Marley

by gardnerhill

Summary

A Christmas story I wrote for Mystery Frank's zine The Hols of CI5 in the early 1990s. Sequel to "Wave Goodbye Already!"

Raymond Doyle and William Andrew Phillip Bodie were dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. George Cowley knew they were dead? How could it be otherwise? Cowley had viewed their bullet-riddled bodies in the alleyway where they had been ambushed that cold March day – Ray sprawled backward over Bodie's corpse as if still trying to protect his fallen comrade, a bullet hole like a third eye in the middle of his forehead. Cowley had been their CI5 Controller, their boss, their bete noir, their reluctant confidante, and their chief mourner; Cowley had been a witness to the drawing up of the death certificates for the two men. Cowley had retired both of their work folders under the heading DECEASED, and had reassigned their RT frequencies to other agents. And it was a well-known fact that the old Scot would sooner cut off his right arm than tell a lie.

So, as was said in the beginning of this account, both CI5 agents Doyle and Bodie were dead as a door-nail. This must be distinctly understood.

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Ray Doyle glowered down at Bodie from his position on a roof vent. "Bodie, if I'd seen anything I'd have told you, wouldn't I?" He paused for another luxurious sniff of the rich warm humidity wafting out of his perch. "Mmm. Smells like they've just got dinner on."

"Cut it out, Ray," Bodie snapped. "You know we can't come up there." He stood on the street looking up at his partner, oblivious to the occasional spray of slush and dirty snow from passing cars. Beside him was a man in white, sitting cross-legged on the street, staring at a small stone.

"Could always walk through the door," Ray offered sweetly. "They wouldn't mind at all."

"Yeah, right," Bodie said. "And if Jacob comes out right then, I miss the whole thing. No, said yourself we're on stakeout, and if you're bent on spoiling Christmas Eve we might as well do it right."

"That's not a very nice thing to do, Mr. Doyle," the white-suited man complained, never breaking his eyes off the pebble, which was now wobbling from his fingertips about three centimeters off the ground.

"Marty, you've known 'Mr. Doyle' for nearly a month," Bodie said, turning to look at his pupil, and speaking just loudly enough for Ray to hear. "Have you ever known him to do anything nice?" He looked at the pebble. "'No, no, Marty, you're trying too hard," he said briskly. "Remember, you're not trying to pick the stone up with your hand, you're doing it with your mind, but using your hand to do it. Look, it's like a crane on the dock – the engine is down here, see, and the armature just does what the engine tells it."

"I see," Marty murmured.

"That's why he's whinging on about me bein' up here and smelling everything, Hopkirk," Doyle called down, not breaking his gaze from the houses he espied from his perch. "He can't run his motor long without refueling. Very inefficient."

Bodie ignored his partner. "Keep at it, Marty. Wasn't easy for Ray or me at first, either, but we wanted to help our old mates at the Squad so much we kept trying." Bodie shrugged and grinned. "Wound up working twice as hard as we used to do before. And twice the hours. And we didn't
even get paid."

Marty Hopkirk laughed. "I know, Mr. Bodie. I kept forgetting to sleep at first, too. I spent most of my time wandering around London and making new friends."

Bodie looked around at both ends of this alley road. "And don't forget to keep an eye out for people who might see the stone lifting. That's why I dragged you out here tonight. You've got to practice being a help without giving yourself away."

"It's like juggling," Marty grunted, glaring at the pebble and darting his eyes around. The pebble wobbled, wavered; rose another centimeter off the ground.

"Exactly what it's like. Car."

Marty Hopkirk dropped the pebble and held still. "You don't need to freeze up," Bodie said in exasperation as the lorry drove through both of them, splashing snow and slush on either side of the road. "They can't see or hear you."

"Don't like having cars go through me," Hopkirk snapped peevishly. "That's how I died in the first place."

"You've got to overcome that," Bodie said sternly, poking Marty in one shoulderblade. "What if your mate Jeff needed your help in the middle of the M1, eh? Ray and I can handle being shot at now, and that's how we bit it. Practice, Marty, that's all you need. Now keep trying to pick it up."

Bodie grinned and gave the foppish ghost a thump on the shoulder. "By the time I'm done with you, you'll be yanking guns out of people's hands."

"Mr. Bodie, has anyone told you you're a sadistic slavedriver?"

"Just call me Macklin, mate. Now back to work – and keep your eyes on your work. I'll let you know if we spot Jacob."

The unhappy ghost in the white suit returned to the small round stone. Bodie busied himself with keeping a lookout for passersby and cars, though the former were few; nearly everyone was in celebrating.
"Why didn't you bring your bird along tonight, Ray?" Bodie asked jovially, stressing the word "bird" a little more than was usual. "Shouldn't be alone on Christmas Eve, my lad."

"Elizabeth's busy tonight," Ray said shortly. "Lots of kids getting lost in department stores, Heathrow, train stations."

"Going out afterward?" Bodie persisted, a wicked grin on his face. "Wouldn't miss seeing your guardian angel tonight."

"And stop slagging her wings, Bodie!" Ray snapped, glaring down at his partner; his forehead bullet-hole was trickling blood, an indication of his poor temper. "She can't help 'em being there!" He resumed his watch, hovering over the humid vent, with an ill grace, one hand going up to wipe the blood out of his eyes.

Bodie only chuckled, his purpose accomplished, and resumed his lookout for carolers and other hazards of the road. He knew the ins and outs of the volatile Ray Doyle better than anyone else, living or dead. Ray had fallen hard for Elizabeth Becken, and if the silly sod wasn't reminded of that in the right way by his partner, he'd start taking her for granted, wouldn't he?

Ah, but it did his heart good to see Ray and Elizabeth together; Andrew Marvell had been wrong about none embracing after the grave. Gave the rest of them hope. It certainly didn't hurt that Bodie just plain liked Elizabeth despite her being too good for his partner, and the date of her death had him teasing Ray about dating older women.

Hopkirk shook his head and kept at his stone. He had seen the two deceased agents in action for nearly a month and their bizarre rapport was still a mystery to him. Nothing at all like his more conventional friendship with Jeff Randall, his still-living partner in their private detective agency – if, that is, a friendship between a mortal and a ghost could even be called "conventional."

When the two CI5 agents had paid a social call on Hopkirk a month before as part of their fact-finding tour of London, Marty had been extremely envious of their ability to physically manipulate matter; the best he himself could do was verbal warnings to his partner, and he felt worse than useless every time Jeff got beaten up by a pack of hoods the two of them together could have handled. It was Bodie who'd offered to teach him a thing or two; this stupid little pebble wobbling off the ground was a tremendous breakthrough. "You and Mr. Doyle are strange, Mr. Bodie," he said, eyes intent on his grail.

Bodie shrugged. By now he'd learned that he couldn't break Hopkirk of the habit of automatic politeness – "just call me Bodie" didn't work very well with a ghost in a white formal suit.
Besides, it was only the truth. Not even Cowley could completely figure them out.

Cowley. Two more months to go before he and Ray were due to report to their supervisor regarding their fact-finding mission to discover as much about their fellow ghosts as possible.

Once Cowley had recovered from the shock of hearing both men's voices cheerfully greeting him from inside his limo on his way home from their funeral, he had accepted their offer of assistance as he did any handout; with care and suspicion. And the two deceased agents had been a help to the Squad, pooling their supernatural abilities with their skills and lending an invisible hand to CI5; voice-cornering suspects, disarming or distracting opponents, locating missing or kidnapped people. But the two men's boredom-inspired poltergeist pranks on living agents – the final straw being Murphy's near-heart attack when Doyle had materialized in the rest room late at night, pulled off his own head and thrown it at the terrified man – had made Cowley pull the two from active duty, and send them out on a six-month investigation of their own phenomenology.

One of the tidbits they had picked up in their ramblings was the corroboration of the story that Jacob Marley did, indeed, fly over the city on Christmas Eve, wailing in his chains. He was seen only on Christmas Eve, and he appeared from the location of his old house – long gone, but ghosts do not forget. Marley did not communicate with his fellow spirits in any way. A little questioning of their supernatural contacts helped them pinpoint the location. Now they waited, hoping to catch the wraith in the act and perhaps see if they could break through his shell.

Ray, the lucky bastard, had the rooftop vantage – he could levitate himself, which Bodie could not. And since ghosts took sustenance from the smell of food, Doyle was blissfully sharing the Christmas feast of the house below as the odors wafted through the vent.

A man stumped by, head down, arms loaded with packages; his haggard appearance indicating his last-minute shopping panic. He was muttering under his breath, "Bloody fucking Christmas carols, I hear 'Rudolph the fucking Red-nosed Reindeer' one more fucking time..."

"Amen, brother!" Bodie answered heartily as the man strode through the handsome CI5 agent, head down, completely unaware that he had just had a brush with the preternatural. "And death to fucking 'Jingle Bells'!" the modern ghost yelled after the oblivious modern Scrooge.

Marty Hopkirk shook his head and picked up another stone.

Ray Doyle shook his head and kept looking for Jacob Marley. Inwardly, he agreed 100% with Bodie; the relentlessly cheery music pouring out of every establishment with a public-address
system made Ray understand why suicides went up over the holidays. Now for a carol to put blood in a man, there was that angry Jethro Tull number...

He let the thought peter off and die a natural death, let his mind wander, and inevitably the thought came to him, as it did now when he wasn't thinking of anything special: *Wonder what Elizabeth's doing*. And a smile curled onto his face.

Ach, Bodie was right. He'd fallen hard once again. What was it about those classy birds that he kept falling for?

* * *

Her manners and grace were not the first things Ray Doyle had noticed about Elizabeth Becken when he'd first seen her in the Zoo. It had been the wings sprouting from her brown wide-shouldered '40s-style suit; pearl-white wings, gleaming with a faint gold light, that crested at her head and drooped to her feet, slightly bowed inward. She had been leading a tear- and chocolate-smeared little boy by the hand – a living boy, Ray had noticed blankly, about two or three years old, who'd toddled along firmly holding the nice angel's hand – and let go of him when the boy's mother gave a cry and ran through the crowd to sweep the child up into her arms. The wings looked out of place on the prim suit; but Ray stopped thinking that when he saw her face. She'd been watching the tearful reunion, the mother firmly shushing the boy who tried to point to the pretty angel who'd brought him back to Mummy; and on her face was a love and longing that made her beautiful.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," Doyle had said softly, enchanted by the scene.

The woman had turned at the sound, wings glimmering slightly. Her eyes had widened slightly at Ray's gruesome appearance (he looked exactly as he had when the snipers had finished raking him with bullets, and the bullet-hole between his eyes that oozed blood whenever he was angry or stressed hadn't exactly improved his appearance), but she had made no other reaction. "I'm Ray Doyle."

She had taken his offered hand in both of hers, grinning widely in an extremely unangelic fashion; she had a firm grip. Her madonna-ish look was gone; now Ray could see that she looked rather horsey, especially when she grinned. "Oh, I'm so glad to meet you! It's such a relief to be seen by an adult! Elizabeth Becken, Mr Doyle."

Oddly shy, Ray had offered to walk with her; they'd travelled through the zoo and wound up sitting on top of the lions' enclosure, talking. As he'd surmised from her clothing, Elizabeth Becken had died in the '40s; 1940, to be precise. "I'd just gotten dressed for work when I heard
the air-raid siren – and right then, a horrid noise. I climbed out of the ruins of my flat. Terrible shock. Then the ambulance came and the driver wouldn't listen when I told him I was fine, just a little shaken – and then he pulled me out of the rubble, my good suit all covered in blood. I was stone-dead and I'd never noticed." She blinked hard; her wings shivered. Then she laughed. "And all I could think when he put my body in and drove away was that I was going to be late for work." Ray agreed with her about the strange things that went through one's mind at death.

Elizabeth had joined the Shrapnel Squad – a brigade formed from the ghosts of people who died in the bombings. "Of course we didn't have any uniform or code. Mostly we'd go through the rubble, looking for survivors, and try to catch the attentions of any ambulance-men."

Doyle nodded, beaming. "Heard about you lot from Thomas More." Not even death had been able to squelch the solidarity of his countrymen during the Blitz. "Been on a Squad or two meself."

Elizabeth laughed. "You know, Ray, when I first saw you I was just going to ask if you'd been a Shrapnel. A lot of them looked worse than you do; bombs do ugly things to people. But then I saw what you were wearing. Only hoodlums wore dungarees and leather jackets at that time; you'd have stood out in the Shrapnels." Ray had grinned at her use of the quaint term for jeans, and even more at her candidness. He was liking her more and more.

"Most of the Shrapnels dissipated after the bombing stopped, or after the war; but not me. You see, some of us could talk to the living or be seen by them, or pick up solid objects. I can be seen, heard and touched by very small children. And children are always getting lost. That didn't end when the war did."

"I don't exactly know why I'm a helper for children, Ray. Unless it's because I never had any of my own, and I wanted to. But I died an old maid." When pressed, Becken admitted that she had been 32 when her life ended. Doyle nodded; in 1940, that would have made her a wizened spinster. "I was always so plain-looking, no matter what I did. All the boys were going off to fight Hitler, and they were marrying young pretty girls. The men my age were already married." Her wings drooped a little in sad remembrance, one curling over Doyle. He dared to touch it; the feathers felt lovely against his hand, and the underlying wing was warm and strong. But then she blushed and smiled, and again he saw the change to her horsey face; for a moment she seemed to carry the same glow as her wings. "It helps, that I can help other people's children. I was seen by them as a guardian angel so often that I manifested angel's wings, and I've had them ever since."

"They're beautiful," Ray had said firmly.

She'd smiled again, and then poised, alert in a listening posture akin to Bodie's. "Ah. Over by the Reptile House." She hopped to the ground, her wings fanning her fall into a graceful swoop and landing.
"Another lost kid?" Doyle hopped down, not nearly as gracefully. "I'll come with you."

They'd spent the rest of the day reuniting families and talking. Fortunately none of the tearful children could see the horrible blood-covered man walking with the nice lady angel, or they'd have been traumatized for life.

When Bodie had caught up with them from his own day-trip to the symphony, Doyle had reluctantly introduced him to Elizabeth – even before the massacre, Bodie had had Ray beat in the looks department, and the rotten bugger could really pour on the charm when he wanted to – but his partner had graciously avoided any hint of moving in.

They had gone to the pictures that night, sitting in a good location to catch the smell of popcorn. Elizabeth loved Raiders of the Lost Ark, though she shut her eyes during the gorier scenes; Ray was oddly comforted that the real horrors of the Blitz had not deadened her reaction to carnage.

They'd been dating about twice a week since then, Doyle taking copious notes about the Shrapnel Squad from her recollections for his report to Cowley. They'd parted in early December – "my busy season," Elizabeth explained – when she'd gone into round-the-clock child-finding. Doyle had his own commitments to keep as well; but they promised to reunite either Christmas Day or Boxing Day.

* * *

Tomorrow, or the next day, Ray thought quietly, smiling, taking a deep sniff of the fresh-baked bread being served to the living merrymakers in the house below. Tomorrow, or –

A moan sounded from below. Bodie, of course, going on again about Ray enjoying a full Christmas dinner, ghost-style...

But Bodie didn't clank or jingle when he moved.

Excitement filling him, Ray dropped his levitation to stand firmly on the flat roof. "Bodie," he said, very softly.
Bodie could not levitate the way Ray could, and was not as good as Ray at making himself visible to the living, but his hearing had become truly supernatural since his death. He was instantly alert at the sound of his partner's voice. "Marty, drop the stone. He's here."

Marty Hopkirk stood up himself, excited and silent. It was he who'd first told the two CI5 agents about Jacob Marley, and had seen him fly overhead for five Christmas Eves – but he had never thought about an actual stakeout to discover the origin of the spirit. Cowley trained them well; not even death could keep the agents from doing their jobs.

A ghastly grey human figure emerged from the side of the house, walking out onto the air from the first floor. Died in an upstairs bedroom, then, Bodie thought automatically. And it's not midnight, so this must be the time of night that he died.

Jacob Marley was pigtailed and dressed in a coat, waistcoat, stockings and tasselled boots; spectacles were perched on his forehead, and a kerchief was bound tightly around his jaws. And coils of heavy chain were wound around him and trailing from him, formed of safes, cash boxes, account books, keys and padlocks attached to each other, giving the unfortunate man the appearance of a bizarre charm bracelet. (The accoutrements of the counting-house were not attached to a chain; they themselves were the chain.) As Bodie stared, the man reached up to untie the kerchief round his head.

Looks like a character out of a Dickens story, all right –

And then the ghost's mouth fell open, black and hollow; and the man howled.

And the hair lifted on the back of Bodie's scalp.

Marty Hopkirk's face contorted in pity for the sound of anguish, though it was not a new sound to him.

But the wailing of the tormented spirit tore at Bodie's heart and froze his mind for a moment of stark horror and pity for the pain in that voice. And when Bodie could think, the first thing that flickered through his mind was My God, how can anyone survive that anguish?
Bodie couldn't levitate. Ray could.

Doyle stepped off the roof in response to that cry of pain. He was unable not to respond to that hurt.

Jacob Marley was rising to meet Doyle, standing at roof level.

"Jacob Marley?" Ray asked as the leaden phantom rose, his locks and ledgers clanking together. "Mr. Marley? Marley!" he shouted, trying to pierce that wall of torment.

The man lifted his head and faced Ray without seeing him, his mouth still open in an unending cry.

The look in those eyes was like an arrow of ice in Ray's gut. His own mouth opened as grief and horror smote him.

Raymond Doyle had just looked into a mirror. Jacob Marley was trapped in his own grief, his own guilt. And in his own utter, icy loneliness.

Jacob Marley had had a living contact, Hopkirk had said. It could very well have been Charles Dickens himself, who'd used the character in his famous Yuletide ghost story. But Dickens had died and gone utterly away, leaving no ghost of himself behind. Marley had no one to speak to now, no one to offer comfort, no friend or companion. No Bodie to pull him out of his grief and crushing guilt.

There but for the grace of God –

"Please..." Ray couldn't recognize his own pleading voice. He put out his hands as the shade rose to begin his annual session of torture on the most festive night of the year. "Please, let me help you..."

Anne Boleyn had walked through Ray's arm, a ghost through a ghost. Trapped in her own guilt and grief for the deaths she had caused, she was a figure of faded sorrow, with no one to save or succor her. But even Anne Boleyn had allies – Thomas More and John Fisher, the two men who had died for protesting her marriage to Henry VIII, and whose own spirits now took turns watching over Anne until the time she could forgive herself and free herself from her prison of
guilt that kept her wandering the Tower. Trapped in sorrow Anne was; but not alone.

Jacob's shoulders felt solid and real to Ray's hands. He hadn't been dead long enough to fade as much as Anne. The ghost pushed against Ray's hands, never ceasing his howls of anguish.

Ray rose with Jacob as the chained spirit rose high above London – a London now marked with skyscrapers and TV aerials. High, higher they rose. Jacob moved faster, arrowing for the heights of the sky.

"Ray, let go!" Doyle heard Bodie shout from the ground. His partner sounded furious. Ray was going to get his head bitten off when this was all over...

Ray's hands were slipping from the ghost's shoulders. Soon Jacob would be arcing over the sky, alone again, as he was every year, forever alone –

No.

"Ray!"

Ray slipped – and clung instead to the chain wound around the buttoned brocaded waistcoat. The links were ice-cold and chilled his fingers, the numbing leaden nothingness spreading down his arms. The feel of the ghost-figure beneath was like touching a corpse. Grimly, stubbornly, Ray twined his fingers in the heavy padlocks and keys and held on tight. Not alone, he would not be alone tonight –

Bodie stared from the street as his partner sailed high into the air and away, attached to Jacob Marley like Ahab tangled in the lines on Moby Dick's back.

"Mr. Doyle!" Hopkirk cried fearfully. "Please, let go of him! Oh, please!"

Anger. Anger filled Bodie, cold icy anger. Anger, so much safer and more useful now than the panic and terror filling him at the thought of losing Ray, no don't think about that – "Ray you stupid fucking bastard, let go!" he roared at the vanishing pair of spirits.
Ray heard the rage in Bodie's voice and knew what it hid. "Bodie, it's all right!" he yelled out, still clinging to Marley, still amazed by the cold in his hands. Higher they rose, and still higher, soaring through the cloud-cover blanketing the city, high, higher. But Ray remembered Bodie's keen hearing. "Can't hover for long, so I'm hangin' on, got to talk to 'im!"

Higher. Higher. If Ray had been alive he'd have been dizzy or sick to his stomach with fear at their height. But he kept talking, hoping that his mate could still hear him. "Let go when I'm done, I promise! Cowley said to learn all we could from other ghosts!"

But as the leaden cold crept down Ray's arms, and the howling voice of Marley chilled Ray from within, he realized with dread that he might learn more tonight than he had bargained for.

Ray's voice was fading; the two figures had already vanished from sight. "Cowley said to learn all we..." Then even Ray's voice was gone, out of range.

For a long time Bodie stood motionless on the street, still looking up at the place in the sky where Doyle had vanished, his arms at his sides, his hands clenched into fists.

Marty Hopkirk dared a look at his teacher. The flat expressionless stare on Bodie's face terrified him; he hadn't seen its like since the look on Jeff Randall's face at viewing Marty's body in the morgue. "Oh dear, Mr. Bodie, this is all my fault, I told you both about him..."

"Leave off, Hopkirk. Our job." Bodie turned away, exuding cold rage. "When that bloody idiot gets back, I'm going to pull his fucking head off his shoulders and go bowling with it."

But for a moment, Bodie's eyes had looked as flat and dead and hopeless as a ghost's eyes should look. And sickness had filled him at the thought of his partner inextricably bound to another haunt, vanishing into an undiscovered netherworld, not to reappear for another year, bound to Marley's cycle of penance forever –

He shook his head once, quickly, as if physically dispelling the wafting moment of panic. He kept the fear; it would help him think more clearly.

"Can't hover for long," Ray had said. He was hanging on because he couldn't sustain his hovering
so high in the air and for so long. Marley flew through the air. Flying.

He needed –

Bodie whirled and began to run, ignoring obstacles like buildings, people and automobiles. "Come on, Marty. Round up a few friends. Start searching – Paddington, Heathrow, Victoria, Marks and Sparks –"

Hopkirk fell into step beside Bodie. "Mr. Bodie, what –" They tore through a pack of carolers who, unfortunately, didn't miss a note of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

"We're going to find Elizabeth Becken."

"Marley! Eh, Marley!" Doyle shouted over the wind in his ears – the wind from a height he had only ever seen from an airplane's window, the city hidden by lit-up snowclouds – and between Jacob Marley's blood-chilling wails that echoed and rolled in the high reaches like thunder. And through the soul-numbing iciness of the man's shackles etching into his clawing fingers and creeping through his body.

Doyle hadn't thought a ghost could feel coldness before. Snow and rain fell through Bodie and himself as all solid matter did, without effect either way. Their phantom clothing had had no influence on their comfort or discomfort; nor had it seemed to affect any of the other spirits they'd met. The weather of the world of the living did not affect the dead. But these fetters Marley wore were not of the living. They seemed made of the breath of a dragon that prowled the uttermost frozen levels of Hell.

The chill they brought was one Doyle had known many times while alive; hopelessness, despair, the void. The cold of a solitary life, of the self turned in on itself. He had known that sensation very well, up until the day that a big ex-soldier from Angola had plopped down next to him at the pub with two beers and the adage "You sweat it off and you pour it back," and had cheerily introduced himself as Doyle's new partner.

"Marley! Look down here, you daft git!" Doyle shouted over the creeping cold clawing towards his center, the hollow metallic clank of the chain's cash boxes producing the same shivering effect up Ray's spine as the sound of a shovel hitting a coffin. But that was stupid, he was dead already –
But looking up into the howling despair above the chain to which he clung, Ray understood for the first time that there were different levels of death – and deaths more deadly than the one he'd suffered. To be alone forever, with only your own selfishness and greed as company, your inturned pain keeping all offers of friendship at bay – surely this was what it was to be in Hell.

"Jacob!" Ray screamed into the wind that whipped past him, the shuddering wails of the white wisps around him. "Jacob, I'm with you! You're not alone! I'm here with you!" He thumped his clawed hands against the man's chest, through which Ray could clearly see the two buttons in the back of the man's coat. The chain clunked and shifted against him. "Look down, you stupid dead bastard!"

Jacob Marley did not look down. But others looked at Ray.

Ray stared at the white wisps that whirled around both of them – wisps with hungry eyes, mouths open in moaning, raising fog-arms and fingers like morning vapor. They, too, trailed chains and padlocks, safes and keys – and some had chains longer than Marley's.

He knew who they were. He and Bodie had read Christmas Carol and a few biographies of Charles Dickens to research possible locations of the actual ghost. These were Marley's cronies in greed and misery, doomed to wander the earth in everlasting repentance. They, too, were freed for only this one night to witness the misery they had never tried to ease while they lived and breathed. Their overwhelming sorrow horrified Doyle, pierced him like the cold of Marley's fetters.

So many. So many I cannot help...

The cold of the chains crept closer and closer towards Doyle's center. The long strand had wound itself around one of Ray's legs.

"Jacob, look at me," Doyle groaned, thumping the man again.

The man took phantom breath – and out came not a wail or shriek but a long shuddering sigh.

"I'm down here," Ray moaned, feeling the ice of the chain bite into him, through the phantom clothing, through phantom skin and flesh, seeming to sink in towards his bones. Another strand looped itself around his waist. "Down here, and I'm with you. You're not alone. Wake up. For god's sake, man, speak to me. Don't leave me alone. Oh, please don't leave me alone..."
Bodie tore through the crowds in the store and up the stairs to the Toys and Novelties section; and there was the shimmering gold-and-white of angels' wings. "Thank you, Mr. Grace," he remembered to say to his informant.

The ancient-looking ghost, one of the original Grace Bros. who had founded the department store, only smiled benignly at the young spirit who had been in such a rush to find Miss Becken and had sent ghosts everywhere to track her down. Perfectly understandable; the young lady ghost in question was a lively little thing... "Quite all right. Your friends found her in a very short time. You've all done very well." And "young Mr. Grace" headed back downstairs to continue his supervision of his former employees in Ladies' and Mens' Wear.

"There you go, love," Elizabeth was saying to the snivelling little black girl being alternately hugged and scolded by a frightened woman. At a snuffled, watery "Gi-give my Gramma a kiss in heaven," she smiled and said, "I'll do that, Kira dear. Now go with your auntie and don't wander off again." The aunt in question led Kira off, still scolding a mile a minute.

"Elizabeth," Bodie said. "We need you right away."

"Mr. Bodie!" Elizabeth gave her angel's wings a little shake to settle them back into place, and gave the deceased ex-mercenary a very disapproving look. "I am very busy, as you can – "

"It's Ray. Jacob Marley has him."

Cold. He was so cold. His clawed fingers didn't want to hold the chains any more. The howls of pain from the man he held only echoed back the pain he himself felt, the suffering he'd seen all around him in his lifetime and could not stop, the deaths, the lives wasted, destroyed because he'd acted too late, too soon, not at all.

The chains now held him safe, bound to Marley's side. Their numbness etched in towards his very center, like water soaking in along a wick towards a still-flickering flame at the other end. It was as if Marley was taking out all of Doyle's warmth, sucking it in and showing nothing for it.

Should have known better. Hot-headed. Acted without thinking. He's been alone too long. One person couldn't do it, couldn't possibly do it. Now he would become as cold and helpless, tied to Marley, hoping, perhaps, that some day some foolish ghost would cling to him and feed him a little remembered warmth, and lose its own freedom in the process.
His head sagged as the cold crept through him, becoming part of him. Let go. All he had to do was let go of the chain – it was already holding him – and his memories of warmth and friendship would disappear, fade into the relief of ignorance. Let go.

Three stood outside, looking straight up into the cloud-cover.

"But Mr. Bodie, I can't really fly," Becken was explaining desperately. "It's just how so many of the children saw me. I can glide a little, yes, but – "

"Well, now's as good a time to learn as any," Bodie interrupted shortly. "He's stuck in Marley's chains and we have to get him down."

Marty Hopkirk stood nearby, picking up one stone after another like a man biting his nails, trying to vent his nervousness. He had no part in this conversation, was useless to both of them.

"Oh, dear God," Elizabeth said, her hand over her mouth. "Poor Ray. If he stays with him too long, he'll be caught up in his fate. I've seen Jacob Marley, of course, but I couldn't reach him. I can't reach him, because I can't fly – "

"Damn you," Bodie snarled, his temper giving way to his fear. He seized a wing and she cried out in pain – ghosts could touch and hurt each other. "What do you think these are for?"

"Mr. Bodie!" Hopkirk cried. "That won't – "

Becken yanked her wing free and it knocked against Bodie's chin, not accidentally; the strength in that giant wing sent the soldier to the ground. Bodie rubbed his jaw and looked up into steely brown eyes in a homely face – and reminded himself that Elizabeth had seen as many of war's horrors as he had.

"Mr. Bodie," she said sternly. "When you were born, I'd been dead for ten years, and had my wings for five years. All humans long to fly. Don't you think I'd have taught myself to fly long before this time if I could?"
He hadn't thought of that. His fear for Ray had made him stupid, thoughtless... He pulled himself to his feet. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Couldn't think of what to do..."

"I have tried to aid Jacob myself. I have prayed for him. I have tried to speak to him. I have tried to raise myself to fly with him." Her face was twisted in grief for two lost souls. "But I cannot fly. And even now it may be too late for Ray."

"Then he's lost to us," Hopkirk said miserably to the pebble he was elevating. "Both of them."

"No," Bodie said coldly, because he did not want it to be true.

A group of people left their parked cars on their way to a party, laughing and talking, their breaths misting the air, and walked through the knot of ghosts unaware of the heaviness of the drama unfolding on another plane of existence.

At the last minute, Hopkirk remembered the pebble he was lifting and whirled away from it to let go, looking at Elizabeth –

And Elizabeth rose high into the air, light as a cloud.

Both men gaped at her, whose astonished face matched theirs.

Marty could feel himself holding Elizabeth the way he had held the stone, with his spirit and his energy. But picking up the ghost was nothing, effortless, compared to his struggles with solid matter.

"Miss Becken, Mr. Bodie, I'm doing that!" he gasped.

Bodie was staring at Hopkirk.

"Marty, that's your gift!" Elizabeth cried.

"You can pick up ghosts!" Bodie said at the same time.
"Never tried it before," Marty said breathlessly, giddy with power surging through him. Something he could do that others couldn't –

"Can you sustain it?" Bodie asked intently, all business again.

"It's like breathing," Marty said, awed.

Bodie grinned – as much out of fear as of relief. "Then breathe." He looked at the winged woman. "Elizabeth, go find Ray. He's lost."

The wide swath of covering holding him tightly was only more chain, it had to be. It hurt, worse than the leaden links that had twined him already, and the light pouring from it hurt his eyes –

Light? The rest of the chain had brought only the darkness of despair.

Marley's cry had changed – was now a cry of pain as well as of sorrow. Pain; it hurt him too, to wind this chain around Doyle and trap him in guilt and grief forever.

Let go of the chain and he was lost. Let go –

Ray's fingers slipped free, feeling nothing. The wide band of pain buoyed him, holding him firmly to the condemned ghost. Bright and beautiful and cruel pain, shimmering white...

Shimmering white and gold...

Ray turned and looked downward, into the white and gold wings surrounding him. He looked up into a face he hadn't seen for decades. Peace and safety and warmth – heat driving out the cold, that was what was causing the pain – surrounded him.

"Mum," he murmured, and sank into her welcoming arms.
Elizabeth’s wings were wide enough to encompass both Raymond Doyle and Jacob Marley.

Ray was as gray as Marley, his eyes as dead and flat. He sagged back into her arms as she pulled him free, as cold as a corpse. His vivacity had been pulled into the unquenchable maw of the needy spirit.

Marley howled at the pain of heat penetrating his indifference, loosening the coils of his mortal greediness from his trapped victim.

She felt his cold leeching her warmth, feeding hungrily on her storehouse. But she only gripped the two of them tighter, glaring into Marley’s dead eyes, heat blazing unquenchable from her center, through her wings and arms and body, to pour unabated into both ghosts.

Russet-red blushed Doyle’s curls again; green filled his eyes and drove out the gray. His jacket darkened, blackened and turned rust-red at the bullet sites. A small, bright-red trickle ran from the man’s forehead bullet wound. Ray stirred and groaned, looking up at her.

Ray was saved. All she had to do now was "tug" on the force-line beneath her, and Marty would lower them to the ground. All she had to do now...

Jacob Marley shook his chain and shrieked at the overwhelming blaze that continued to pour into him.

But Elizabeth would not be stopped at saving Ray Doyle. Her long years of pity for Jacob, her joy at being able to make a difference, her years of experience and her sublimated wealth of maternal love poured out into the death-cold figure she continued to embrace as fiercely as she had fed Ray from her source.

And she was not feeding Marley solely by herself. Through the line of force Marty had used to lift her high, she could feel and draw upon the two ghosts far below; the steady thin stream of worry and friendship from Marty, and the floodlight-intense beam radiating from Bodie. She became a conduit, tapping both as well as herself.

Marley was a dry ocean bed, but Elizabeth Becken was a fountain. She did not know how long she stayed locked together with the ghost, pouring herself out into him in a blaze of heat and light.
Small children all over London looked up into the clearing night. "Mummy! Daddy!" they cried, pointing at the blazing mote of light high in the sky. "Look! The Star! The Star!"

The parents looked up into a sky which looked the same to them as it always did, smiled indulgently at their children, and said, "Yes, love. See the star?"

At the moment that her wing-tips finally began to tingle with numbness...Elizabeth Becken looked into shining brown eyes gazing at her from a face that was now merely pale, not livid gray. Eyes that, at last, filled and overflowed, trickling phantom tears of regret down the pale cheeks.

Marley gaped, astonished. His mouth closed on his own. Ray stared at Marley, from his place safely cushioned in Elizabeth's arms.

She leaned over and kissed the high forehead below the pushed-up spectacles – cold now, merely cold, not the leadenness he had been. "Can you feel the warmth inside you?" she asked.

He nodded, tears still leaking down from his eyes. Then a rasping voice creaked out of his mouth. "Yes."

"That warmth will save you. But only if you give it away. Give it to others in pain, in need, or in despair. If you give it, it will take away your coldness and loneliness, and remove part of this horrid chain you must wear; but if you keep it out of selfishness, it will turn into another fathom of chain. Your fellow ghosts, and the haunts of the deep places in the earth, are cold." Elizabeth Becken thought of what Charles Dickens had made the fictional Marley do. Could the writer have been writing the freeing spell for his unfortunate spirit friend? "And if you can appear to one mortal, and prevent him from sharing your fate...on that day, Jacob Marley, you will have saved a soul. Your chains will fall away, and your long years of repentance will be over forever."

Marley looked from her to the man he had almost damned to his own hell. His hands, still burdened with his chains, moved in a helpless gesture of pleading. Out of the rusty voice rasped, "Sssorry."

Ray Doyle did not forgive easily. But the recognition in eyes that were no longer flat grey horrors
– that were weeping with the end of his self-imposed isolation – moved him. It was obvious that Jacob Marley had not been a man who apologized easily, either. He reached out to clasp Jacob's cold hand with his own and say, "It's all right."

And there, at last, was the acknowledgement of Doyle's presence and his ability to bring change. From across centuries – across levels of horror and deepness – the kindred spirits smiled at each other.

Elizabeth and Ray stayed where they were in midair as Jacob Marley moved on past them, to continue his path across the sky as pealing bells below rang out the summons to Midnight Mass. His chain still clanked and rustled behind him, and was still as long; the wraiths of the upper air still surrounded them. But the sound coming from Jacob Marley was no longer the shriek of the hopeless damned, but the sobbing of a soul cleansed.

* * *

"You had the right idea, Ray," Elizabeth said serenely as they wafted to the ground. "You simply didn't have enough firepower." She twitched her wings with a little grimace. "I really do not think I shall ever feel the tips of my wings again, however. They seem to have gone numb permanently. Ah, but a small price to pay for a man's salvation, wouldn't you say?"

"Amazing," Ray murmured, still awed at the depth of warmth he had seen in her. He shook his head in disgust at himself. "Got stuck like a cat in a tree, didn't I." Bodie would never let him live it down – well, perhaps that wasn't the best way to put it... And, ghost or not, Bodie was going to kill him for this.

But Doyle felt no guilt for what had happened because of his plight. No guilt, none at all. The horrors he had seen would stay with him for a long time – and he had just had a graphic demonstration of what happened when guilt overwhelmed someone. He was already wondering how he was going to write it all down for Cowley.

She smiled impishly at him. "And if you hadn't gotten yourself stuck in like that, none of us would have had the impetus to do what we did. As a result, not only did we save you, but we gave Jacob Marley the ability to free himself. That is more than he has had for over 100 years, and is something of which we can all be proud. Not to mention Mr. Hopkirk discovering his talent for levitating spirits, which he discovered purely out of his desperation to help you."

Ray nodded. "Got a point there."
Bells were still pealing all over the city, announcing the end of Christmas Eve.

"Well, that's quite enough work for the night," Becken said briskly, fanning her wings out into a glide as they descended to the two figures standing below them. "I'm sure your Mr. Bodie would like to have a few words with you – "

"Going to have a fucking dictionary with me." Ray snapped, then grimaced. "Sorry. Language."

"Oh, I'm not naive, Ray. I've heard the word 'dictionary' before." She whispered the word as if shocked, and they burst out laughing. "But once he's done, and if there's anything left of you, let's go find a nice wild party somewhere, inhale some good food and strong spirits, and dance till dawn."

Ray grinned at her in complete agreement. "Though you're pretty strong for a spirit, yourself," he said with an evil chuckle.

"Wicked, Ray," was all his guardian angel said as they descended to face the music.

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