Ghosts of Christmas Past

by

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FADE IN.

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

There’s little room on the mantelpiece for Christmas decoration. A few candy canes and tinsel line the edge, reflecting light from the fireplace below.

Family photos take up most of the space. There are a lot of them:

A middle aged man, wearing a fishing vest. He hugs a ten year old boy. The fishing pole rests between them.

The same boy mugs for the camera. He bends over a Red Rider sled, poised to take it for a spin.

A shot of the man in a recliner; a pipe in his mouth. He sports more grey hairs this time – and more wrinkles.

A teenaged boy holds his diploma out to the camera. The man, his hair now snow white, rests an arm on his shoulder – a proud smile on his face.

A snow globe sits at the end of the mantelpiece. Bits of confetti float in the liquid, falling around the plastic snowman encased inside.

EXT. CEMETARY - AFTERNOON

It’s snowing. Hard. BRIAN (35) bends down, brushing slush from a tombstone. His glasses are somewhat icy as well. Rangy and lean, he wears a battered tan trench coat, only a few shades lighter than his brown hair.

DANIELLE (37) stands a few feet behind him, watching somberly. Tall and blonde, her straight hair falls back over the shoulders of her wool overcoat.

BRIAN
Merry Christmas, Dad.


BRIAN
You should have seen our tree this year. We cut it down from Battenfields, just like you always did.
Seven footer - had to cut some off the bottom before it fit the ceiling. No room for the angel when we stood it up.

A Christmas blanket lies to his right, decorated with red ribbons. He places it before the headstone gently.

BRIAN
You know, Barney still looks for you. He won’t play catch with anyone else. Whenever he hears a sound, he goes running for the door.

Brian pauses in thought.

BRIAN
Okay, maybe not running. He’s getting old too, you know...

He glances at Danielle for support. She smiles gently.

BRIAN
It won’t be the same without you, Dad. We miss you. And I’m...sorry. Really sorry. But Merry Christmas. We’ll remember. I promise.

Sighing, Brian brushes snow from the tombstone one last time. Looking towards Danielle, he gives her a faint nod. They turn to leave.

INT. CAR - EVENING

The snowfall continues, driving heavily against the windshield.

Brian sits behind the wheel, Danielle in the passenger seat. The dashboard’s glow lends everything a greenish hue. The SWISH of wipers is the only sound in the car.

DANIELLE
You okay?

Brian nods his head, his eyes locked on the road.

BRIAN
I’ll be fine. I thought Exit 6 would be coming up by now...

A station wagon cuts in front, a little too close for comfort. Brian grimaces, slaps the wheel in irritation.
BRIAN
Signal would be nice.

He grumbles under his breath.

BRIAN
Asshole...

The two lapse into silence. They turn off the highway, onto Exit 6. The TIK TIK of the car’s signal seems terribly loud. After a moment, Brian smiles faintly in Danielle’s direction.

BRIAN
You know, when I was a kid, my dad had this Christmas tradition. Every year, we’d go ice fishing. Never caught anything...not that it mattered. Then we’d go to Sarnies for a huge Italian dinner. Mom didn’t have to cook, and no-one had to clean up afterwards. When we got back, we’d light the tree and open a gift - just one. Then head to bed.

Brian pauses, and draws a slow breath.

BRIAN
It’s just - he was always there. He took care of us. He did so much, and now...

Brian’s voice cracks, his words trailing off. Danielle puts a hand on his knee.

DANIELLE
He knew you loved him, Brian. And you did everything you could. It’s Christmas, and he’d want you to be happy.

She gives her husband a look of encouragement.

DANIELLE
We’ve got the tree at home. A few gifts. A little wine...

Brian smiles weakly.

BRIAN
And a little Barney to be walked. I know. I promise I’ll lighten up. Sorry for the mood.

Danielle shakes her head, dismissing his concern. Brian holds out a free hand, which she takes in hers.
INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Brian and Danielle lie on the floor beneath a Christmas tree, surrounded by presents. String lights twinkle. Brian holds a wine glass as Danielle unwraps a box.

It’s a Sandicast Labrador ornament, similar in color to Barney - a chunky yellow lab who lies a few feet away.

BRIAN

Well?

Danielle eyes the gift critically.

DANIELLE

He’s cute. A little thinner than the original.

She makes a move, reaching towards the pile of presents.

DANIELLE

This one’s Barney’s. Let me get another...

Brian intercepts her hand.

BRIAN

No, just one. Remember, that’s the rule. You don’t like it?

He picks up the ornament, and examines it from several angles. He holds it up to Barney for comparison.

Danielle takes the ornament from Brian’s hand, and kisses it on the nose.

DANIELLE

No, I like it a lot. Thanks.

She follows up with a kiss to Brian - considerably more passionate. They snuggle, the presents forgotten.

DANIELLE

I just don’t see why we have to wait till morning.

BRIAN

I told you. Tradition’s very important in the Brennan household. Especially at Christmas.

Danielle pouts.
DANIELLE
We never waited when we were kids.

BRIAN
Your family also had a Chanukah bush.
Bunch of radicals. Tonight, we wait.

He cuddles closer.

BRIAN
Besides, we have better things to do than unwrap gifts.

Danielle relaxes in his arms, and smiles.

DANIELLE
It’s good to see you happy. I was getting worried.

Brian sighs, and puts down his glass.

BRIAN
I’m sorry. It’s just...the first Christmas without him here. I can practically feel his absence.

Brian looks to the fireplace. Lights from the tree bounce off the glass of family photos.

BRIAN
Dad was the one that was big on tradition. Every year the fishing, and the night out. And every year he’d put out a glass of milk and cookies for Santa. Gone in the morning, of course.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dressed in sleeper pajamas, YOUNGER BRIAN (7) stands in the kitchen doorway, unnoticed by his father.

RICHARD BRENNAN (52) sits in his recliner - a plate on cookies in his lap, the glass of milk in his hand.

BRIAN (V.O.)
I actually believed it until I was seven. I snuck into the living room one night, and caught him at it. He didn’t see me, and I never told him I knew. He actually continued the tradition until I left for college.
BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian hugs Danielle closer.

BRIAN
I think he knew I’d figured it out by then. And hopefully a hell of a lot sooner.

DANIELLE
Your dad was a great guy.

BRIAN
I know. I wish you’d gotten to know him when he was younger. He had so much energy then.

Standing up, Brian reaches a hand down to Danielle.

BRIAN
But enough of that. I think it’s time for bed.

He leers comically, as Danielle takes a few steps towards the bedroom.

DANIELLE
Give me a moment. I’ll get the Santa suit!

Brian raises an eyebrow.

BRIAN
Be right in. Let me clean up a sec.

Bending down, Brian retrieves wrapping from the floor. He turns off the tree, and brings the wine glasses to the sink. On a whim, he pours a glass of milk and finds a cookie...placing both on an end table, next to the couch.

DANIELLE (O.S.)
Helllllooo!

The faint sound of JINGLING echoes from the bedroom.

Brian smiles, and heads towards the sound of bells...

INT. THE BRENNAN LIVING ROOM - LATER

There’s unexpected movement on the mantelpiece. A storm rages inside the snow globe, as if recently shaken. The winding key drags forward a few notches. Slurred NOTES of Jingle Bells escape before it falls silent.
In the darkened room, the clock TICKS loudly.

The glass on the end table lies on it’s side. Drops of milk pool on the surface, sprinkled with cookie crumbs.

Bumping into furniture, Barney races through the room, chasing his tennis ball.

Brian appears in the doorway, wearing a brown cotton bathrobe. His glasses are in his hand.

BRIAN
Barney! Hey numbskull, know what time it is?

Brian inches into the living room, feeling his way carefully.

BRIAN
What, is your water dish empty again?

The tennis ball lies at Brian’s feet. He reaches down to retrieve it, putting on his glasses as he stands up. The milk glass is at eye level. Brian freezes.

BRIAN
What...?

After a moment, the confusion on his face fades.

BRIAN
Barney, dammit!

He pats the carpet at the foot of the table. It’s dry. He picks up the glass – a bewildered look on his face. Brian wanders to the kitchen, glass in hand.

BRIAN
Buddy, if that was chocolate chip, you’re on your own...

Putting the glass in the sink, he turns back towards the living room. As he passes the archway, the tree lights flare brightly. Brian jumps back, caught off guard.

BRIAN
Aaaa!

Lights on the tree continue to flicker, illuminating shadows on the nearby couch.

There appears to be an indentation, as if someone has just left the seat...or has yet to get up.
Brian stares at the air above the cushion. It looks somehow wrong; the light bending in odd ways.

BRIAN
Now I’m just losing it.

He reaches a hand towards the couch, but changes his mind, pulling back before making contact.

BRIAN
A bit of undigested beef, perhaps...

Blue wisps of smoke curl in the air. Brian’s gaze follows the trail - half expecting to see a pipe. It’s not there. He looks back at the couch dubiously.

BRIAN
Dad?

Brian lowers himself into the recliner, his eyes never leaving the couch. He sits facing the shadows.

BRIAN
Well, I know I didn’t have that much to drink...

He glances towards the bedroom.

BRIAN
So either the pressure’s gotten to me, or this is the most vivid nightmare I’ve ever had.

Barney approaches the couch on his belly, whining and wagging his tail submissively.

A look of horror spreads over Brian’s face.

BRIAN
Guess pinching myself isn’t going to do any good.

He falls silent, staring at the shadows in front of him.

BRIAN
It is you, isn’t it?

His gaze falls on the photos above the fireplace.

BRIAN
It’s funny. You know how many times I wished I could just talk to you again? Tell you how sorry I was. That I wished I could do it over.
And I knew I’d never get the chance, because you’re gone. Because you’re dead...and you don’t get second chances from the dead.

He shivers, looking away briefly.

BRIAN
I wouldn’t be surprised if you were here to condemn me. I deserve it.

FLASH BACK TO:

INT. NURSING HOME WARD - DAY

Brian and Danielle stand in the narrow hallway – one on either side of Richard’s wheelchair. Slumped in the chair, he looks thin and worn.

They speak to him for a few moments (M.O.S.). Danielle rests a hand on his shoulder. Then they turn and walk away, leaving Richard with a uniformed attendant.

BRIAN (V.O.)
I should have done more.

BACK TO PRESENT.

BRIAN
So damn me to hell. I won’t resist.

Brian stares unblinkingly towards the couch. After a moment, his face softens.

BRIAN
Or at least say something. Please?

The silence is deafening. Brian reaches out again for the couch, but loses his courage. He rises to pace the floor.

BRIAN
We really did try, Dad. When you started failing...and we got the diagnosis.

He gestures as he walks, his hands flailing with frustration.
We got the home health aide through Medicare, and drove up every weekend. And then you got worse.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

At the table, Brian spoon feeds his father. Richard turns red, and begins to cough.

BRIAN (V.O.)
...you couldn’t swallow too well anymore...

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Brian guides an unsteady Richard to the bathroom. The older man lowers himself down, balancing on the rail assists.

Brian kneels, and hands a towelette to Richard.

BRIAN (V.O.)
You couldn’t do a lot of things.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian stops, his voice soft.

BRIAN
But hey, you did the same for me when I was a kid.

He looks down at his feet, a bit of tinsel tangled around his toes. Brian shakes it loose, and resumes his pacing.

BRIAN
Mom was gone, and you couldn’t stay at home anymore. So we sold the house. And we talked about moving you in with us...really, we did. But then, we were both working, and you would have been at home with the aide. We looked for the best place we could, and told ourselves that it was so you could have more supervision.

He stops and stares at the couch.
BRIAN
But was it really that? Or maybe we didn’t want to make the extra effort?

Brian collapses into the recliner, his face racked with pain and guilt.

BRIAN
We could have brought you home. Or I could have quit my job, and we could have moved in with you. With the aide, we could have made it work. Danielle would have understood.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. NURSING HOME DINING HALL - DAY

Richard being fed by an aide, his arms useless at his sides.

The aide wheels him back to his room, positioning the chair to face a flickering TV. He leaves him alone.

BRIAN (V.O.)
And the worst part is that you never lost your faculties. You knew what was happening. And you knew where you were. Everything considered...

BACK TO PRESENT.

BRIAN
...it was actually a blessing when the cancer came.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Brian and Danielle stand over Richard’s hospital bed, crying. The elder man is comatose. Several tubes snake from his arms and face, attached to flickering monitors.

BRIAN (V.O.)
You never regained consciousness. I failed you. Hell, I failed Mom, too. When she died, I owed it to her to take care of you.

START MONTAGE:
Brian as a young boy, roughhousing with his father.

The pair fishing together. Two sets of bare feet dangle off the edge of a pier.

Clips of a family movie, grainy and grey. Richard mugs for the camera, hugging 12 year old Brian to his chest.

END MONTAGE.

BACK TO PRESENT.

Brian stares at the couch.

BRIAN
It was the least I could have done.

He lapses into silence. The shadows on the couch shift subtly. Brian waits. No response is forthcoming.

BRIAN
So that’s it? What do we do now?

He shakes his head, bleakly.

BRIAN
No matter what I say, I can’t change what I did. Or didn’t do. So there’s no absolution. And I can’t ask your forgiveness.

Tears streak his face.

BRIAN
But I did love you, Dad. I really did.
And I hope, in the end, that you knew it.

Impulsively, Brian reaches out again for the couch. His hand comes in contact with a flat plane of leather. Emboldened, he pats down the remaining cushions. There’s nothing there. Only shadows.

Brian stands over the couch. Staring at it, he mutters to himself.

BRIAN
So I am nuts, after all. Serves me right.

He hovers for a moment, then turns away.

BRIAN
Come on, Barney. Let’s go.
Brian leaves for the bedroom, drained and exhausted.

INT. THE BRENnan LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS.

In the darkened room, the lights on the tree continue to flicker; reflecting off ornaments and shiny wrapping paper. At the base of the tree are several boxes, decorated with cards and bows.

Nestled in their midst is a gold covered placard, shaped like a Red Ryder sled. Emblazoned on it is an inscription: “To the best son a father could have. No regrets. Love, Dad.”

The lights on the tree go out - this time, for good.

FINAL FADEOUT.