that there was no other human soul in sight, but there seemed to be vague shapes moving in the flickering candlelight, just out of view behind the pillars and stacks, and I was convinced I was not alone.

Feeling like an intruder (and perhaps I was) I reversed my steps towards the entrance, when, upon the left-hand side of the doorway, I caught sight of a narrow stone stairway spiralling away up into darkness. Again, I was gripped by accursed curiosity, and I ascended with echoing footsteps up that narrow way.

The stairs led up to a long low room: a reading room I guessed, for it was lined with desks and chairs. I could see no one working at any of the desks, but I could hear the scratching of a pen and the rustle of pages coming from somewhere nearby. I noticed an open book upon one of the empty desks, and I looked at it more closely, for, despite the apparent age of the tome the sketchy illustrations on its pages reminded me of my work back at the university. I sat in the chair and tried to read, but the text was in Latin, or some other ancient language that was beyond my comprehension. The diagrams, however, made perfect sense to me, covering many of the same topics that I had been working on these past three years. Not only that, but they went well beyond my own work, and, as I scrabbled frantically through the pages, the mysteries of dark

matter, the directionality of time, and the true origin and fate of the Universe unfolded before me in a series of increasingly strange pictures.

I slammed the book SHUT. The bang resonated all through the halls of the library, the increasingly faint echoes continuing for some considerable time. I hurried, ashen, from that strange building, and must have wandered, stunned, through the city streets for quite a considerable time, if time could be still be said to have any meaning. And as I wandered, I gazed upon all those happy, simple people going about their business as someone gazing from afar at a reflection in the surface of a delicate glass bauble.

And from that day forward I abandoned my scientific studies, and gave myself over to the pursuit of Music, and Art, and Literature, and I kept my eyes turned firmly away from the heavens, for I had learned that what the philosopher said was true: when you stare too deeply into the Void the Void stares back, and the name of the author I had seen on the cover of that insane book as I had slammed it shut had been my own.

-Paul R. A. Farquhar, December 2019