The Ghosts of Christmas

by Koyote19

Summary

It's not always the same old story

Notes

Okay, this is not exactly Charles Dicken's version of the story, just to be clear. In the spirit of full disclosure, "Scrooged" is probably my favorite take on the story ever, so this will be a bit more in that vein.

My apologies to Charles Dickens.

rated Teen for multiple references to drug use and sex. (this is the part the apology refers to)
written for the December 2005 Challenge: Ghosts of Christmas past, present and/or future.

The office door blew open with an odd howl, followed by the sound of a metal doorknob embedding itself into plaster. Richard woke with a start, raising his head from the pile of files he’d apparently been using as a pillow, and the papers were scattered to the floor by the wind that should not have been present in a room three hallways away from the nearest window to the outside.

“Bloody hell. That was the Morrows account.”

“Well… you were going have to retype it anyway,” a hoarse voice observed calmly. “You were napping for quite a while. The drool was making the ink run.”
“Great.” He wiped absently at his chin, then frowned at the odd darkness lounging familiarly in the chair across from the desk. “Bob?” He peered a little harder, trying to make out the features of what appeared to be an amorphous shadow that still managed to resemble his former best friend. “Is that you?”

“In the flesh... well. Maybe not quite that.” The darkness coalesced a bit more, and now he could make out a familiar pair of eyes. “You work too hard, buddy. You know what Stephen King always said—”

“All work and no play make Jack a dull boy,” Richard finished the line with a confused frown. “But my name’s not Jack, this isn’t a hotel and you’re... dead.”

“I told them you were a bright boy, Rich!” Bob grinned, or would have if he’d been solid enough to do more than glow darkly.

“I have got to stop ordering takeout from Wong’s when I’m working late.” Drool forgotten, Richard sat back in his chair. “Wait... this is a joke, right? Jake, get in here! The joke’s funny and all, but I have a lot of work to do.”

“It wasn’t the takeout.” The ghost shook his head. “And we both know that Jake is crap at practical jokes. He might be my brother and all... but the man just isn’t the brightest bulb if you know what I mean.”

“Bob? It really is you?”

“In the spirit.” The ghost sank through the chair, then bobbed back to float just above it. “Which really sucks, let me tell you. Don’t be in a hurry to die, man. The retirement benefits are pretty fucking paltry. No booze, no sex, no drugs... not worth it, man.”

“Yeah,” Richard blinked, then shook his head. “So if it wasn’t the takeout... why are you here?”

“Oh, right. Down to business, right Rich? Jeez, you sure got stuffy without me around. What happened to smoking a few joints, free love and goodwill towards women?”

“It doesn’t pay the mortgage, and if I don’t finish this account tonight, I won’t make the plane to Geneva tomorrow to meet Roxanne for Christmas.”

“Roxanne? What happened to Beverly? Or was is Brenda?”

“Beverly married a stockbroker two months ago, and Brenda is dating the crown prince of Denmark. Wait. Exactly how long have you been following me around?”

“Oh, I just pop in now and then to see how you’re doing. You don’t have to make it sound creepy or anything.”

“Uh-huh.” Richard scowled at the ghost. “Look, it’s good to see you and all, and I appreciate you waking me up from that little nap, but if that’s all, I need to get this mess straightened out.”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine. Mr. Too-busy-for-his-long-dead friends.” The ghost sighed, patted around the darkness and pulled what looked like a scrap of torn paper out of where a pocket should have been and peered at it before clearing his non-existent throat. “Right. Back to business then. I am the ghost of Robert Marley, back from the... lord, who the hell wrote this crap?”

“Um... I’m sure I have no idea,” Richard muttered.
“Oh, yeah. Well, I’ll just paraphrase then. You, Richard Ebenezer Scrooge IV, are on the fast track to a nasty trip to the hereafter, whereupon your workaholic soul will languish in utter boredom and celibacy, unless you take steps to fix it now.”

“O-kay. You know, this sounds a lot like that story Grandpa used to start telling when he’d been nipping the wine for the Christmas Goose.”

“That’s probably cause you take after him an awful lot,” Bob mused; then shook his head. “Well, except for that bit in 1969 where we experimented with psychotropic hallucinogens…can’t quite see the old buzzard doing that, actually.”

“No. Me either.” Richard tried to shake away that mental image with a shudder.

“Anyway, moving right along here, cause time is fleeting and all that. You’re going to be visited by three ghosts, who will show you the error of your ways, blah blah blah…” The ghost scanned the piece of paper, then shoved it back into what might have been his pocket. “I’ll just leave you to it then, shall I? Gotta run, I’m planning on paying a little visit to Jake too. It’s still just as much fun to scare the bejeezus out of him as it was when I was alive.”

“You’re a bastard, Bob.” Richard shook his head. “And tell the next ghost to enter without the wind effects, ok? I’m gonna be spending the rest of the night putting the Morrow account back together, and if I leave the office in a mess again, Cratchitt will have a conniption.”

“Sure thing. Catch you later buddy. And for what it’s worth, Roxanne is a babe!”

“Thanks.” The shadowy figured tossed him a jaunty wave, then disappeared with a popping sound, leaving him alone in the paper-strewn office.

* * *

He was still gathering papers when the lights flickered, then went out. “Jesus, now what? I don’t have time for power failures.”

“Actually, time is all relative.”

“Howard, if you’re going to start quoting physics at me, get the hell out of my office.”

“Nice to see you too, Dick.”

Richard groped around the desk in the dark, found a paperweight and pinned down the stack of papers in his hand; just in case.

“So… you’re the first ghost? Or was Bob?”

“No, Bob was a freebie. I’m the ghost of Christmas past. We drew numbers to see what order, but Bob whined until they let him come first.”

“They?”

“The Powers that Be. The ones running the show and handing out the script.”

“If your script was written by the same Power that wrote Bob’s, feel free to paraphrase.”

“Thanks, buddy.” The darkness faded to a spinning kaleidoscope of bright colors that made him feel vaguely nauseous, before settling down into the familiar confines of his childhood living room. “So, here we are, Christmas Eve, 1961.”
“Wow… that’s a pretty cool trick. Nice effect.”

“You think so? I was kinda hoping to be the ghost of Christmas Future and get fire and smoke and stuff.”

“No, it was good. Reminds me of 1969.”

“Oh, yeah. That was a good year…”

“Yeah. So, how long do we have here? Cause I still have a lot of work to get done tonight.”

“No worries, we have plenty of time. No matter how much time we spend here in the past, only a few minutes will have passed in the present time.”

“Really?” Richard grinned, ignoring the figures of his family as they sat down to a meager dinner a few yards away. Despite the poor fare, everyone looked happy as his father sliced the ham he’d saved for a month to buy. “That’s pretty cool. So… did you get to pick the time? Or was that set down by the script?”

“No, I got to pick it.”

“So why this one?”

“Cause it’s the Christmas my dad went on a bender, and I spent the night with your family,” Howard sighed wistfully. “I loved this Christmas. Best Christmas morning of my whole damn life, come to think of it. Your mom could cook.”

“Howard?”

“Oh, sorry. What?”

“I thought I was supposed to be learning the error of my ways and all?”

“Oh, right.” Howard looked disappointed. “Right. Lemme think for a minute….”

“This’ll take a while,” Richard muttered. “Can I make a suggestion?”

“Sure, sure. Go for it.”

“Does it have to be Christmas?”

“No… I don’t think it said that in the rules-”

“Great, I got a better destination in mind then.”

“Oh?”

“August 16, 1969.”

“August…? Why August?”

“Cause it was Woodstock, and the summer of Love.”

“I’m not sure….”

“Come on, think about it. We’re invisible, right?”
“Yeah…?”

“And no bodies?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s perfect. No waiting in lines for the bathroom, we can sit on the stage if we fucking want to, no dealing with mud, heat, weather--”

“Oooh.”

“No drugs this time, but we’ll be able to enjoy the music.”

“Yeah.” He could see the ghost wavering.

“Two words then. Janis. Joplin.” He knew he had him then. Howard got that blissful look on his face that could only be brought about by memories of his first Great Crush. “And can you really think of a better memory to relive?”

“No.” Howard shook himself. “Ok, 1969, here we come!”

* * *

They reappeared in his office with a pop, both humming the melody to Me and Bobby McGee and playing air guitar.

“Ahem.”

Both men started guiltily then glanced at the ghost tapping her foot impatiently in the corner. “Are you boys quite through goofing off?”

“Yes ma’am,” Howard muttered. “Good luck, buddy. I had a great time though.”

“Me too. We should do it again next year.”

“It’s a plan!” Howard grinned, then disappeared with a flicker of electricity.

“Hi Aunt Edith. So you’re the ghost of Christmas…?”

“Present. And don’t think you’ll be conning me into going on any joyrides, young man.”

“Never crossed my mind, Aunt Edith,” Richard sighed. “So where are we going?”

“To see that nice young woman you stood up at the altar.” The room swirled chaotically around him, reminding him of the tornado scene in the Wizard of Oz.

“Judith?” Richard reeled a little dizzily as they landed in a comfortable living room, decorated with a tree and more children’s toys than he’d ever seen in one place outside Toy’s R Us. “I did not stand her up at the altar. We broke up a good three weeks before the wedding, and it was her idea.”

“Because she realized what an immature, selfish lout you were.” Aunt Edith threw him a disapproving look, and sniffed. “Look at her. She’s still beautiful.”

“Yeah… and she’s deliriously happy with Frank Crawford.” Richard looked around him at the children crowding around the table as Judith passed out cookies. “Damn, that’s a lot of grandkids.”
“They could have been your grandchildren...”

“Thanks, but no. I’m Godfather to the three oldest ones as it is, and that’s quite enough, thanks.”

“Your mother pined away for a grandchild of her own. And you passed up a chance to give her that for a succession of floozies and a grandcat.”

“She loved that cat.”

“That’s not the point...” Aunt Edith scowled at him. “You are a rich, fifty-four year old bachelor, with a girlfriend half your age in Switzerland that loves you mostly for your money.”

“And the downside of that is...?” He shrugged. “She’s beautiful, the sex is great, and neither of us is all that interested in commitment.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret, nephew. Most women are interested in commitment. As you should know quite well, as I believe that’s why Joan, Beverly and Danielle are married to other men, and Brenda is working very hard at it.” She shook her head. “If you aren’t careful, you’ll lose this one too.”

“I thought you said they were all floozies.”

Aunt Edith ignored that comment, as two of the grandkids ran through her at that moment. He didn’t miss the wistful expression on her lined face.

“So what’s this trip really about, Aunt Edith?”

“You could have given Judith so much...” Edith scowled at him. “You are so very much like your grandfather.”

“Uh huh... and if they hadn’t had six kids, so could Frank Crawford. Have you seen the price of tuition for six college educations?” Richard glared back at the ghost of his elderly Aunt. “You aren’t pinning this one on me. She wanted kids, not me. I was perfectly honest with her. And we’re still good friends. She loves Frank, and that’s cool. He’s a good guy. They’re happy. And Mom loved her grandcat very much. Just cause you wanted a great-niece or nephew to spoil rotten...”

The room faded out around them, into a familiar hospital room. He recognized the face of his assistant as he sat on the edge of a bed, holding the hand of his youngest son.

“Aw, damn. Tim had a relapse?”

“If you weren’t such a stingy...”

“Wait just a darn minute there, Aunt Edith! It’s not easy finding affordable healthcare with a low deductible that will cover pre-existing conditions. Believe me, I’ve looked. But if I’d known that Tim was back in the hospital, I would have given Bob his bonus check yesterday instead of tomorrow. So just back off.”

She sniffed again, but apparently had no answer for that one. A moment later they reappeared in his office in a swirl of furniture and wind.

“Look, Aunt Edith. I know you wanted me to have a child for you to spoil, and I’m sorry. But I’m just not the father type. Would you really want to inflict me on some poor innocent child?”

“I suppose not.”
“See?” He grinned at the elderly woman. “It really has been for the best. And for what it’s worth, my cat loved you too.”

“He did?”

“Very much. Especially the catnip mice you sent us. They were his favorite toys for a whole week.”

“Well then…” She unbent enough to lean forward and kiss his cheek. “I supposed I’d better be going. I still have your sister to visit as well.”

“Thanks Aunt Edith. Have a merry Christmas.”

“You too, dear.” She started to fade away. “And that Roxanne is still young enough to have children, after all…”

“Aunt Edith!”

“You can’t blame me for trying…”

“I suppose not,” he sighed. “How about I promise to think about it. But no kids.”

“It’s a start, nephew.” She faded out completely this time, and he drew a deep breath, looking around for another ghost.

* * *

He’d finally finished organizing the Morrow account when the walls of the room exploded into flame.

“Yeah, I can see why Howard wanted this gig.” He looked around, then frowned at the dark cloaked shape standing silently in the corner. “Wait…who’re you?” It didn’t look like anyone he recognized. Most of his friends had gone for the hippie look, and were all far too old for the Goth culture.

The girl shook jet-black hair out of a face layered with pancake makeup and mascara, then gestured with a handful of silver jewelry. The office disappeared again, this time leaving him and the Goth-chick standing in a nearly empty cemetery. The Cratchitt family, including a now adult and healthy Tim, stood next to an open grave as two workers lowered a coffin into it, and a minister read from the Bible. One the other side stood an older, but still beautiful Roxanne, wearing a sleek black dress and veil and holding what looked to be one of Frog’s grandkittens.

“Oh, no… this is so not going to do!” He frowned at the scene. “I know I contacted that lawyer about a will. Remind me to specify cremation and I want a wake, not a funeral.”

The Goth-ghost threw him a look of stunned disbelief.

“What? Not all of us find it romantic to rot in a little box. The day after Christmas, I’m going to go and pick out a nice urn, and make sure that Roxanne knows what to do when the time comes, since apparently we’re still together. No, on second thought, I’ll make sure Bob Cratchitt knows what to do. She’ll have enough to worry about without details like that.”

The ghost of Christmas future sighed, burying her face in her hands with what sounded like a muffled whimper. “Kids today, they just don’t know how to plan for their future.”
“Sir?” He started, as the cemetery disappeared around him. Except that this time he wasn’t back in his office. The stewardess smiled down at him. “I need you to put your seat up, we’ll be landing in Geneva in just a few minutes.”

“Oh…right. Thanks.” He rubbed his eyes as he sat up all the way, and looked out the window at the morning sunlight. “Man, what a weird dream. Hmm, looks like we’re early. Maybe it couldn’t hurt to at least look at rings, since I have the time and all…”

* * *

In the back of the plane, three shadowy figures exchanged high fives.

“Well, Aunt Edith, looks like you were right. I’m sure they’ll be very happy together, for a long time.” Howard shook his head.

“Of course they will, dear.” She dabbed at her eyes with a transparent white handkerchief. “My record as a matchmaker was unrivaled when I was alive… did you really think I would lose my touch just because I’m dead?”

“Not a chance, Aunt Edith.” Bob Marley grinned. “Not a chance. Now… what say we pay another visit to Jake, just to shake things up.”

“I swear, Robert Marley, you are going to send that brother of yours to an early grave.”

“It’s all in good spirit, Aunt Edith. All in good spirit…” The bright laughter lingered for a moment after the three had faded away, and the plane landed in Geneva.

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