

## A Ghost of Christmas Past

by Jean R. Timmins



"How can you stand visiting that old bitch every week, Mora? She's getting harder to take every day."

As she spoke, the young woman threw herself into the driver's seat, slammed the car into gear and jerked it away from the curb in front of the apartment block with scant regard for oncoming traffic.

"'That old bitch' happens to be my sister—and four years older than I am—so I guess I owe her something. Try not to be so vicious about your aunt, Fran." was the mild reply of the gray haired woman sitting beside her *in* the little car, now threading its way through the late afternoon traffic of downtown Vancouver.

"Well, I'm glad all I have to see of her is the few minutes I spend there when I come to pick you up. Even so she always manages to get in some dig about me and what she calls my 'dissolute' way of life."

Fran's quick temper was cooling now and she could grin a bit about her Aunt Esther's expressed

disapproval of the fact that her niece was living in a state of unwedded bliss. Fran had tried taking Johnny to visit Aunt Esther but that had been a complete disaster, never to be repeated if Fran had anything to say about it.

"How can she be so hard and bitter—and so *condemning* of anything that might be slightly different, Mom? You're not like that, and yet, as you just said, you are sisters."

Janet Richards sighed and glanced at her daughter, impulsive, generous—and headstrong. There were similarities between Esther and Fran, but they were blurred by the years in age and generation which separated them.

"Esther wasn't always hard and bitter and condemning, Fran. She was once very much like you!"

"Oh, hey, come on." Fran's voice rose in a squeal of protest.

Her mother laughed: "Look I'm just saying that not so long ago Esther and *I* were young. When you were born, Esther was almost as proud of you as I was. She sort of chose your name — Frances."

Her voice trailed off a bit here—she knew that last statement wasn't going to improve Fran's attitude towards her aunt, because Fran, at an early age, had decided she couldn't stand her name—"Frances". Of course, since she had met John and started what this generation called a 'relationship' and what Esther referred to as an 'affair' with him, it was even worse. The 'Frankie and Johnny' joke was worked and overworked by most of the couple's friends.

Mrs. Richards waited through her daughter's expected outburst; then—

"Yes, I know you don't much like your name, but it's really quite a nice name, and she might have had her reasons for choosing it."

"What *do* you mean, Mom, 'she might have had her reasons'? Nobody else in our family has the name, or ever has had. Hey, did she have a boyfriend called Frank or something?"

Fran's hilarity at the thought of her old maid aunt having anything faintly resembling a boyfriend brought a quick reaction from her mother.

"Now just wait a minute, Fran. You don't really know much about those years when I was young. Maybe I should tell you a bit more about Esther's youth. It's not really my story to tell, but it might help you to understand her a bit better. This time of year, December, makes me think of a Christmas about fifty years ago. Can it possibly be fifty years. . .!"

Janet's mind went back to that small frame house on the prairies which she and her two sisters had called home. December on the prairies—how different from this mild west coast weather! Back there, the icy wind whipped snow like buckshot into your face as you walked the two miles from town to home. It was the middle of the hungry thirties—drought, dust, no crops, no money, and very few jobs. Esther, seventeen (nearly eighteen) was lucky. She had a job looking after a couple of kids and doing housework for a family in Saskatoon, a hundred miles from home. I was only thirteen, and I remember trudging home from school on that last day before the Christmas holidays, fifty years ago. I was old enough to know very well why Christmas this year would be a very meagre feast—too many years of no crops left farmers with nothing but debts to celebrate. I told myself that /didn't mind, but Kathy, only five, would have a hard time understanding why this year Santa wouldn't be arriving to leave presents under the tree—there wouldn't even *be* a tree, mother had said.

Later that evening, I heard the whistle of the passenger train as it swept through the night towards Winnipeg, and that mournful sound made me feel more sad and helpless. That train had come from Saskatoon on its way to Winnipeg. Saskatoon and Esther—I couldn't think of anything to make a happier Christmas for my baby sister, but I was sure that Esther, if only she were home, would have thought of *something*. To me Esther had always been just about the cleverest, prettiest girl in Saskatchewan, able to handle any kind of problem with ease. So that, an hour or so later, when the door burst open and Esther came in from the dark night, it seemed just like one of the miracles that only Esther could manage to arrange. With much laughter and bustle, she told us that she just hadn't been able to stay away from home at Christmas time so had begged for enough time off to come home, and those kind people had actually allowed it. Esther's arrival changed the whole complexion of the festive season, for it was now truly festive. She would not accept a 'no Christmas tree' Christmas and came up with a marvellous invention.

"All we need," said Esther "is a smallish poplar tree. Then we buy some of that green crepe paper—it's only 15 cents a package. Then we cut it into strips, fringe the strips, and wrap each branch of our little poplar tree with this fringed paper—see, it'll be easy."

Easy it wasn't, but fun it certainly was. Kathy and I worked with Esther all day and even a good part of the next, which was Christmas Eve day, to finish our 'prairie' Christmas tree as Esther christened it. When at last we had used up every scrap of green crepe paper, had wrapped every possible branch and twig of the little poplar tree, then covered it with the family collection of Christmas ornaments, it made a brave show in the corner of the living room. It may not have looked exactly like a spruce or a pine, but it certainly didn't look like a plain old poplar either.

Five year old Kathy was quite sure, now that the miracle of a Christmas tree had been accomplished, that Santa Claus would have no trouble finding the house that night. She went happily off to bed—early, because after all, it was Christmas Eve. But I wasn't very pleased when Esther suggested that I should get to sleep early too—"in preparation for the big day tomorrow" she said. When I protested, Esther explained a bit more.

"Look", she said "you and Kathy and I have spent almost the whole time since I've been home

working on the tree, and I haven't had much time to talk to Mother and Dad. It's sort of grown up stuff, so if you don't mind, Janet?"

Well, approached like that, given a half-way-to-grown-up status, I gave in gracefully and went into the small bedroom off the living room, with a few chuckles from my father now and then, and my mother's low voice alternating with the quick eagerness of Esther's. She was obviously telling them more about her life in Saskatoon. I was dropping off to sleep when my father's raised voice startled me awake.

"No, and again no, Esther—we cannot possibly allow you—just seventeen—"

I couldn't hear the rest, nor Esther's reply, but obviously something important was being discussed. So I slipped out of bed and crouched against the bedroom door, shamelessly listening as hard as I could. This wasn't just ordinary eavesdropping—this had something to do with Esther and I had to know what it was.

It was my mother's voice I heard next.

"Esther, you just don't know how hard life can be. This young man, Frank whatever his name is;—he may be a fine young man, but he has no job, and you are so young. You can afford to wait..."

I gasped—a young man—was Esther *engaged* or something? Real romance right here in the living room. But somehow, something was going wrong. Now it was Esther, whose voice was raised, crowding in over her mother's words.

"Mother, he *has* a job. It's just that he's laid off. He's a trainman, I told you—a trainman with the CPR. When times get better, he'll be called back to work. Please, both of you, we want to get married now and I have to have your permission. Please, can't you see, either of you...?"

Esther's voice broke here, and I could hear her crying. This wasn't exciting anymore, it was sad and unhappy and not very much like Christmas Eve. The voices from the living room went on for a very long time, but too low for me to hear any more. So I crept back to bed and eventually went to sleep.

Janet Richards, sitting in the car beside her daughter, finished the story of that Christmas fifty years ago.

"All I remember of that Christmas day is Esther's quietness—and her red swollen eyes. She told Kathy and me that she must be catching cold. And she went back to Saskatoon the next day."

"But Mom," protested Fran, "Surely you found

out more. Surely she told you about this Frank."

"Well, no, not right then" said her mother.

"Remember fifty years ago a thirteen year old girl was considered too young to be admitted to the council of the elders, so to speak. But over the years I gradually found out a bit here and a bit there. Very little from Esther herself, because she started right then to keep her secrets to herself a lot more than she had ever done before."

Janet sighed over the years gone by, then continued:

"Later I met a girlfriend of Esther's who told me most of what happened. When Esther went back to Saskatoon without permission to marry Frank, she went ahead—being headstrong like you—and had an affair with him, as we oldtimers so quaintly say. When she became pregnant, as was inevitable given her innocence and the universal ignorance of birth control methods, Frank left her flat. Without asking help from anyone, or advice from anyone, she chose to—well, to get rid of the baby—to have an abortion."

"But, Mom, wasn't that illegal?" Fran's voice rose in shocked protest.

"Oh, yes, illegal, and in those days, spoken of only in whispers. But somehow she managed to do it, and somehow managed eventually to pay off the doctor who had performed the operation. By working as a domestic, or at any job she could find, she paid him off—and became the hard bitter old woman you know today."

There were tears in Fran's eyes, and she was silent for some moments. Then she sighed.

"What can anybody really say about a thing like that? She has had such a wasted life."

"Yes, wasted. It's the one thing I find it hard to forgive my parents, but to give them their due—they thought they were protecting her from the hardships of a poverty-stricken marriage. It is never easy watching your children grow up."

Here she glanced at Fran and they exchanged a quick smile, for Fran had not asked permission when she moved in with Johnny. She had taken matters into her own hands and informed her parents of her decision.

"Well, I'm glad you told me about Aunt Esther. Mind you, I'm not saying *it* completely excuses her. She made certain choices for herself, and she shouldn't blame the world if they turned out to be wrong ones. But yes, I can and I will be more understanding the next time she gets on my back about Johnny."