

The Uninvited Guest (by Robert Bee)

The Christmas turkey was but a flayed cage of bones on the serving dish. Its former flesh lay heavily in the four stomachs surrounding the Hoggit dinner table, announced by the occasional belch.

The potato, corn, pumpkin and peas had gone the same way, adding to the symphony of digestion.

"I'm full, Ma," complained Alma.

"Me too." Ikky threw a stray pea across the table at his twin sister, aiming at the zit blossoming on her button nose.

"Ezekial, behave," Essie Hoggit snapped. "I told you kids to leave room for the puddin'. Now we'll have to wait a'whiles."

"Suits me," Horace Hoggit belched from the end of the table. "I'm stuffed." He gazed out the cracked dining room window at the flat dry fields reaching towards the equally flat horizon. His old tractor stood in the afternoon sun beside the even older barn. The barn's corrugated roof shimmered in the mid-day heat, daring any wayward crows to even try a landing. "Jesus, it's hot Essie."

"Bite your tongue, Horrie. Remember whose birthday we're celebrating." Essie piously pushed her chair back and headed for the kitchen.

"Sorry, Essie." Horace winked at his two children. "I wouldn't want God to strike me down. At least, not until I've had my pudding." Alma and Ikky giggled at their Dad's rare display of humour, and Horace joined in, between burps.

As if on cue, there was a sound like the curtain of the firmament being ripped, then a thunderous explosion. The following shock wave lifted the old farmhouse off its foundations. The turkey carcass leapt off the table and landed in a fatty mess on Horace's lap.

Profanities log jammed behind Horace's clenched jaw, afraid to escape lest another heavenly blast strike him down. He felt a particularly blasphemous phrase squeezing past his teeth and braced himself for a second dose of heavenly wrath.

"Shit, what was that?" Alma screamed.

"Bugged if I know," Ikky yelled, and ran to the window. "Uh oh!"

Horace upended his chair, scraped the turkey off his lap and on wobbly legs went to the window. "My barn," he cried.

Horace could be forgiven the exaggeration, for up to that moment, a barn had in fact stood at the spot now occupied by a great smoking crater. Bits of barn and tractor continued to rain down, though most of it lay in a twisted ruin encircling the crater.

"My barn," Horace groaned.

"My, what a bang." Essie stood at the kitchen door, cross-eyed, covered in custard powder, and a saucepan over her head like Johnny Appleseed. "You lot see what it was while I get the pudding ready." She returned to the kitchen, humming 'White Christmas'.

"Essie, the barn's been blown to bloody billyo," Horace yelled.

"That's nice, Horrie. You go repair it while I fix the pudding." 'Jingle Bells' warbled from the kitchen.

Horace and the two teenagers tumbled out of the front door – the front steps hadn't landed back in the right place – and approached the still smoking crater, stepping around pretzelled sheets of roof iron and melted tractor tyres.

The hole was as big as the barn had been.

"My barn," Horace sobbed as they climbed the crater rim.

"Remember 'The War of the Worlds'?" Ikky whispered in awe. "Do you think..."

"No, this is more like what happened in 'The Blob'," Alma said. "So don't touch anything, no matter how pretty it looks." She turned to her father. "What do you think it is Dad?"

"My barn," Horace whimpered.

They reached the crest of the rim and looked down. Amid the smoke and shadows, they could make out a large hemispherical mass, glowing in pulsating purples.

"Wow," said Alma.

Ikky tested the side of the crater and almost fell in. "Great Zorel, this is how Superman came to Earth. Holy Christmas Day, do you think..."

"My barn," Horace croaked.

Alma and Ikky peered into the crater, trying to penetrate the smoke. "It's not moving," said Alma.

"No doors opening," agreed Ikky. They stared at the glowing object, ignoring their father's lamentations.

"Of course, it could be just a meteorite," Alma said.

Ikky stared at his sister, torn between fantasy and reality. He chose reality. "No, it has to be..."

"Pudding's on," Essie called across the debris strewn yard. "Get it while it's hot."

Alma and Ikky exchanged glances, then shrugged. "May as well," said Ikky. "This thing's not going anywhere."

They each grabbed one of Horace's arms and started leading him back to the house to finish their Christmas dinner. His final "My barn" was cut off by the slamming screen door.

At the bottom of the crater, the purple mass lay still, cooling, crackling. Then with glacial slowness, it rose from the smoky shadows and began to seep up the side of the crater. As it slurped over the rim's crest it accelerated and, as if driven by a primal need, continued to gain speed. It approached the listing house like a snail in full flight.

The aroma of plum pudding and brandy custard wafting from the shattered windows enveloped the nebulous mass, shaping it from primordial codes deep within its alien genes until it resumed its true form.

As it crashed through the front door, deep inside its impossible mind, an ancient mantra was repeated... and repeated...

"Bones and flesh, have them fresh,

but beware of threepences in the pudding."

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