If We Must

by Sarah1281

Summary

Ebenezer Scrooge absolutely must be redeemed, everyone agrees on that. He needs it and so does everyone around him no matter *how* reluctant he may be about it. It's a good thing they're not giving him a choice in the matter and have a grisly fate to hold over his head but even so these spirits will need the patience of saints to try to get through to him.
Chapter 1

Ebenezer Scrooge had kind of an unfortunate name. He didn't mind it, really, but people often had difficulty saying it with a straight face. Unless, of course, they were too terrified of him to breathe loudly in his presence but he would like to think that that was the least of his reasons for making it his business to terrify everyone he came into contact with. He always did like to challenge himself, after all.

Bob Cratchit was shivering more and more noticeably, hoping that his employer would say something so he wouldn't have to be the one to bring it up. Scrooge did not look up once, however, and so finally Cratchit coughed and said. "Mr. Scrooge?"

"Yes?" Scrooge asked curtly, still not looking up.

"It is extremely cold in here," Cratchit informed him.

"Is it?" Scrooge asked rhetorically. "I hadn't noticed."

Cratchit stared with some disbelief. Scrooge was wearing, if anything, less clothing than he himself was. Maybe he was just immune to weather. "Yes, well, it is just three days after the darkest day in the entire year. Things are about as cold as they ever get."

"I assume there was a point to this, Cratchit?" Scrooge asked, irritated.

"A point? Yes, of course. I was just wondering if we could put more coal in the fire," Cratchit replied hurriedly. He was always loathe to upset his employer for fear that the other man would snap and fire him and try to save costs by running the business entirely by himself.

Scrooge said nothing for so long that Cratchit turned to look at him to make sure that he hadn't suddenly died or something.

"Mr. Scrooge?"

"I was just calculating whether it would be cheaper to risk you freezing to death and being forced to pay for the funeral like with my last three assistants or to start increasing the minimum acceptable temperature for this building," Scrooge explained.

"M-Mr. Scrooge?" Cratchit asked, alarmed. Scrooge was kidding, of course. Probably. Dear God, he hoped the man was kidding! But he rather doubted most days that Scrooge was capable of humor and he certainly didn't look as if he were not being serious.

Scrooge saved from having to answer (or perhaps Cratchit was saved from having to wait indefinitely for an answer that may not be forthcoming) by the door banging open.

"I say," a cheerful voice said as Scrooge's nephew Fred stepped into the counting house. "It's almost colder in here than it is outside!" He shut the door experimentally and then opened it again and stepped back outside before finally coming in this time for good. "Did I say almost? I mean it is definitely colder in here. How ever does my uncle manage that?"

Cratchit had often had the same feeling but he had thought – hoped – he had imagined it. "Good day, sir."

"Good day to you, too, Cratchit," Fred said merrily. "Where is my uncle? Has he left for the day? I do hope that he has not because he won't tell me where he lives and I have no other idea where I
could find him."

Cratchit frowned in confusion and gestured towards Scrooge's desk. "But he's right-"

"Cratchit, you're fired," Scrooge snapped, slowly coming out from his hiding place of under his desk.

Cratchit felt his heart stop.

"Don't be ridiculous, Uncle," Fred chastised. "You can't fire somebody on Christmas Eve!"

"Why not?" Scrooge asked petulantly.

"Because it just isn't done!" Fred exclaimed, shocked.

"Would it be any kinder if I fire him the day after Christmas?" Scrooge asked him.

Fred hesitated. "Well... it really isn't ever kind to fire anybody at all. And in this case, he'd know of his impending termination so he'd have that hanging over his head during all of the holidays. But if he didn't then he'd spend too much and not be able to afford it since he must secure another position... this is a tricky one."

"You had best go on your way and leave me to it," Scrooge suggested hopefully.

"I won't fall for that one again!" Fred cried out. "And I'm not leaving until you let me say what I've come here to say."

"What's the point?" Scrooge demanded. "You always say the same thing and every year I always say the same thing. You needn't have even bothered to come here. If I had wanted to go I would have just shown up."

"Ah but then you might fear that you weren't welcome and it would have hurt you," Fred protested.

"'Fear' is really not the word, nephew," Scrooge said flatly. "And while it is lovely of you to think of my feelings, perhaps you ought to consider them again here and now and stop bothering me with your Christmas tripe."

Fred laughed heartily. "Oh, uncle, you are too much! And no need to suggest that in that case I leave because I'm still not going to go."

Scrooge sighed. "Then hurry up and invite me."

"Uncle, would you care to join Clara and I for our dinner party tomorrow?" Fred asked graciously.

"No."

"But-" Fred started to say.

"No. And you really should invite people more than one day in advance. They might have plans," Scrooge said pointedly.

"Oh, we invited everybody else weeks ago," Fred assured him. "But you never have plans."

"You presume much, nephew," Scrooge growled.
"Besides, I wanted to wish you a happy Christmas and I couldn't do that in November. I was thinking of your feelings about seeing me twice in such a short period," Fred informed him.

"And yet you think I'd want to see you twice in such a short period by coming to dinner tomorrow?" Scrooge asked incredulously.

"Every year you do not attend, Uncle, is a little bit richer I'll be when I finally win the bet I have made with all of my friends about getting you to come to dinner," Fred said determinedly.

"Bah, humbug," Scrooge scoffed.

Fred's eyes lit up. "You said the line!"

"It's not a 'line'," Scrooge argued. "It just perfectly encapsulates how I feel about this whole Christmas season."

"Somehow it's not Christmas without that line," Fred said fondly. "I almost don't know what I'll do if you ever come around. Sorry, when. It doesn't do to be skeptical at this time of year."

"I do so resent the day that you first started to come and visit me," Scrooge said, annoyed.

"You don't mean that, Uncle," Fred said casually.

"And you have got to stop telling me what I do and do not mean!" Scrooge cried out.

"Maybe I will when you stop saying such ridiculous things," Fred countered. "What could you possibly have against Christmas?"

Scrooge opened his mouth and then stopped as he actually thought about it. "Nothing, really," he admitted. "I'm rather indifferent to it on the whole."

"That," Fred declared, "is certainly not the impression that you've given me. Ever. At all."

"It's just that the blasted thing won't leave me alone," Scrooge complained. "If I could just ignore it in peace then we wouldn't have any problem. But no. Everyone feels the need to force their holiday spirit on me when I have no interest in celebrating and closing everything down and demanding days off...The whole thing is a nightmare. And good luck attempting to get anything out of anyone in the days leading up to Christmas!"

"Just give it up, Uncle, and get caught up in the spirit," Fred urged.

"Never," Scrooge sniffed. "What good does Christmas do anyone anyway? It's just an excuse to make merry and indulge yourself and spend money that you do not have."

"Maybe," Fred conceded, shrugging. "But we have such a jolly time doing it!"

"Happiness is fleeting," Scrooge insisted.

"It is an annual celebration," Fred pointed out.

Scrooge shook his head. "Oh, be gone! You've said what you've come here to say and you're giving me a headache."

Fred obligingly moved towards the door. "So I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Good day, sir!" Scrooge cried out.
"Happy Christmas!" Fred said before ducking out the door.

Scrooge glared after him and then, when the door shut, switched his glare over to Cratchit. "What kind of a bodyguard are you when you don't keep undesirables from getting in here?"

"I'm not actually your bodyguard, sir, I'm your clerk," Cratchit corrected quietly.

Scrooge waved that away. "You're whatever I pay you to be. And speaking of…"

The door opened and two strange men walked in.

"Hello," one of them said brightly. "Is Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley here?"

"Mr. Marley," Scrooge said icily, "is dead."

"Oh!" the man said, horrified. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"He's been dead for seven years," Scrooge continued.

"But…but the sign," the man said, gesturing vainly towards the door.

"You have no business coming in here to beg me for money if you're not even going to bother to learn the slightest thing about my business," Scrooge sniffed.

"So…are you Mr. Scrooge?" the other man spoke up.

"I am," Scrooge allowed.

The two men breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, we're not really here to beg you for money," the first one said slowly.

Scrooge remained impassive. "Really."

"Only-only it's for the poor, you see," the man hurried on, seeming to lose his nerve.

"What about them?" Scrooge asked.

"They have no money," the man informed him. "Some of them having nothing to eat and nowhere to go and not even adequate clothing to shelter them against the elements. And while this is a problem at all times, this time especially it is truly terrible."

"I am familiar with the concept of the poor," Scrooge said distastefully. "Although I don't see what's worse about this season than any other."

"It's Christmas!" the man exclaimed.

"Quite," Scrooge said sourly. "What do you want?"

"How much money can we put you down to giving to the poor?" the braver of the two spoke up.

"Nothing."

"You wish to remain anonymous?" he pressed.

Scrooge actually chuckled. "That's adorable."
"How can you have so little regard for the poor?" one of them demanded.

"I help the poor out plenty," Scrooge insisted.

"Just not at Christmas," the other said, shaking his head.

"My taxes go to prisons and poorhouses and if these people are really that badly off they really should go there and not expect people to throw money at them," Scrooge said flatly.

"They don't expect that!" one cried out.

"And they shall not get it. It is good to see that we are on the same page then," Scrooge said, nodding to himself.

"And many would rather die than go there!" the other cried out passionately.

Scrooge shrugged. "It's not the choice that I would have made but it is a free country. Maybe if enough of them die off we'll have more resources to deal with the ones who do want to live."

"You...you are...you...terrible!" one of them spluttered.

"Do try to articulate," Scrooge said absently. "Now if there's nothing else, could you kindly take your leave? I have much work to do."

"You are a bad person," the other accused as they headed to the door.

"Now is that really any way to talk at Christmas?" Scrooge asked mockingly.

A slammed door was the only response.

Scrooge sighed. "Honestly, Cratchit, I don't even know why I pay you. You're worthless."

"That being so, sir, it's time to go," Cratchit announced.

Scrooge glanced at the clock. "Is it already? I never do get anything done when people insist on barging in here and wasting my time. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow."

Cratchit winced, hating what he was about to have to do. "But...Christmas."

Scrooge's eye twitched. "Is it really?"

Knowing he was treading on dangerous grounds, Cratchit continued with, "It's just that everyone else will be closed so there's actually no real point in opening up the office. It will just inconvenience you and rack up expenses and...yeah."

Scrooge gave him a look. "And I expect you'll be wanting to be paid for the work you're not doing."

"If it's convenient," Cratchit said meekly.

Scrooge barked out a laugh. "If it's convenient? Oh, that's a good one. But I suppose if I don't you'll go off and form a union or something. Fine, fine. But I want you to come in half an hour earlier every day until we've gotten that full day made up for."

Cratchit couldn't help grinning. Another year of successfully getting Christmas off and he could feel a weight lifted from his shoulders. "Thank you, sir!"
"Get out of my sight before your Christmas spirit makes me ill," Scrooge ordered and Cratchit was only too happy to oblige.

Scrooge had just reached up to open his door when the door-knocker morphed into Jacob Marley's face. Scrooge blinked but continued what he was doing. He was a bit more put-out when he was nearly run over by a ghostly and horseless hearse charging up the stairs in front of him. As it was ghostly and thus probably not there he more than likely would have been fine but why take the chance?

"And it has less trouble with the stairs than I do," Scrooge groused. He was entertained at dinner by watching all of the objects on his mantelpiece transform into Marley's face and back.

Just as he was finishing, the sound of bells ringing loudly was heard.

"I don't even have bells in here," Scrooge complained. He stood up abruptly when the banging sounded and then promptly sat back down again when the ghostly figure of Marley dragged himself into the room, hardly able to move from the great chains weighing him down.

The two men stared at each other for a moment.

"You know, Jacob, just because this was your house first doesn't mean that it's not weird and rather unappreciated for you to haunt it," Scrooge said finally.

Marley's jaw dropped just a little further than a normal jaw could had he quickly moved it back into place. "This is the first time you've seen me since my death seven years ago and more than likely your first supernatural experience and that is how you greet me?"

Scrooge fought the impulse to look away. "Yes, well, I'm not up on ghostly etiquette and even if I was, I don't remember inviting you."

"You said it was my house," Marley pointed out.

"I said it had been but ownership had passed to me once you died," Scrooge countered.

"Well that's just not fair since I couldn't fight for it," Marley protested.

"I think recent events prove that you could have if you really wanted to. The superstitious lot down in the courts probably would have let you keep it," Scrooge said disdainfully.

"You sound as if you don't believe me," Marley noted. "Or, to be more precise, you don't believe in me."

"Put yourself in my shoes, Jacob," Scrooge entreated. "You live a rational, reasoned life and suddenly supernatural occurrences – which have never been present before – are all around you? The logical explanation is that I'm hallucinating. I would say it was something I ate but I saw a few things before dinner. Perhaps I've been drugged. That's a much more comforting idea than losing my mind. I really shall have to fire Cratchit for this."

"If you think that you're hallucinating all of this and that you have quite possibly lost your mind then why are you so calm about it?" Marley asked suspiciously. "I know that if it had been me, I would have been much more…excitable. Agitated, even."

Scrooge nodded. "Of course, I could react like that. But really, what's the point? It would just compound an already bad situation and it wouldn't change anything. Besides, since I'm probably
just talking to any empty room or maybe not even talking at all but lying catatonic somewhere there is no point in shouting at the walls."

Marley just shook his head at him, disappointed.

"What?" Scrooge asked defensively. "Stop judging me!"

"What does it matter if I'm judging you if I'm not even real?" Marley asked waspishly.

"It's actually more of an issue if you're judging me when you're not real," Scrooge explained. "I can take you judging me. You did it all the time when you were alive. But if you are actually just a figment of my imagination and you're judging me then it really means that I am judging me and I do not like what that implies about me."

"Or it could just mean that since you expect me to judge you, you imagined that I would do so," Marley suggested. "Wait, why am I trying to convince you I'm not real?"

"I do not know," Scrooge replied. "But that is a good idea regardless. Let's keep the damage to my psyche to a minimum, shall we?"

A companionable silence fell upon them.

"So why are you here, anyway? Assuming you're real, of course. Or even if you're not, I want to know what purpose my subconscious could possibly have assigned you," Scrooge told him.

"Ebenezer, I'm here to save your soul," Marley intoned gravely.

Scrooge just stared at him for a second. "No."

"No? You can't just reject my reason for coming here!" Marley burst out.

"I'm just saying that I find it all highly suspect," Scrooge replied. "I mean, Jacob Marley. The Jacob Marley. Coming here to talk about my soul? I might believe you if you were anyone else but not Jacob Marley. It simply couldn't happen."

"It could if the instant I died I found myself burdened with all of this cumbersome chain," Marley argued. "I'm forced to wander the Earth and can never rest-"

"Except evidently right now," Scrooge interrupted.

"Well, yes, except for right now," Marley agreed. "But you know what I mean."

"I only know what you say and what you said wasn't true," Scrooge claimed.

"This is a special circumstance and you know it," Marley growled, beginning to lose his patience.

"Do I?" Scrooge demanded. "How could I possibly know it when you haven't told me anything?"

"You won't let me!" Marley accused.

Scrooge made an overly elaborate gesture for Marley to continue. "By all means."

"As I was saying, I am forced to wander the Earth without rest – except for literally right now – because of the way that I-" Marley began again.

"Okay, I'm sorry, but I do have another question," Scrooge interrupted apologetically. "Or two."
Marley closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "What?"

"You're a ghost. You don't have a physical form," Scrooge said slowly.

"That's not a question," Marley pointed out.

Scrooge's eye twitched. "I was getting there!"

"Well don't give me so much damn buildup, just ask your question," Marley ordered.

"Fine," Scrooge bit out, glowering. "How much of a burden can chains be if you're not actually corporeal?"

Marley thought about it. "It's more symbolic, I think. I'm not literally having difficulty moving around but the weight upon my soul is immense. And that is not the extent of my punishment either."

"And tacky," Scrooge announced. "Really overdone. Besides, how can they force you to wander the world? Is there some sort of compulsion on you?"

"Why do you have to overthink everything always?" Marley cried out in sheer frustration.

"I take exception to the idea that it is possible to 'overthink' anything," Scrooge sniffed. "And if this is to have anything to do with me, as I assume it does or you would not be here, then I believe it is perfectly reasonable to put some thought into this. Even though it's probably not real."

Marley decided to pretend as if Scrooge had never cut in and keep going.

"Look," he said, cutting to the chase. "It turns out that there is an afterlife and that in that afterlife higher powers frown on you being a selfish bastard. I know that I was a selfish bastard in life and you were just as bad. You see where that got me and you've had seven more years to add to it so I can only imagine how badly you'll be punished."

"Well that doesn't seem very fair," Scrooge objected.

"What? You being punished for being a terrible person?" Marley inquired.

"That too. I really don't like the thought of being judged," Scrooge remarked. "But I mean the fact that my punishment would be worse than yours. It's not my fault that you went and died seven years ago! Why should I be punished for my longevity and you be rewarded for the fact that you went and-"

"That's quite enough of that," Marley quickly cut in. "I don't know about 'fair' but let me ask you something. Is it fair that I never got a personal intervention and a chance to repent?"

Scrooge sat back, blinking. "Oh, is that what this is?"

"Yes!" Marley exclaimed. "Why do you think I bothered coming here in the first place?"

Scrooge shrugged. "I'm sure I don't know. You were always a right bastard, Jacob."

"I've changed," Marley insisted.

"You waited seven years to come here," Scrooge countered.

Marley coughed. "I was busy."
"Doing what?" Scrooge demanded. "You were dead."

"Exactly. Being dead is very time consuming, I'll have you know," Marley informed him.

Scrooge just sighed. "I don't see why I'm being punished for being successful."

"You're not," Marley replied. "And don't even start with 'But you just said that I was' because I didn't."

Scrooge shut his mouth and tried to look like he was not about to do that very thing.

"You're being punished because you're kind of a terrible person, just like I was, and don't help the poor. You don't even spend any of your own damn money!" Marley exclaimed. "You live worse than your underpaid employee does."

"I'm sure Fred will blow through the money helping everyone he sees after I'm gone," Scrooge said indifferently.

Marley's eyes widened. "You're leaving everything to your nephew?"

"Well who else am I supposed to leave it to?" Scrooge asked reasonably. "My business? I might as well just hand it to my soon-to-be-fired employee. Why do I need to be saved and not, say, people who go around murdering other people?"

"I don't know but you should be grateful that you're getting this chance," Marley informed him.

"Just tell me how is it my responsibility to help the poor?" Scrooge demanded.

"You have much and they are dying on the street. That makes it your responsibility," Marley tried to explain.

"I don't follow," Scrooge said stubbornly.

"Mercy, man! I can't put such a basic concept into words!" Marley exploded.

"Then you're not doing a very good job of convincing me," Scrooge said placidly.

"I'm not the one who is supposed to convince you," Marley replied.

Scrooge frowned. "Oh, you're not? Then why are you here anyway?"

"I'm starting to wonder that myself…" Marley muttered. "I'm here to not only slowly ease you into this whole supernatural thing but to warn you that you are going to be visited by three spirits. The first will be at one, the second at two, and the third at three. It will save time if you know to expect them."

"Do I have to?" Scrooge almost whined. "That sounds terribly inconvenient."

Marley's eyebrows rose. "More inconvenient than being eternally damned?"

"That will be later and this is now. And I hate staying up all night as well as continually getting woken up," Scrooge replied primly. "Besides, I don't believe you're even here for altruistic reasons. You probably get some sort of 'get out of Hell free' card for 'saving' me, don't you?"

"You," Marley said frostily, "are just as impossible now as you ever were when I was alive."

"You haven't changed much, either. But I, at least, am not too proud to admit that I have missed
you, Jacob," Scrooge said, following Marley as he headed to a window. Looking down, he noticed a freezing mother and child huddled across the street and hundreds of ghostly apparitions all desperately attempting to help her. "What are they even doing? They have to know that ghost money won't do her any good. I didn't realize that dying made you an imbecile."

Casting one last disgusted look at Scrooge, Marley flew off to join them.
Chapter 2

Scrooge jolted awake to the sound of bells. Fortunately for his sanity, this time the bells were from a neighboring church and they signified that it was one in the morning.

"Those bells go off every night and they've never woken me up before now," Scrooge groused. He wasn't sure if his hallucination had been a dream, a simple hallucination, or actually real but he might as well be prepared and so he slowly sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, he could hardly see for the light emanating from the head of a man of indeterminate age.

"I say, that is bright! Could you put on your cap, please?" Scrooge inquired politely.

The man looked rather offended. "Would you so quickly put out the light that I give? Isn't it enough that you're one of the kinds of people who made this cap and force me to wear it for much of the year?"

Scrooge glared right back at him. "Hold it right there! Not only are you trespassing in my bedroom in the middle of the night but you're damn near blinding me! I just asked you to stop being such a bother and you don't get to turn this into a moral stand!"

Looking rather put-out, the man did so.

"Thank you," Scrooge said, satisfied. "You're the one who brought the cap in the first place, you know. Do you know how obnoxious it is to do that and then act like you're being oppressed for it? Now who the hell are you and why do you look like you're about fifteen and sixty at the same time?"

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past," the spirit replied. "It's sort of my thing."

Scrooge stared at him for a second. "You're seriously going with that?"

"I am," the spirit confirmed.

"Alright, I'll play along," Scrooge muttered. "Long past?"

"No, your past," the spirit informed him.

"You're telling me that not only do I have an individual spirit that embodies my past but it only embodies my past on one day of the year? And not even a day that I'm particularly fond of?"

Scrooge couldn't believe it.

"That about sums it up, yes," the spirit replied.

"You spirits aren't terribly practical, are you?" Scrooge criticized.

"And you overthink things," the spirit accused.

"Rubbish," Scrooge disagreed bluntly, crossing his arms. "Why are you even here?"

"I'm here to help save your soul, remember?" the spirit asked.

Scrooge sighed deeply. "Ah. That. I don't suppose there's any chance of you just going away and
leaving me to my fate?"

"None whatsoever," the spirit confirmed.

Sighing again, Scrooge pulled on his cap and robe. "Well, let's get this over with. Apparently we have an hour."

"Spirits have different time than humans do," the spirit assured him. "We'll have plenty of time."

Scrooge scowled. "Damn. I was counting on this only lasting three hours in total. Well, I suppose it's a good thing I'm not actually going to work tomorrow."

"Way to think on the bright side," the spirit said encouragingly. "Now, take ahold of my arm as we leave through this second-story window."

"Not even vaguely within the realm of possibility," Scrooge said, backing up.

The spirit ignored him and took him firmly by the arm before moving towards the window. Scrooge struggled valiantly but could not free himself.

"So the ghosts of my past are driving me to suicide," he murmured, shaking. "When people told me this might happen I didn't think that it was going to be quite so literal!"

Scrooge closed his eyes tightly as he felt himself being pulled out of the window but, to his shock, he did not feel himself falling. Eventually, he found the courage to open his eyes and saw that the city had vanished and they were in a veritable winter wonderland.

"I wish I could travel by spirit all of the time," he said enviously. "Think of all the time and money I could save!"

"You really should stop thinking of that," the spirit countered. "Do you recognize this place?"

Scrooge squinted, examining the landscape closely. "I…I'm not sure. I feel like I've seen this place before but only in a vague way."

"You were a boy here. This is your old school," the spirit said in disbelief.

"Is it?" Scrooge asked puzzled. "That does sound about right."

"How can you not know this?" the spirit asked, aghast.

"Maybe it was the fact that I haven't been here in forty years," Scrooge suggested. "I'm feeling distinctly judged right now. And how do you even know? Are you some sort of a stalker?"

"I'm your past, remember?" the spirit said tiredly.

"Well then, let's see what you have to show me," Scrooge said indifferently.

"You're not…at all…I don't know, emotional about this place?" the spirit asked hesitantly.

Scrooge shrugged. "It was alright, as far as I can recall. Forty years, you know."

"This might be a little bit more difficult than I had thought," the spirit said worriedly.

"What? Everyone thinks I'm a terrible person but I'm supposed to turn into some weeping mess at a glimpse of my distant past?" Scrooge asked, stunned. "Oh, Jacob…"
They walked along towards the school itself and passed many figures as they did so.

"Why do you not call out to them?" the spirit asked, confused. "That seems the natural impulse."

"Well, to begin with I don't actually remember any of their names and barely recognize the faces," Scrooge replied. "And then there's also the fact that they don't appear to actually be able to see us nor would I expect them to. This is clearly just a vision and not really a part of the past. Besides, they wouldn't know me or wish to speak to an old stranger in a dressing gown anyway."

"You are really determined to suck all of the joy out of this, aren't you?" the spirit pouted.

"Hey, I'm the one being held hostage here," Scrooge pointed out.

When they reached the schoolhouse they saw a young boy reading in the windowsill.

"Tell me that you recognize him," the spirit implored.

Scrooge looked at him oddly. "Of course I do. That's me as a child."

"You're the only one that isn't going home for Christmas," the spirit remarked.

"The staff resented me for it because one of them always had to stay with me," Scrooge recalled.

"Oh, that you remember," the spirit said, annoyed. "Is this why you hate Christmas?"

"I wouldn't be so petty," Scrooge disagreed. "But it can't have helped, this lack of positive Christmas experiences."

"Why were you here alone?" the spirit pressed.

"Someone is determined to rub salt in the wound, I see," Scrooge said, narrowing his eyes. "I suppose it was because my father hated me and wanted nothing to do with me."

The spirit coughed awkwardly. "Well, let's see another Christmas, shall we?"

And as Scrooge watched, the figure slowly began to age before their eyes.

"I thought you said 'just one'," he said.

"I did. I just have to fast-forward," the spirit explained.

Suddenly the scene stopped going by at rapid speed and a door burst open. A young girl laughed as she ran into the room and kissed young Ebenezer on the cheek.

"Fanny?" Ebenezer asked, incredulously. "What are you doing here?"

"As you may be aware, I've been asking father to let you come home since before I could walk," Fanny informed him. "And literally every single day he's said no. Well he's gotten a lot nicer lately and I finally wore down his resistance and he said that you could come live with us! Granted you'll soon have to go get an apprenticeship but it's better than nothing."

"Not that I'm not thrilled here, Fanny," Ebenezer assured her. "But why didn't anybody send word that I was to be leaving? This is rather a big thing to just drop on somebody like that."

Fanny looked down and bit her lip. "Oh, I...I didn't even think. I'm sorry, I-"

"Don't even worry about it," Ebenezer said softly. "I'm coming home and it is all thanks to you
and that is all that matters."

As the two of them walked off to make the necessary arrangements for Ebenezer to never ever return, the spirit remarked. "That girl was always so very delicate-looking. But she had such a large heart."

"She did," Scrooge agreed.

"So does her son," hinted the spirit.

"Perhaps," Scrooge conceded. "But Fanny was somehow far less annoying about it."

"Perhaps you were just more open to it back then," the spirit suggested.

Scrooge shook his head. "No, it was definitely her lack of annoyance. It was that ponce she married who raised the boy, I think. I never did like him even before he killed my sister. He was too cheerful. It was very suspicious."

"You blame the husband?" the spirit asked, surprised.

"Well, she did die in childbirth," Scrooge pointed out.

"The husband is not the person that most would blame for that if they chose to blame anybody," the spirit said delicately.

"Well who else am I supposed to blame?" Scrooge asked rhetorically. "Fred? Don't be ridiculous. It's not his fault he was born. No, her husband was the one who impregnated her with that lethal baby."

"Well…since Fred's father is dead I don't suppose we really need to argue about this," the spirit decided. "But why are you not more open to your sister's child if you do not blame him for her death?"

"Because he is incredibly annoying. I did say that already, did I not? I do so hate to have to repeat myself."

"You did," the spirit acknowledged. He waved his hand and the scene changed again. "Do you know this?" he asked hopefully.

"As the sign helpfully informs me, this was the place where I was apprenticed," Scrooge responded. "I'm not thick, you know."

"You were happy here, were you not?" the spirit asked knowingly.

Scrooge shrugged. "Happy? I can't say that I was. I mean, I had a kind and generous master so I was lucky in that but I hated being an apprentice because I was not allowed to go where I pleased and had no money. Sometimes I look back on those days and wonder how I ever made it through."

"It can't have been that bad," the spirit argued.

Old Fezziwig paused from where he had been pretending to work and snuck another glance at the clock. His eyes lit up. "Work's over for the day! Ebenezer! Dick! Come now, you can work later! Ebenezer!"

Reluctantly, Ebenezer set down his quill. "But sir, if I can just get this finished up tonight then I
"It's Christmas Eve, boy, what's the matter with you?" Fezziwig asked light-heartedly.

"I just don't want to have extra work two days from now is all," Scrooge said, casting one last longing look at his work before he set it aside.

"That's two days from now," Dick said carelessly. "Think about it then."

"And that is the kind of thinking that landed him in the poorhouse," Scrooge said wisely.

"Him you remember," the spirit said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I make it a point to keep up on my rivals," Scrooge replied. "Undeserving of that honor though they may be."

They watched in silence as the building was slowly transformed into a magnificent party and guests filled the room.

The spirit caught Scrooge smiling a little as he watched the goings-on.

"What is this?" the spirit asked triumphantly.

"I am just awed that such a merry time could be had. It is truly inspirational," Scrooge replied.

"Is it really so great a thing? It would have cost him three or four pounds at most, a pittance really," the spirit said dismissively.

"Spirit, I think you're missing out on just why I am so awed by this," Scrooge told him. "Even more so than I was back then. Why, if everyone could be this merry this economically then Christmas might not be such a dreadful waste after all! As long as you are living within your means, I believe that you should feel free to be as merry as you wish."

"Well as long as they have your permission," the spirit said sourly.

"They do," Scrooge repeated.

"We should hurry," the spirit told him. "My time grows short."

"I thought spirits didn't go by human time," Scrooge reminded him.

"Well I'm getting rather sick of you," the spirit admitted.

"Ah," Scrooge said as if that explained everything.

The scene changed again and now and older Ebenezer – albeit one still decades younger than the current Scrooge – was sitting on a park bench with a lovely young woman.

"There's no point trying to talk me out of it," the girl said. "I have quite made up my mind."

"You can't just end our engagement without telling me why, Belle," Ebenezer protested.

Belle considered it. "Very well, I suppose you have a point even though I'm sure it is more curiosity than care that drives you to ask that question. You're just too obsessed with money."

"I don't know what you mean," Ebenezer said defensively.
"You're going over your latest figures even while you're sitting here with me and I'm ending things with you," Belle pointed out.

Flushing, Ebenezer stowed his papers away. "Well I fell behind and I really can't afford to."

"Marrying me and having a family would just cause you to fall further and further behind. Do you have any idea how much work a baby is?" Belle demanded.

"We could hire people for that," Ebenezer said dismissively.

"I wouldn't want to!" Belle exclaimed.

"Fine then you can take care of it while I'm working," Ebenezer acquiesced.

"I would want a little support!" Belle objected.

"Well you already shot down my idea to hire someone," Ebenezer reminded her.

Belle sighed. "See, this is one of the things I was talking about."

"You're the one being unreasonable here," Ebenezer said stubbornly.

Belle sighed. "I'm not but even if I was it doesn't really matter. The two of us can't come to an accord on such a basic thing and you're barely even interested in me these days."

"I'm very interested in you!" Ebenezer insisted.

"You couldn't come with me to my mother's grave the other day," Belle pointed out.

"Jacob had to impress a new investor and he was nervous so he needed me on hand," Ebenezer replied.

"And then when we were supposed to have tea with our old friends the Dickersons the week before that you couldn't make it," Belle continued.

"Jacob was sick and couldn't just be left alone!" Ebenezer exclaimed. "Have a heart, Belle."

Belle laughed. "That's funny. And then what about before that when my sister came to town to visit and you weren't there for that?"

"Jacob and I discovered a discrepancy in our finances and had to spend the day figuring out what went wrong and fixing it," Ebenezer replied. "You know all of this, Belle."

"I do. And every time you're too busy for me you have time for Jacob and work. Frankly, I think that you either live at your office or you're in love with your partner. I'm rather hoping it's the latter, actually, because that way maybe you'll be happy," Belle said distantly.

"I…what?" Ebenezer spluttered.

"I'm not judging you!" Belle rushed to assure him. "I just can't possibly marry someone who is in love with somebody else."

"I'm really not," Ebenezer said flatly.

"I'm choosing to believe that you are as it is less sad to me than the thought that the man that I loved will grow old alone because he's too busy trying to make money," Belle said softly.
"Why does everyone always vilify the desire to make money?" Ebenezer demanded. "I just don't understand it."

"We don't," Belle replied. "Trust me, if a large pile of money were to just fall out of the sky and drop onto my lap then I would not complain."

"You can't just expect money to happen to you! You have to work for it!" Scrooge argued, scowling.

"Which is why I will never expect to be rich," Belle told him. "I have not the dowry to marry someone already wealthy and the kind of work that a poor man must put in to become wealthy would leave no time for me. You can't work to the exclusion of all else, Ebenezer. That's no way to live and I'm so very afraid that you will discover that one day but it will be too late."

"Well don't bother," Ebenezer snapped, standing up. "I can see that you're quite clearly judging me. If you no longer want anything to do with me then don't have anything to do with me. I reject your pity. And who ends a relationship on Christmas Eve anyway?"

"Forgive me but I didn't think you'd mind given that you have a bizarre aversion to Christmas," Belle said, taken aback. "In fact, I thought you might even welcome this since now you have an excuse to dislike the holiday."

"I do not dislike it I am merely indifferent to it. What I dislike is everyone trying to force it on me," Ebenezer said tiredly, standing up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get back to the office."

Belle sighed as she watched him go. "I was really expecting some sort of token protest…"

"Ah, Belle," Scrooge said fondly as he watched her. "We never would have worked out, of course, she's quite right about that but she was quite a girl. I'm sure she's happy in whatever she did with her life."

"You don't know?" the spirit asked, surprised.

Scrooge shrugged. "Why should I? She was quite keen to escape from my life so I'm just respecting her wishes, really."

"It's remarkable," the spirit marveled.

"What is?" Scrooge asked.

"I thought that by taking you to see your past I'd get some sort of a reaction out of you and find that you were once a good person who time and circumstances have warped into the selfish bastard I see before me but I was wrong. You always were a miserable little blighter, weren't you?" the spirit asked rhetorically.

"I'm feeling judged again," Scrooge complained. "Look are we done here or do I have to watch the other thirty Christmases of my life?"

"Let's try just one more," the spirit said but without much hope.

The scene changed again to what at first glanced appeared to be Scrooge's bedroom but the presence of Scrooge in the corner doing paperwork and another man lying in the bed quickly proved otherwise.

"Are you sure you can afford to take the time from the office to sit here while I'm dying?" Marley asked weakly.
"Don't worry, I brought a great deal of it with me and Cratchit is going to send over regular updates," Ebenezer assured him.

"Good. I wouldn't want the business to suffer because of my failing health," Marley replied. Most people would have said that sarcastically but not Jacob Marley.

Ebenezer nodded, pleased. "And that is why you are the perfect business partner."

"Except for the part where I'm dying," Marley pointed out.

"It happens to the best of us," Ebenezer replied.

They sat there in companionable silence for awhile.

"I can't believe you brought work to your best friend's deathbed," the spirit said, shaking his head.

"Regardless of what some people would have you think, I am not completely heartless and we had been working together for too many years for me to just ignore this like I would most people dying," Scrooge sniffed. "This was the first deathbed I'd been to since Fanny's."

"You shouldn't have brought work at all!" the spirit corrected him.

"But…that would have been really boring and a waste of time and Jacob wouldn't have approved," Scrooge said, confused. "And isn't the important thing in a situation like that to keep the dying person happy?"

"Ebenezer," Marley said suddenly, his eyes wild.

Ebenezer looked up from his work. "Yes, Jacob?"

"We were wrong. We were so wrong," he said desperately.

"About what?" Ebenezer asked, clearly just humoring him.

"There's an afterlife! I can see it! And they judge you for being a terrible person!" Marley warned.

"It's a good thing we're not terrible people or anything, then," Ebenezer replied.

"But…we are!" Marley cried out, sounding terrified.

"I don't believe it," Ebenezer said. "After all, we don't go around killing people or mutilating them or raping them or kidnapping them or stealing from them or anything like that. We're just businessmen. Successful businessmen but it seems pretty harmless."

"Oh, but it's not!" Marley insisted.

"You just rest now, Jacob. I know that you must be scared of what is to come but you'll be fine," Ebenezer assured him.

"But he wasn't," the spirit said ominously.

"He looked fine," Scrooge disagreed.

"He was eternally damned," the spirit reminded him.

"He really didn't seem to mind and he as good as admitted that if I 'change' or whatever he'll get out of it after only seven years," Scrooge countered.
"He was eternally damned," the spirit said again.

Scrooge rolled his eyes. "You know what, if you're not even going to have faith in this then can I just go home?"
Chapter 3

Scrooge had barely gotten back under his covers when he heard the clock strike two. Cursing softly, Scrooge reluctantly got back up and went to go investigate the jolly laughter that was suddenly emanating from the next room over.

"Another spirit, I presume?" Scrooge asked, looking up at the jolly green giant who barely fit in his room and certainly did not seem to belong there.

"I am the Ghost of Christmas Present, yes," the spirit confirmed.

"Well, this should be shorter then," Scrooge said, feeling slightly more optimistic about the whole thing.

"We can visit more people," the spirit told him.

Scrooge groaned. "There's actually no one I want to see and certainly not at this hour."

"I will be taking you to see them at a later time today," the spirit clarified.

"Some 'present'," Scrooge scoffed.

"Or we could just watch everybody sleep," the spirit threatened.

Scrooge hesitated. "Can I have a moment to think about it?"

"No. Now come on," the spirit ordered.

"So how does this whole 'Christmas Present' thing work?" Scrooge asked curiously. "Were you born today? Will you die tonight? Are you like a phoenix or something?"

"You've never seen my like before?" the spirit sounded disappointed.

"No, I haven't. And since I am clearly talking about a giant Christmas spirit, let's not make this about any larger issues like me not appreciating Christmas or something."

"But-" the spirit started to say.

"No," Scrooge said firmly.

The spirit sighed, looking a little discouraged. Scrooge often had that effect on people. He held out his hand and when Scrooge took it the scene changed.

They were walking among the city on Christmas morning and watching everyone celebrate.

"Oh, ugh," Scrooge remarked eloquently, making a face.

"What?" the spirit asked, looking around for the source of Scrooge's displeasure.

"I hate moving about the common people," Scrooge answered. "It's part of why I made so much money and why I generally stay indoor on Christmas. There's nothing miraculous or wonderful or life-changing about any of this."

"Well, fine. Maybe you'll care more about someone you know," the spirit suggested.
Scrooge snorted. "I doubt it. I don't like anyone that I know."

The scene changed and they ended up in an extremely poor neighborhood.

Scrooge jumped and looked around him nervously. "I'm not visible, am I? I can't shake the feeling that I'm going to get violently murdered here."

"You're not going to be murdered, violently or otherwise," the spirit said, rolling his eyes. "You're not visible and at any rate this isn't really that bad of a neighborhood. It's just poor."

"Do I have to go in there?" Scrooge asked, eyeing the house in front of him unhappily.

"You could stay out here and see which one of us is right about you being murdered," the spirit said carelessly.

Scrooge quickly stepped through the door and looked around, feeling decidedly uncomfortable at all of the poverty around him. He lived simply, too, but that was by choice and so it was different.

"I don't know these people," Scrooge asked, surveying the scene around him of a family preparing dinner.

"Wait," the spirit instructed.

"Why did Father take Tiny Tim to church while none of us went?" a boy asked. "I mean, I'm not even really helping."

"You should," his mother said.

"I don't mind," a girl said. "Church is really boring and so crowded today!"

"I think that's him!" the boy said, listening carefully. "Martha, go hide!"

Laughing, Martha ducked into the next room.

The door opened and Cratchit walked in carrying a small and sickly boy on his shoulders.

"Oh, joy. My clerk who I'm going to fire tomorrow," Scrooge said apathetically.

"They are darling," the spirit argued.

"They're rather dirty," Scrooge said distastefully.

"What a thing to say!" the spirit cried out, appalled.

"I actually meant that literally. They need to bathe," Scrooge clarified. "Tell me that that's not true."

"They don't have the money to bathe more regularly and it is all your fault!" the spirit accused.

"I don't see how it is. Some of them could get jobs or Cratchit could get a better one," Scrooge countered. "Maybe he'll get one once I fire him."

"Where's our Martha?" Cratchit asked, looking around eagerly.

"I should also add that referring to someone as 'our so-and-so' annoys me beyond measure," Scrooge declared.
Everyone looked down sadly.

"She couldn't come?" Cratchit asked hollowly, looking terribly disappointed. "But…Christmas!"

"Here I am, Father!" Martha exclaimed, bounding into the room. "I can't bear to see you so disappointed, even as a joke."

"How asinine. 'I can't stand to see you so disappointed'," Scrooge repeated mockingly. "What a daft girl! It was a joke. Either commit to five bloody minutes or don't even bother."

"Don't you think you're being too hard on her?" the spirit asked him.

"I think I hate her," Scrooge continued undaunted.

Tiny Tim went up to his room for something and Cratchit took his wife aside. "Today at church, he was so good! He didn't fall asleep or anything like the others always do. He said that he hoped that everyone in church saw him," Cratchit said, getting all choked up. "He thought it might be pleasant for them to be reminded of the man who healed the lame on today of all days."

"Aw!" Mrs. Cratchit and the spirit cooed as one.

"Isn't he darling?" the spirit exclaimed.

"I don't think so. He sounds suspiciously precocious and, while I hate all children in general, I especially hate precious children above all," Scrooge declared. "If the words 'darling', 'precious', 'adorable', or anything along those lines is used to describe a child then they are anathema to me. And I bet no one was even thinking that when they saw him anyway. How self-centered, thinking everybody would spend so much time thinking of him."

"You're a monster," the spirit said, glaring at him.

"Look, I'm not saying that I want to punch this kid," Scrooge defended himself. "Although, to be fair, I am sort of starting to think about it."

Tiny Tim slowly staggered down the stairs and everyone patiently waited for him to get to the table.

Everyone but Scrooge, that is. He tapped his foot rapidly. "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up!"

"What's your hurry?" the spirit snapped.

"I dislike my time being wasted. I'm sure he can do it himself but it takes all damn day," Scrooge complained. "Just carry him! He is not independent and he never will be."

The Cratchits said grace once he had finally reached the table.

"And now let's give a toast to the founder of our feast, Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge!" Cratchit said, holding his glass up.

"I would love to know how you figured that," Scrooge scoffed.

"The founder of the feast indeed!" Mrs. Cratchit obviously didn't think much of that idea either.

"Emily!" Cratchit cried out.

"What?" Emily demanded. "He barely pays you as it is, he keeps threatening to fire you, he begrudges giving you Christmas off…And, despite your attempts to moderate your stories, I can
tell that he is just generally a complete asshole."

The spirit looked over at Scrooge to see his reaction.

Scrooge was almost smiling.

"That you like?" The spirit couldn't believe it.

Scrooge shrugged. "Why not? She's just being honest and she has reason enough not to like me. At least she's not wishing me a happy Christmas."

"The children, Emily," Cratchit said imploringly, nodding to the anxious children. "And it's Christmas."

Emily sighed. "Fine. Though I will be toasting him for your sake and the day's. I'm sure he'll be very happy alone with his piles of money."

"I would be," one of the boys muttered.

"God bless us," the Cratchits sans Tiny Tim intoned.

"God bless us, every one," Tiny Tim said quietly.

"You know he just does that to be different," Scrooge groused.

"So precious!" the spirit enthused.

Scrooge just shook his head disgustedly.

"What if I told you that Tiny Tim is going to die within the year unless you personally spend a great deal of money on doctors for him and getting him better food and more coal?" the spirit inquired.

Scrooge tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I'd say that it seems quite unfair to put all of that on me. I don't even know the kid and I don't like what I've seen."

"So you want him to die?" the spirit cried out melodramatically.

"That's overstating it," Scrooge said reprovingly. "I just don't particularly care."

"I wanted to use your own words against you here," the spirit said wistfully.

"I would apologize but I hate to have my own words used against me," Scrooge said unsympathetically.

"Tiny Tim was supposed to really change you, to humanize the nameless faceless poor you were fine with ignoring and mistreating. He was supposed to make you care. You were supposed to weep for the injustice that would allow such an innocent soul to perish in this cruel world," the spirit further lamented.

"Well, I didn't. And why would I? I don't even know him and he's extremely annoying. Why does everybody think that years of making me the way I am can be undone by looking over my past once more and watching a sick kid?" Scrooge wondered aloud.

"Let's just go, shall we?" the spirit asked rhetorically, sighing heavily.

Scrooge gladly took his hand and they ended up in a much nicer house in a parlour where a great
deal of festivities were going on.

Fred was standing in the middle of the room laughing loudly and everybody else was just sort of watching him and that wasn't weird at all.

"He said that that Christmas was a humbug, he really did!" Fred swore. "And he believed it, too!"

"I'm sure he did," one of the guests remarked. "But Fred, why are we talking about your uncle? It's kind of weird."

"I agree," Scrooge concurred, nodding. "I am going to hope that we purposefully came when they were talking about me or else I really have to wonder about him. More so than I already do, that is."

"I'm just trying to explain why he's not here," Fred said innocently.

"Nobody actually expected him to come," the guest persisted. "Seeing as how he never comes. If he did come, I'd be shocked."

"Plus, he's pretty amusing. Not very nice, of course, but who does his unpleasantness hurt apart from himself? I certainly don't mind it," Fred declared.

"Those poor souls who work for him or have to do business with him, I imagine," someone said.

"Well, yes," Fred conceded. "But aside from them."

"Plus he's very rich and people always make allowances for the wealthy," Fred's wife remarked.

Fred laughed again. "That is true, Clara. But it's not like he ever spends any of it so he might as well be poor. And he's certainly never going to give it to us."

"I intend for it to be a surprise when he receives it," Scrooge explained to the spirit. "Just because I'm giving him all of my money when I die doesn't mean I want any more contact with him now."

"I have no patience with him," Clara said indignantly.

"And I can't say she's making a great impression on me, either," Scrooge declared.

"Why do you need to have patience with him?" one of the guests asked. "Didn't you say that you never met him and he wants nothing to do with your family so if it weren't for Fred's constant visits then you wouldn't ever even have to concern yourself with him?"

"Well..." Clara flailed but quickly rallied. "He really should be more appreciative of dear Fred's generosity and perseverance!"

"But he doesn't want it so why should he be at all appreciative?" another guest asked.

"I feel sorry for him honestly," Fred admitted. "I mean, here he is in life having everything that a man could want – except a family but that I can only assume was by choice – and yet he is so very miserable. I really don't understand it. He could have such a pleasant time if he came here and dined with us but he just won't do it. But I intend to continue and try to wear him down. Who knows? If I can't convince him maybe I'll at least get him to leave his poor clerk fifty pounds."

"He can leave the man fifty pounds himself if he wants to after I'm gone," Scrooge sniffed.

The subject mercifully changed after that and the party moved on.
Eventually, after another hour or so (Scrooge kept trying to catch the spirit's eye to find out how long they had to stay but the spirit studiously avoided looking at him) they began to play 'yes or no.' It was a simple game and Scrooge rather felt an asinine one.

They finally got to one question that seemed to stump everybody. It was a live, disagreeable, savage animal that growled, grunted, and spoke. It lived in London and walked about the streets without being a show of led by anybody and it wasn't a part of a zoo or killed in a market. And because that could describe a great many animals, Fred also had to clarify that it was not a horse, a donkey, a cow, a bull, a tiger, a dog, a pig, a cat, or a bear.

"I wish this game had a question cap," Scrooge grumbled.

"I know!" Clara's sister called out suddenly. "It's your Uncle Scrooge!"

"Oh, are we back on him?" one of the guests asked, sighing, as Fred laughed and nodded.

"You really should have said 'yes' at 'is it a bear',," another guest claimed. "When you said 'no' there was really no way that I was ever going to have gotten it."

"Oh yes," Scrooge said sarcastically. "These are kind and pleasant people who I am missing out on a great deal by choosing not to associate myself with."

"Since we keep making fun of him, we should probably drink to his health or something," Fred decided. He held up a cup. "To Uncle Scrooge!"

Everyone else quickly followed suit.

"If I had anyone else to leave my money to, I would so disinherit him," Scrooge announced. "But then, I often feel that way after leaving my nephew's company."

Then the spirit made Scrooge tag along as he visited what must be every single slightly unhappy person in the world who celebrated Christmas and manually and individually brightened their day. Scrooge complained bitterly the entire time but the spirit paid him no heed.

The spirit seemed to be aging before his eyes.

"Are you seriously dying?" Scrooge couldn't believe it as they stopped on top of a mostly deserted bridge.

"It is nearly midnight and I am the Ghost of Christmas Present," the spirit reminded him.

"It's not even three in the morning," Scrooge protested. "Because that's when I'm supposed to meet with the third spirit."

"Stop overthinking it!" the spirit ordered.

"Why does everybody keep telling me that?" Scrooge wondered.

"Maybe you should take their advice," the spirit hinted.

"Maybe I would if it wasn't such stupid advice," Scrooge retorted. He happened to notice something strange under the spirit's robes. "Er…what?"

"Oh, this," the spirit obligingly moved his robe (Scrooge automatically shutting his eyes before slowly cracking them open again as he realized that he was not, in fact, being flashed) to reveal two of the ugliest children that Scrooge had ever seen. They were dirty and diseased and
discolored and quite savage-looking. They might almost have been feral.

"Spirit, I know I said earlier that I didn't like children but I think that I really hate these two," Scrooge declared, feeling suddenly squeamish.

"It's a common reaction," the spirit said agreeably.

"So…what is the deal with them?" Scrooge asked hesitantly.

"They are mankind's children," the spirit explained.

"Correct me if I'm wrong but I don't think that a species as a whole is capable of having children," Scrooge said. He held up a hand. "I know, I know. You want me to stop 'overthinking' it."

"The boy is Ignorance and the girl is Want. And I mean 'want' as in 'to lack' and not 'to desire,'" the spirit informed him.

"That's kind of obvious, spirit," Scrooge retorted.

"You would be surprised," the spirit said cryptically. "Beware both of them and everything to do with them but especially the boy because he will destroy everyone and everything."

"Maybe we should think about killing him then," Scrooge suggested.

The spirit was horrified. "He's a child!"

"You just said he was going to kill us all," Scrooge said unrepentantly.

"That wouldn't even work since he's just a physical representation of an abstract concept," the spirit replied.

"We could still try," Scrooge claimed.

"We could," the spirit agreed. "But, well, why bother when we have perfectly good prisons and workhouses that your taxes go to support? Ah, I did get to use your own words against you after all!"

"Sort of but not really because that's not a direct quote but some pretty heavy paraphrasing," Scrooge answered calmly.

The bell struck twelve.

"I won!" the spirit cried out as he disappeared.

Scrooge was soon distracted from the unprofessionalism of the spirit by a figure that looked a lot like how he imagined death would look coming closer to him.

"I take it that you're the Ghost of Christmas Future?" Scrooge asked, trying to be brave. He frowned. "That sounds weird. How about 'Yet To Come'? Yes, I think that sounds a lot better."

The spirit said nothing but inclined his head.

"Oh, are you not a talker then?" Scrooge asked, unable to stop the smile from breaking out over his face. "Finally, this evening is looking up!"
"Since you don't appear to be willing to speak – and I sincerely thank you for that, oh mysterious death apparition – you will have to conduct me where you will and I will piece it together," Scrooge announced.

The spirit did not have to do anything to begin with as a few gentlemen he vaguely knew huddled together, laughing.

"You're not having a go at me, are you?" one of them asked. "He's really dead?"

"Why would I joke about something like that?" another one asked. "He'd probably make my life a living hell!"

"But what's he done with his money?" the third asked impatiently.

"Who knows?" asked the first. "Maybe he left it to his business. He has nobody else."

"He didn't leave it to me is all I know," the second added. "Do you think anyone will actually turn out for the funeral? I know I'm not going unless something else I don't want to do happens to be scheduled for the same day."

"Maybe he didn't leave the money to you because you're an ass who doesn't care that a man you knew died and don't even want to go to the funeral!" Scrooge exploded. He looked over at the spirit, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "I know I'm not the most sentimental of men but they take it too far."

"Well, I wouldn't mind going," the first said boldly. He waited for the other two to turn to him, dumbstruck, and then continued with, "As long as lunch is provided!"

The spirit began to walk suddenly and, thankful to escape this terrible scene, Scrooge followed him. As the part of town they passed through became worse and worse, Scrooge began to eye his surroundings warily.

Eventually, they stopped in front of a pawn shop and went inside.

Three grubby women stood in front of an equally grubby pawnbroker.

"Don't you just love a good grave-robbing?" the pawnbroker asked, almost buzzing with anticipation.

One of the women, who looked almost familiar to Scrooge, drew herself up. "I would never grave rob and I am insulted that you would imply otherwise! Why, I'm a good Christian woman, ain't I?"

"I'm not doubting you," the pawnbroker was quick to assure her. He glanced at the bulging bag. "It's just that, well..."

"He weren't in his grave yet so that's different," she insisted.

"Too true, too true," the pawnbroker readily agreed. "Now ladies, what have you got for me?"

The first woman produced a mostly worthless bundle of little trinkets such as seals, brooches, and sleeve-buttons. She received very little for it but the pawnbroker would not pay a penny more.
The second woman fared a little better with sheets, towels, and some tea items.

They all looked to the almost familiar woman eagerly.

"Well, I've got his bed curtains," she said smugly as she produced them.

The other three just stared at her.

"While he was just lying there?" the pawnbroker couldn't believe it.

Scrooge, who had been peering closely at her, gave a start. "I say! Is that my cleaning woman?"

The suspected cleaning woman cackled. "Well, it's not as if he had any use for it!"

"I suppose. But... still..." one of the other women looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Is this the same man from earlier?" Scrooge asked, intrigued.

No answer, of course.

"You think that's something?" the cleaning woman asked, smirking. "Some idiot dressed him in his best clothes – better than I knew he had, the cheapskate – and so I lifted them and came here."

And she produced a very fine set of clothing. "And then there's the blanket, of course."

"You stripped a corpse!" one of the women couldn't believe it.

"Okay, my cleaning woman or not, she is so fired," Scrooge declared.

The woman nodded primly. "And I expect to be well-paid for it."

But the pawnbroker didn't touch it. "He didn't die of anything contagious, did he?"

The woman gave him a look. "Would I be there if he did? He must have been dead for days before I found him seeing as I only come in once a week. He chased everyone away while he was alive so now no one cares that he's dead. Not that he minds, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't go that far," another woman said. "His nephew was there when I went by and he seemed upset. He said that for my loyal service of course I should have a little something. I almost didn't take anything after that but he insisted. A right proper gentleman he was. Hard to believe that they're really related."

"I can't watch this," Scrooge declared disgustedly, turning to walk away. When he got outside, he turned to the spirit. "What cretins. I know that you pretty much embody death and that the other two spirits came to show me my past and present so I really cannot imagine who this dead man from the future is. But just in case, can you show me any normal human reactions? I find myself disturbed to be surrounded by so many sociopaths."

The world changed and suddenly Scrooge found himself standing before Bob Cratchit's house.

"Oh, thank goodness I'm back here," Scrooge said monotonously. "This is exactly what I meant."

Still, there was nothing to be gained by waiting outside and so he reluctantly ventured forward.

The Cratchit children were all huddled around Peter who was reading from the bible while his mother was attempting to sew. She was having difficulty as she was clearly on the verge of tears.

"The color hurts my eyes," she finally said, giving up.
"Let me guess," Scrooge said sourly. "That kid is dead and somehow this is all my fault."

The spirit said nothing and though Scrooge still couldn't see him properly, he rather fancied that the spirit was projecting an aura of 'You said it, not me.'

"Shouldn't your father be home by now?" she asked, closing her eyes.

"He would be normally but he's walked a little slower ever since…" Peter trailed off.

The other children added their completely unnecessary agreements.

Just then, Cratchit himself came in. "Sorry I'm late. I just met Mr. Scrooge's extraordinarily kind nephew and he offered to pay for the whole funeral himself as well as hiring me on since I'm out of a job and getting Peter a decent starting position!"

Everyone oohed and ahhed appropriately.

"But where did you even meet him?" Emily asked.

Here Cratchit looked down. "At…at the cemetery."

She was puzzled. "You mean…oh, but he is a wonderfully forgiving man!"

"I get it," Scrooge snapped. "Everyone who meets my nephew, excepting myself, is much better off than before their paths crossed. At some point this gets gratuitous."

Cratchit nodded. "Indeed. I…things should be ready by Sunday. I really think that Tim would be happy there."

Scrooge rolled his eyes in the corner as the Cratchit family then banded together and vowed to never forget Tim or to quarrel again and all sorts of things that would have made the Ghost of Christmas Present openly weep but did not move him in the slightest. At least the current spirit seemed similarly uninterested.

"Can we just move on?" Scrooge finally requested as all the saccharine outpouring proved too much for him.

The spirit held out his arm and Scrooge gladly took it.

Then they were in a cemetery which was a bit worrying. The spirit led the way to one in particular and, pausing for but a moment, Scrooge glanced at it.

"Oh, the dead man everyone was talking about was me. What a twist! That would explain why my nephew kept being mentioned and why my cleaning woman was there," Scrooge remarked. "And dead in only a year? Look, I know you don't talk but this is rather an important question I've got to ask."

The spirit said nothing.

"I know that if I change my ways now then the circumstances of my end will change quite a bit but will the timing? If I suddenly start 'honoring Christmas' or whatever it is that you people want then will I outlive Tiny Tim at least?" Scrooge demanded. "Or wait, changing probably demands I do something about that. Will I live longer than a year? Because if I can survive then frankly I would rather do so. And I suppose Jacob's fate does not look appealing and he was a friend so if I can get him out of that I probably should do so."
The spirit still said nothing.

Frustrated, Scrooge started pulling on the spirit's robes and the spirit started pulling back, trying to free itself. In the struggle, the robes that the spirit wore billowed out and covered Scrooge and when he was finally able to wrest himself out from under them he discovered that he was no longer in the graveyard. Instead, he was in his own bed fighting with his own blankets which his cleaning woman had not yet stolen.

And he may have resolved to change – even if he was quite possibly missing the point – but he was still firing her because she seemed like a terrible person he didn't trust near his corpse. Hopefully he would not die for many a year but she was much younger than him and so, if he did nothing, she would probably still be around then.

"The fact that I'm here means that this was probably a dream," Scrooge reasoned. "But if I'm having dreams about how much I should change then maybe I should listen as clearly part of me wants to. And why risk it? I wonder what day today is. Is it still Christmas?"

He went to the window and saw a young boy passing by.

"Hello," Scrooge called down to him.

The boy jumped and then turned to eye Scrooge warily. "Are you talking to me, strange man?"

"I'm not strange but I am, in fact, talking to you," Scrooge confirmed. "Is today still Christmas?"

The boy looked at him strangely. "Yes. Of course is it. Why, were you so drunk last night you thought you might have slept through it?"

Scrooge shook his head. "No, nothing like that. Listen, do you know that poulter on the corner?"

"Of course I do," the boy said, looking affronted.

"I just wanted to make sure before we went any further," Scrooge assured him. "Now, do you know if they've sold the prized turkey there?"

"I'm not psychic but the last time I was there they hadn't," the boy replied. "It's a shame it's going to waste but it's so bloody expensive and nobody could eat all of that."

"Well can you do me a favor and buy it for me?" Scrooge requested.

"Why can't you buy it for yourself?" the boy demanded.

"Because that takes effort and I'd rather pay somebody else to do it," Scrooge replied.

"Well how about you give me the money so that I can pay the man and not have to convince him to just follow me out here with that bird and that he'd get paid here?" the boy suggested.

"Trust you with that much money?" Scrooge scoffed. "Not on your life." He coughed. "I mean, er, what if you get mugged or something? I'm only looking out for you."

The boy sighed. "Fine. How much are we talking?"

"A shilling if you do it at all and half a crown if you get back within five minutes," Scrooge answered promptly. "Not that I'll be timing you or anything but-"

But the boy was already gone.
"I suppose that if I'm to keep Tiny Tim alive so that I can stay alive then the first step is to properly feed them. But if I tell them who it is from then not only will I have to deal with annoying things like gratitude that I'm not really in the mood for right now but they'll be more likely to suspect poison than just a random stranger going around giving people giant turkeys," Scrooge said to himself.

He quickly got ready while waiting for the boy and the man from the butcher's shop to come back.

It was more than five minutes before they did return (perhaps it really had been a challenge for the child to convince the man to come with him for free after all) but Scrooge gave him his half a crown anyway and, once he remembered where Cratchit lived, he sent the butcher off in a cab to deliver the bird.

Then, to test his newfound resolve and because he had already gotten ready, he set off to go mingle with the common folk and to greet them as if he were pleased to see them. He must have done a passable job because three or four of them wished him a good day and a happy Christmas as well.

The two people asking for money yesterday were still loitering about and while his first impulse was to go on another way (both because he did not want to deal with any hostility from them and because he suspected the 'changed' thing to do was to give them money), he braced himself and then went right up to them.

"Hello, I'm not sure if you remember me," he began.

The way they both stiffened as they saw him suggested that they did, in fact, remember him.

"I'm afraid that you caught me at a bad time yesterday. I'm not usually like that," he lied. "Or at least I hope I'm not!"

That earned him a weak chuckle.

"So how about I give you a little something after all?" he asked, whispering a figure into their ears. "And let's keep this anonymous, shall we?"

"Oh, Mr. Scrooge!" It was clear that they didn't really know what else to say.

"I'll take that as a 'yes', shall I?" he asked dryly.

"Yes!" the man exclaimed happily.

"Right, so...I'm sure you've got much to do so come see me later or something," Scrooge said awkwardly.

"We will," one of the men promised him, sounding like he really meant it.

Well, he supposed he had better get used to that.

It occurred to him that such a sudden change as he was enacting might make one think that he was mad. Still, he didn't think he had much to fear from Bedlam because not only did he have a lot of money and as his next of kin a nephew who would be only too glad at the change but people would be too terrified at his return to his usual self and the retribution that he would pay out to those who had had him locked away in the first place.

Or at least he hoped that was how it would be.
Better fire the cleaning woman before she noticed a change.

Fred, never expecting him to actually show up, had not actually told him what time the party was to be at his house. Well, he had only himself to blame if Scrooge showed up too early then. It would be difficult to make nice with people who would only make fun of him behind his back and expected him to be thankful that other people wanted to pester him (he did not like Fred's wife!) but he thought of the alternative and figured that he could put up with it.

He actually felt a little nervous before he knocked but then he reminded himself that this was ridiculous. He had been invited, after all, the way he had always been invited and everyone in Fred's acquaintance apparently knew all about Fred's long-standing quest to get him to come to dinner so he couldn't very well turn him away now could he?

The maid answered the door and showed him in.

"Fred!" Scrooge cried out and did get a little trill of delight at the stunned expression on his nephew's face.

"Uncle Scrooge!" Fred cried out. "But…what are you…?"

"I was invited," Scrooge reminded him, smiling. "I know that I turned you down for the…I don't even know how many times. Too damn many. But I changed my mind. I do hope that the lack of advanced notice hasn't thrown off your plans too much."

"Oh, not at all," Clara said, drawing attention to her presence. It was remarkable how nice she looked and not at all like she couldn't stand him for Fred's pigheadedness. "We are always prepared because Fred has this terrible habit of inviting everyone he sees on Christmas day to our party."

Fred grinned and blushed. "I'm not quite that bad, my dear."

"Remember last year?" Clara asked pointedly.

Fred coughed. "I'm not quite sure what you mean…"

"So you did actually want me to show up and didn't just feel it was your duty to ask me?" Scrooge asked, semi-genuinely curious.

"Of course I did!" Fred assured him. "And not just because I stand to make quite a bit of money on this."

"Fred!" Clara exclaimed, laughing. "Don't tell him that!"

"I sort of already did yesterday, I think," Fred admitted. "I could always split the money with you, if you'd like."

"Oh, no need," Scrooge said, waving him off. "I have enough money of my own. And someday, hopefully many years down the line, you'll get all of my money anyway."

Fred's legs buckled and fortunately he was standing near a chair. "W-what?"

"Well, where else do you think I would have left it?" Scrooge asked rhetorically. "With the business?"

"Frankly, yes," Fred admitted. "It did rather seem like the sort of thing you would do. But I am gratified to know that I was in your thoughts."
That was one word for it. And he hadn't actually intended to tell Fred about that, had he? Oh well. "And now you have to pretend to be happy to see me," Scrooge noted.

"We're not pretending!" Clara insisted.

"Really?" Scrooge asked lightly. "I had rather thought that you had no patience with me."

Clara had the grace to flush a deep scarlet. "It's just hard to see Fred get his hopes up every year only for them to be dashed to pieces. But Fred's faith was rewarded, it seems, since you are here now."

"Yes," Scrooge agreed. "I am here now. So I'm afraid that you can't amuse everyone by telling the tale of your impossible uncle since I will be there as well and it will be rather awkward."

"Au contraire," Fred disagreed. "I can tell the tale of the long journey towards this wonderful Christmas dinner."

Maybe it was just the unusual sensation of people being genuinely glad to see him (or so it seemed to him) and not at all interested in committing him but that sounded alright to Scrooge.

The next morning, despite staying rather late at Fred's house and making plans to dine with them again next week, Scrooge made sure that he arrived in to work early so as be able to accuse Cratchit of being late. It would be better if Cratchit were actually late but even if he wasn't Scrooge still intended to accuse him of it.

As luck would have it, Cratchit did arrive eighteen and a half minutes late. Scrooge took a minute to mourn the fact that he could not fire him or even put the fear of Scrooge into him like he would have done even just the day before. He did enjoy envisioning how such a scene would have gone but it could only stay in his imagination. He did rather think it was close to how it really would have played out.

It was rather amusing to watch Cratchit try to sneak in. He had to have known that Scrooge was never, ever late and so it wouldn't work. But maybe he thought that Scrooge paid him so little attention he honestly wouldn't have noticed. And now he was wondering if Cratchit had ever pulled such a gambit successfully before. But now wasn't the time for that.

He cleared his throat loudly and enjoyed the sight of Cratchit on the verge of a heart attack.

"What is the meaning of this, Cratchit?" Scrooge growled.

"I-I'm sorry, sir," Cratchit managed to say after several false starts. "I know that I am behind my time."

"Quite," Scrooge said curtly. "Step this way, please."

Trembling with trepidation, Cratchit headed into Scrooge's office clearly in fear for his position. Oh how he did wish that he could make that fear a reality! But no, that was the path to being dead in a year.

"I-I'm sorry, sir. I was making rather merry yesterday. It's only once a year," Cratchit cried feebly. "And Christmas!"

"If I had a shilling for every time I've heard that recently," Scrooge began, shaking his head. "I
care little for your excuses, Cratchit. 'I was making rather merry' indeed. And where were you yesterday?"

"You gave me the day off, sir," Cratchit said, on surer footing here.

"I?" Scrooge repeated disdainfully. "Does that sound like the sort of thing that I would do?"

"I got it in writing after the problems last year, sir," Cratchit replied, pulling out a folded piece of paper and holding it up for Scrooge to peruse. So he had.

"Well I gave it a long, hard thought and I am just not going to stand for the current state of affairs any longer!" Scrooge thundered.

Cratchit practically wilted right in front of him.

"And so therefore you give me no choice but to…raise your salary, get your boy a doctor or five, and go out to lunch," Scrooge finished. It came out a little less bitterly to see Cratchit practically faint in shock.

"I…sir?" Cratchit couldn't believe it. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Are you really going to question your good fortune?" Scrooge retorted.

"…And a happy Christmas to you, Mr. Scrooge," Cratchit said quickly.

You could always count on people to look out for their own self-interest, even suspiciously saintly people like Fred. But if he was going to be doing this sort of thing all the time, he might as well try to consider it altruism or something.

And who would know better about the strange mix of helping others and selfish self-interest than him, anyway?

Tiny Tim, he vowed, would live and so would Ebenezer Scrooge.

It's the End so Review Please!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!