

A Christmas Carol Revisited

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DEDICATION

A Humble Tribute To A Great Man And Social
Commentator

Charles Dickens

1812 – 1870



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“Praise is like sunlight to the human spirit: we cannot flower and grow without it.”

Jess Lair

PART 1: CHRISTMAS EVE 5.15 P.M.

Christmas Eve 5.15 p.m.

Through tinted windows Ebenezer Clinton Scrooge III watched the bustling side-walk crowds slip silently into the waiting night like shadowy grey wraiths spirited away on a bitter December wind. The gaudy festive lights served only to emphasize their desperate anonymity. Scrooge leaned back into the plush leather upholstery of the limousine, comforted by the fact he no longer needed to mingle with the madding crowd. It was as the car slowed at the intersection of 52nd Street he first thought he saw *'the face'*.

Someone was standing on the side-walk staring directly at him, which was actually impossible because from the outside the windows presented an impenetrable black veil. *Someone* the bubbling froth of humanity flowed around like water in a rushing stream as it breaks over an ancient immovable stone. *Someone* with eyes exactly like, no that simply could not be! For an instant the chill night air embraced him rendering impotent the luxurious heated interior of the imported Bentley.

He leaned forward striking his face sharply against the glass in a futile attempt to confirm or more likely disprove his initial impression. The figure was no longer there

"Stop a moment Grainger." he ordered.

"Everything ok Sir?" inquired Grainger.

"To your right, near the drug store, do you recognize anyone?"

"No Sir, can't say that I do. Who am I looking for?"

“Jake Marley.”

“Mr Marley? But Mr Marley’s dead Sir, has been for some time.”

“I am fully aware of that you idiot, but don’t they say everyone has a double?”

“Guess they do Sir, but I doubt if that included Mr Marley, he was real unique.”

Scrooge’s thoughts drifted back many years, just after he and Jake had joined the company.

“What are you up to this Christmas Ebenezer? How about you and Val spending it over at my place? There’s plenty of room for a few more.”

“Thank you, no. We like a quiet Christmas.”

“You mean you do, as far as I can recall Val always loved parties.”

“She’s in no condition to party.”

“Not pregnant is she, you old dog!”

“She’s unwell.”

“So that’s what they call it these days. You make sure you take good care of that girl. I’m still sore you beat me to the punch. What about Leah? What’s her boy called again?”

“Stephen.”

“Stephen huh, he must be about six or seven now. Bet he’s real excited. Christmas is all about kids. You going to be taking his present over on the day?”

“No, it’s being delivered.”

“Delivered? Right! You have a good one then Ebenezer. Don’t forget to give my love to your beautiful wife.”

Ahead the congestion eased slightly and the limousine moved on with menacing grace through the swarming rush-hour traffic. A simple trick of the light that was all. Besides, they say everyone has a double but there had been no mistaking the irascible gleam that always alerted Scrooge to the fact his old partner and adversary had gauged exactly the subtle machinations of his devious mind.

Strange, it was a sensation that momentarily overwhelmed him with nostalgia. He was not a sentimental man, far from it, but he missed the challenge of an equal. In the days and years following *'the accident'* there had been no one of sufficient intellect and force of character to hinder Scrooge's ruthless march to power. Control the media and you control the masses. He smiled to think that while the world was to all intents and purposes unaware of his existence he could at will reach inside the minds of men and plant seeds that took root grew and bore fruit, very profitable fruit indeed.

That is what had caused the rift and with each passing day it widened until a yawning chasm opened between them that nothing on this earth could bridge. It was not that either man was opposed to employing manipulation as a perfectly acceptable means of influencing the thoughts and opinions of the vast global audience the company had amassed via its satellite, television and media empire. Mind control through such channels as subliminal messaging was a universally accepted marketing method employed by all the major corporations whether you wanted someone to buy a particular brand of toilet roll or plunge a nation into war.

"I need to speak to you Ebenezer."

"What is it now Jake?"

"You know exactly what it is. This proposed contract."

"You mean the most lucrative contract this company

has ever secured in its entire history? The contract that will take us to another level?"

"You know the political ramifications are huge."

"I'm a businessman Jake, not a politician."

"So was Michael Corleone!"

"Slightly melodramatic even by your standards Jake. You made your pitch and the board went with me. Deal with it. You always were a sore loser."

"You're a very persuasive guy Ebenezer. Val discovered that to her cost."

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I shouldn't have crossed that particular line but we both know if this deal goes through it could plunge a nation into war."

"Goodnight Jake."

'Plunge a nation into war!'

Beads of perspiration began to merge and trickle in tiny rivulets down Scrooge's brow. As he dabbed at them the source of his sudden unease broke through the surface of his consciousness like a drowning man's last desperate bid for air. They were words that had once been uttered accusingly in his direction with a vehemence that had momentarily reduced him to silence. Words that had severed the final frayed bond of friendship forever. Jake's words.

"It's almost Time Ebenezer."

The sudden interruption of his reverie by a disembodied voice on the car's internal intercom startled him. He pressed a button and opened communication with Grainger, his Chauffeur.

“What did you say Grainger?” Although even as he spoke he knew the answer. Grainger would not dare to be so familiar. It had not been Grainger’s voice he had heard.

“Nothing Sir, at least not just then, but I have been trying to speak with you for the last ten minutes. The intercom must be playing up.”

“It would be easier to waken the dead!”

“Pardon!” Scrooge swallowed hard. His throat had become unusually constricted.

“I said the intercom must be playing up, sir. Seems as if we have a few gremlins in our systems tonight. Apparently the lift to your private car park is jammed. We’ll have to stop outside and use the main entrance.”

“With the common herd!”

That voice again. Not Grainger’s but another he knew all too well.

Leaning forward he peered over Grainger’s unsuspecting shoulders into the mirror above his chauffeur’s head. Dark brown eyes stared back at him, eyes that could not be Grainger’s because his were blue. The eyes blinked and they were blue again. Scrooge produced a large silken handkerchief and began to mop his brow. It was oppressively warm; perhaps gremlins had also managed to disrupt the air conditioning.

His head began to throb. Whether as a direct consequence of having struck it against the strengthened glass or the sudden unwelcome revelation that he did not want Grainger to turn around because he was no longer certain the presence seated directly in front of him was Grainger. This was absurd!

The car pulled up in front of the monstrous edifice that Scrooge recognized at once as home. He exhaled and the tension flooded from him. Get a grip! What an earth had come over him. A vaguely familiar face in the crowd and his imagination had gone off on one Big Time, to quote the vernacular, something he normally avoided at all cost. He

sank back into the welcoming folds of the padded interior as the car slowed gently to a stop. Though normally impervious to the pressures that oppress powerful men he had to confess to himself that the recent clandestine 'arrangement' made with certain shadowy emissaries of State had provoked in him the first spasms of anxiety experienced since, well, a long time. After Watergate no-one could be considered immune and what if this new 'venture' was a bridge too far? Too late now, the die had been cast, besides the potential pay-off was immense.

"Here we are sir."

"Final Destination."

The words jolted Scrooge back into the present scattering his thoughts like a flock of startled crows. 'Final Destination', the phrase evoked morbid images of hapless teenagers meeting untimely ends in a variety of ingenious and gruesome ways. Not that he was particularly averse to the idea of such a fate befalling a sizeable portion of the youthful population. What use were most of them anyway? Drugs and sex seemed to be the only activities they indulged in with any enthusiasm. The language they spoke was by and large totally incomprehensible and unless they enlisted in the armed forces, where their energies could be channeled and directed to more constructive purposes, Scrooge saw little to justify their aimless existence.

Grainger opened the driver's door and Scrooge watched his large bulk disappear onto the side-walk with a growing apprehension that he was unable to exorcise. Normally Grainger's presence was a source of reassurance, offering protection and exuding intimidation in equal measure. No Caesar felt more secure surrounded by his Praetorian Guard than did Scrooge with the massive figure of Grainger at his side. But not today. An ominous sense of foreboding seeped like fog into the interior of the limousine and he was a child again hiding under his bed while the familiar dread footfalls ascended the staircase before halting deliberately outside his bedroom door. The silence was always the worst holding within itself all the pregnant possibilities of a child's fear.

Silhouetted against the smoked glass Grainger appeared somehow much smaller and infinitely more menacing. Obeying a primal instinct Scrooge moved hastily to secure the internal lock just as a hand attempted to open the door from the outside.

How many times had Grainger performed this same procedure shielding his master from any possible unwanted media attention with his huge frame as Scrooge emerged warily from his black cocoon? Thousands probably. But today was different and the door was already being pulled open from the outside with irresistible force. There was no bed to cower under so he eased himself out into the grey December twilight.

No one was there. Where was Grainger and if he hadn't opened the door then who had? Scrooge remained with his back to the limousine reluctant to abandon the potential sanctuary it might yet offer. Then he saw Grainger. He was about 20 yards away seemingly engaged in a one-sided wrestling match with some unfortunate individual who now lay pinned to the floor but obviously not yet fully subdued. Scrooge surveyed the immediate area with mounting alarm. Could there be more than one assailant? He was aware that the latest project he had agreed to pursue was not without risk but had not anticipated that risk being of a physical nature. Certainly not as crude as an assault on the street in broad daylight. And where was Security? Surely they would have been waiting for him to arrive once they knew the private lift had developed a fault. Something was very wrong.

Prevarication was not one of Scrooge's vices and having assessed the situation he swiftly determined a course of action. Taking refuge in the limousine, although tempting, was not a viable option. Determined individuals bold enough to perpetrate an assault on the very steps of the citadel of his personal empire would not be deterred by a locked door. Obviously *'they'* had succeeded in jamming communications between the limousine and his supposedly secure communication channel at *'Interstellar Inc.'* which would account for the absence of Security and senior members of staff. It would also indicate that whoever had planned this had access to some very serious hardware

indeed.

There were no signs of angels or demons on the marble steps that rose like Jacob's ladder from the frozen side-walk. He was alone and vulnerable waiting for darkness to fall and the call of the Bogeyman. To his left Grainger appeared to have the situation completely under control but why was he marching the unfortunate individual towards Scrooge and not in the opposite direction? Wasn't Caesar murdered by those he thought most loyal to him? Shadowy figures were beginning to descend the marble steps towards them. Security had obviously gotten their act together at last. He glanced at Grainger who had stopped a few feet away with the unfortunate individual securely and painfully in his grip. Scrooge decided to err on the side of discretion. Leaving the individual in the tender care of Grainger he turned to ascend the steps of his citadel.

Two steps up he paused. There was something not quite right. The figures on the steps were still moving towards him but very slowly. In fact they were moving in tandem, keeping pace with each other, like mourners he had once watched following a funeral cortège. He remembered it as if it were yesterday. It had been Jacob's funeral. He stepped back.

Grainger was still standing several feet away holding a scruffy individual who had now stopped struggling and succumbed to the inevitable. His face was almost hidden beneath long greasy strands of what Scrooge determined must have once been blonde hair. His beard was matted and hid a mass of ugly scarring that tugged the skin around his eye down towards his disfigured cheek. Scrooge observed with some distaste that he was missing a left forearm.

He smiled, this was no hired assassin sent on a mission to destroy only a common beggar chancing his arm, or what remained of it. A diseased symptom of the times. New York was infested with such hopeless individuals seeking solace and oblivion in alcohol or drugs, authors of their own destruction, and as such deserving of no sympathy or special

favors. Still they never usually surfaced in this district preferring instead to haunt the more stagnant cess-pits of the city. Perhaps the fact it was Christmas Eve had emboldened this particular specimen into venturing further afield in the false hope that honest citizens would be more inclined to lunatic displays of charity many being so imbued with festive spirits they would carelessly part with their hard earned dollars.

A Christmas Carol Revisited is available from Amazon in Kindle or Print.

