

Paris Palace

This travel essay was written for a contest, then revised with photos, for *Journeys: A Peninsula Writers Bloc Anthology*, published by Tiger Farm Press. *Peninsula Writers Bloc* is group of writers that gather each month on the San Francisco Bay Peninsula. The meetings were to critic our writings and exchange ideas about our craft.

Paris Palace

I arrived in Paris to see France's Louvre, home to great works for art.



As I come out into sunshine at the subway station Palais Royal Musée du Louvre, I believe I have enough

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time to see the museum buildings before my appointment with my uncle. After all, it is only an art museum, how long can it take? Since the museum's Rue de Rivoli entrance is castle like, maybe this will take a while.



I walk through pillars and arches reminiscent of the cathedral, Duomo di Milano. It is an elaborate entryway to the museum courtyard, Cour Napoléon. The courtyard is spectacular, larger than a baseball field that is surrounded, not by stadium seating, but by a magnificent palace. I spin around and around and walk into the center to sit beside the progressive glass pyramids. Few man made creations have had such an overwhelming impact on me: the Olympic Stadium in the French Canadian city of Montreal, China's Forbidden City, and Malaysia's towering Petronas Twin Towers. This Palace and its grounds are incredible.

When ready, I walk the square reading names on statues—I recognize Descartes. Where Shakespeare was an author, poet, playwright, known for having said, “To be or not to be,” Descartes was a mathematician, philosopher, famous for having said, “I think, therefore I am.” And think he did! Every high school student has followed his example by plotting coordinates on Cartesian graphs, a system named after this great thinker.

Descartes and the other French honoree statues overlook the field of activity—tourists wandering, couples sitting together, fathers and mothers playing with children, families exploring. Then I snap out of my reverie, this place is much more than I expected, it takes much more time to see than I had imagined, I am late for my appointment.

Quickly, I walk to Khao Fu's apartment. His name is Shun-Chiu Yau, Khao Fu is Chinese for uncle. He is my uncle, by marriage, and he is a retired Paris university Director of Chinese studies. That evening, over a tasty dinner of duck, rice, and champagne, we cover his 40 years of Parisian life after he moved from Hong Kong. He shows me two paintings by his famous uncle, Chao Shao An. The San Francisco Art Gallery has a number of his paintings, and I have a Chao Shao An art book from the Hong Kong Art Gallery. It is a pleasure to see originals in Khao Fu's home. For a short time as a teenager, Khao Fu was a student of Chao Shao An.

Earlier that day, the French had elected a new President, François Hollande. Khao Fu was very much a Chinese political activist in Hong Kong. While in France he had written books critical of China's political actions. As a Chinese Frenchman, he takes us out to see the action on the streets. Joining the street revelers excited about

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the change, France's first Socialist president in over three decades, we walk to Boulevard Beaumarchais to see Place de la Bastille. It is a location of many political actions and demonstrations, stretching back to the French Revolution. This night, it is a place for political celebration, people cheering, singing, some drinking alcohol, it has the excitement of a carnival.



In the morning I follow narrow streets winding my way back to the Louvre. Only then, did I realize the large pyramid is the visitor's entrance to the underground lobby which is visible through the glass. Once in, I get a ticket, a map, and move along as the pretty information woman directs me to the Richelieu wing where I would find Dutch paintings.

On route I recognize Vermeer's painting, *The Astronomer*, a young scientist with an open book on his table, as he examines a celestial globe. When preparing for this trip, that was me with a notebook computer on my table, as I examined Google Maps, excited to be planning to fly around the globe to India, on the other side the

earth. *The Astronomer* sparks the imagination, with the anticipation of travel, and the pursuit of knowledge.



Further on, there is a Rembrandt painting of an angel inspiring Saint Matthew. As I sit and relax, my imagination enters the painting. I hear the angel, who is a young woman, softly singing to the older man. This attractive siren inspires him to pen a novel of Renaissance intrigue and romance.

The largest Rembrandt is a moment captured from a Bible story. After intrigue, romance, murder, and turmoil, Bathsheba becomes the wife of King David, and later, the mother of Solomon, the future king. The artist shows his character through his choice of composition. He did not paint a religious marriage, nor the king's horrific pursuit of lust, he chose to paint a delightful scene of a sensuous woman, invitation in hand, preparing to make a royal visit to her admirer's palace.

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On one wall Rembrandt's many faces are on display in his self portraits: the artist, the business man, the man about town. He was quite the fellow, someone who would have been interesting to sit and talk with, at a French café. He would have loved the French women. They would have made adventurous subjects for him to paint.

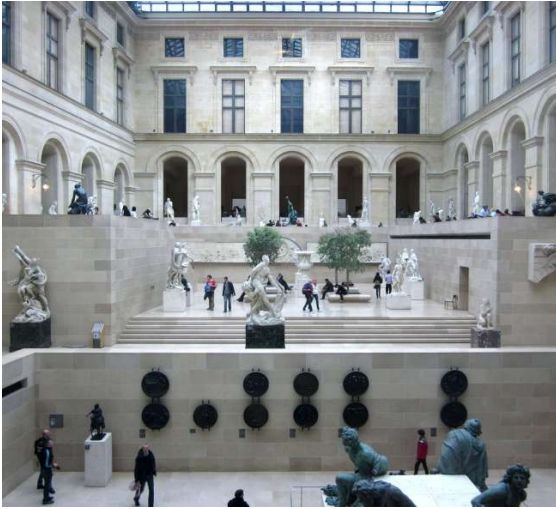
Next to the painting of Bathsheba, an artist is painting her own Rembrandt inspired Bathsheba. The Louvre is for people who love art. The administrative policies support the modern concept of Openness by allowing visitors to take photos, and artists to paint on premise. Sadly, this is not the case for all museums, such as Musée d'Orsay, the home to great Impressionist works.



I am reminded that I am in a palace as I walk through lavish rooms from Napoléon's apartment, that are decorated with wall coverings of gold, beautiful ceiling paintings, and elaborate furnishings.

The Louvre's courtyard was named after Napoléon. In many ways, he is honored in Paris, as a great hero of France. And here I am, a mere traveler, walking the halls and rooms of a great European military warrior.

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Brilliant sunlight on classical French sculptures in a courtyard, under a glass ceiling, is a wonderful place to spend leisure time.



These are the types of sculptures on display throughout Paris. Powerful figures of men and beast sculpted in fine detail. The metal man is the same color as America's French made goddess, the Statue of Liberty. The woman beside the lion with its claws in the man's back, is thinking, *that's going to leave a mark*.



In a room of French art, in the tradition of Moulin Rouge, the Paris cabaret, there is a wonderfully mischievous painting of Gabrielle d'Estrées having her nipple tweaked by her sister.

I stepped back and watched people flowing through this room. Time and again, the women ignored the other works of art to line up, view, and take photos of Gabrielle playing around with her sister. These Paris visiting women are fascinated by this composition.



The Cupid's Kiss sculpture portrays Cupid's devotion

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to love and tenderness. As though I am seeing living art, next to the sculpture, is a caring mother breastfeeding her infant in the same loving pose as Cupid.

Strolling the Louvre, I enjoy the whole experience—exciting works of art, in a lovely palace with passionate patrons. This pleasing thought makes me feel more aware and lighthearted as I wander. In such a mood, I have to laugh to see World of Warcraft here at the Louvre—a teenager is wearing a WoW t-shirt. He likes it when I say, “Great shirt, my sons would love it.”



I take a break at the coffee shop overlooking Cour Napoléon. I recommend getting your photo here, it is the place to show that you have been to the Louvre. In the above photo, from the left, the balcony of the Richelieu wing, a French honoree statue, the Sully wing, and me, the author, with the Denon wing behind. On the courtyard are the pyramids designed by I.M.Pei, a Chinese American.



Then I descend into the crypt where there is part of the original wall of the earlier buildings of the Louvre from the twelfth century. Even older, in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities is the Lion King Sphinx. It is mesmerizing to gaze into eyes born of granite thousands of years before Christ.



Late in the afternoon I enter a hall where it seems Medusa had preceded me. It is full of Greek women and

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men that were sculpted so realistically, it is as if they were actual people turned into marble.

It was then, when I meet the famous Venus de Milo. She is bold, stands tall, strong, a cloth draped low around her hips in the style of low rider jeans. In front is a crowd taking hundreds of photos. I wish to capture something original, and to that end, I apply a photographer's technique: as one walks around a tree to find the right angle where the leaves are illuminated by sunshine, I walk around Venus to find the right angle which illuminates her aura.



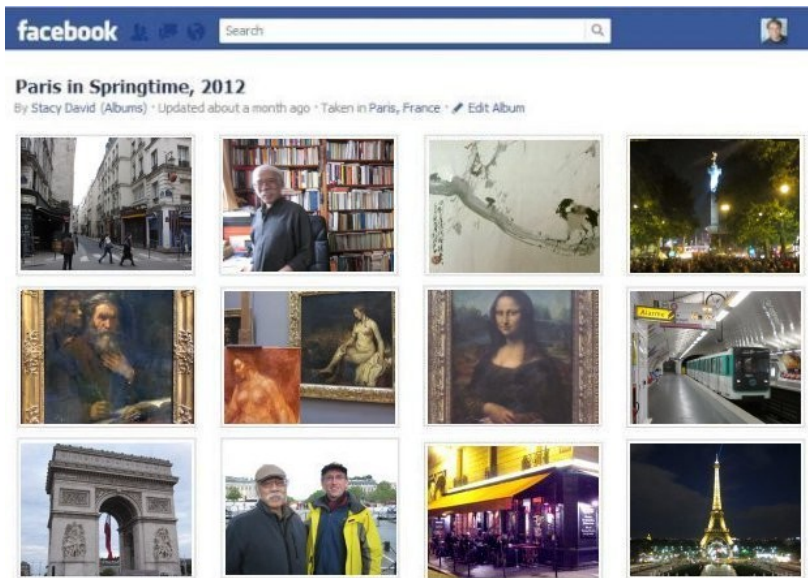
Not enlightening, but humorous, is the backside angle as I think of my teenage sons giggling as they point out *Venus's butt crack*. Other angles highlight the statue's minor damage, however, not bad, considering it was sculpted over two thousand years ago, and that two hundred years ago it was discovered buried in the ancient ruins of Milo, hence the name, Venus de Milo. This is common knowledge.



I wish to make my own observations and move to the edge of the crowd to quietly contemplate the composition of a photo.

Meditating on Venus, I see the statue glow, it is brilliant. Pierre Gassendi, a French philosopher, scientist, astronomer, named the Northern Lights the *Aurora Borealis*. Aurora is the Roman goddess of dawn. Venus is the Greek goddess of Love and Beauty. Boreas is the Greek name for the North Wind. Here, the North Wind is the people's admiration focused on the surface of Venus. I have seen the dancing lights of *Aurora Borealis* in Canada. Here, I am seeing the shimmering glow of *Venus de Milo Borealis*. The effect is as my uncle said, speaking as a Parisian, "The marble appears to have the softness of a woman."

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When I return home, I share photos on Facebook where my friends and family *Like* them and write comments. I do a Google search for *Venus de Milo Borealis*, and find nothing, which I interpret to mean that I did come up with an observation of my own.

The Louvre is a place where great artists, thinkers, scientist, and warriors are honored. Men are seen as gods, and a woman's inner goddess is on display. It is home to absolutely beautiful art presented in a wondrous palace. France's Louvre is the best.

Christmas with Scrooge

Forward

A derivative work of *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. The original story has the British traditions of its time, *Christmas with Scrooge*, has the American traditions from our time.

Business on Christmas Eve

Marley was dead, dead as a doornail. There was no doubt about it because years ago, on a Christmas eve, the register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the undertaker, and the chief mourner whose name was Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge was his sole friend. Even so, he was not dreadfully broken up by the death, except that he had lost an excellent business partner. On the very day of the funeral, Scrooge, the executor of the will, solemnized the closing of Marley's books as an undoubted bargain, in fact, a windfall for himself.

On this Christmas eve, Scrooge was busy in his office counting numbers. Outside was cold and bleak. In bright contrast, with the closing of the front door, came a hearty,

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“Merry Christmas! God bless you all!” It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew.

Startled, Scrooge said, “Bah! Humbug!”

His nephew was all aglow, his face handsome, his eyes sparkling as he said, “Surely you don't mean it?”

“I do,” said Scrooge. “Merry Christmas? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor.”

“Well then,” returned the nephew with a chuckle, “What reason have you to be miserable? You're rich.”

“I live in a world of fools. Christmas is but a time for buying gifts on credit when you have no money. Keep Christmas your own way,” his uncle said, “and let me keep it my way.”

“Keep it? But you don't keep it. I have always thought of Christmas as a good time to be charitable. It is a pleasant time for family and fun. The time of the year when men and women open their hearts and give good cheer to all. And therefore uncle, though it has never put a dollar in my pocket, I believe Christmas is good, and will do good for me; and I say, God bless it!”

The clerk, at his desk near the door, applauded.

“Let me hear another sound from you,” said Scrooge, “and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your job!”

The clerk went silent, head back down to his work.

“Uncle Ebenezer,” pleaded the nephew.

Turning on his nephew, Scrooge said, “Fred, if I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips would be boiled with his own Christmas gravy and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!”

“Don't be angry, uncle. Come! Dine with me, my wife and our friends and family tomorrow.”

“But why?” questioned Scrooge.

“But why? Why what?”

“Why on earth did you marry so young? So poor?”

“Because I fell in love.”

“Because you fell in love,” said Scrooge with sarcasm as thick as pea soup. “Good afternoon.”

“I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so resolute. However, I'll keep my Christmas humor to the last.” With a silly grin, he said, “A Merry Christmas uncle!”

“Good afternoon!”

“And A Happy New Year!”

His nephew took leave without an angry word. The clerk, on letting Scrooge's nephew out, had let two others in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold. One, referring to his list, said, “I believe I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge.”

He handed Scrooge a pamphlet titled, Help the Poor, Help the Children, Help This Christmas Season. On the word Help, Scrooge frowned. On the word Christmas, he handed the pamphlet back.

“During this festive season,” said the gentleman, “it is more than usual that we are charitable to the poor children who suffer. Many are in want of common necessities, thousands are in want of common comforts.”

“Is there government welfare?” demanded Scrooge.

“Yes,” returned the gentleman.

“And are there orphanages?”

“Plenty.”

“Is there Juvenile Hall for kids that go bad?”

“Yes, that jail for children still exists.”

“I am very glad to hear it,” said Scrooge. “I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their usefulness.”

Looking doubtful the fat fellow continued, “In the Christian cheer of mind, a few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy groceries and toys for poor and destitute children. We choose this time because it is a time when people are kind to their fellow man. What shall I put you down for?”

“Nothing!” said Scrooge. “I don't care to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned. They cost enough through taxes.”

“It's never enough and many suffer, some die.”

“What of it if they die? Better to decrease the surplus population.”

“But sir, certainly you don't mean that?”

“Good afternoon,” concluded Scrooge.

“But sir?”

“Good afternoon!”

The gentlemen withdrew.

The outside may have been frigid, however the hearts of a group of children were warm as they walked the streets singing Christmas carols. On hearing their song, Scrooge's clerk went to the door and opened it. But at the first sound of,

“God bless you, Merry Gentlemen, may nothing you dismay!”

Scrooge seized the door and slammed it shut with such energy that the singers fled in terror. The office remained quiet after that.

Eventually, with an ill will, Scrooge stood up and admitted the day was over. The expectant clerk instantly jumped up and put his coat on. He promised he would be back to work the day after Christmas. Scrooge walked off with a growl. The office was now closed for the evening, and closed for the twenty-fifth of December.

Marley's Ghost

After a Denny's dinner, Scrooge went home to his house in which he had partitioned off an apartment. The rest was rented out as offices, now empty because of the holidays.

The fog and frost hung about the black doorway in such a way that the large door knocker seemed as if to sit in mournful meditation. After putting his key in the lock, he jerked his hand back and stood frozen as the knocker changed into its previous owner's deceased face, Marley's face. It was the burning red color of a lobster being boiled to death. As Scrooge stared wide-eyed at this phenomenon, it was a knocker again. To say he was not startled, or that his blood did not curdle, would be untrue.

Once inside his bedroom apartment Scrooge turned on all the lights and gave it a thorough inspection—nobody under the bed, no monsters in the closet. Reassured, he closed the door and locked himself in.

He took off his business suit, put on his pajamas, robe, and slippers. Rather than turn the heat up, he wrapped himself in a blanket and sat down to read a magazine. To his astonishment, the dinner bell above the door began to

ring out loudly, then abruptly ceased. What followed was more unsettling, there came a clanking, banging from the depth of the house. The cellar door flew opened with a boom. Then noises from the kitchen indicated someone stumbling around was coming up the stairs.

Scrooge turned his chair to face the door. “It’s humbug! I won’t believe it.” Believe it or not, his color changed when a figure came floating through the heavy door into his room before his eyes.

Scrooge recognized the face, it was Marley’s Ghost! Marley in his usual business suit and shoes. His body was transparent, the wall behind visible through the ghostly apparition. Scrooge felt a chill from the dead frozen eyes of the phantom before him. His senses made no sense. “How now?” said Scrooge, caustic and cold as ever. “Who do you think you are?”

“In life, I was your partner, Jacob Marley.”

Scrooge recognized Marley’s voice.

The spirit began removing a handkerchief bound about its head and chin. The lower jaw dropped down upon its breast with a grisly crackle and crunch, causing it to raise a frightful cry. The Ghost stood inches from Scrooge. “Do you believe in me or not?” it screamed!

The full power of this ghastly phantasm fell upon him. Scrooge snapped, clasped his hands before his face, pleaded, “Have mercy! Why do spirits walk the earth?”

“If that spirit had not gone forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander the world—oh, woe is me!—and witness what it cannot affect.” Again the specter raised a cry and wrung its shadowy hands. “Seven Christmas eves have pasted and you have continued to labor on, bound within your office walls.”

“Jacob,” he implored, “Do you have any comfort for me?”

“For myself I have none to give,” the ghost lamented. “In life, I never roamed beyond the narrow limits of our office. Now I dread the never ending journey which lies before me! I have wasted a mortal life without caring, without usefulness to humankind. I wish I had known, but no amount of regret can make amends for a life's opportunities missed.”

Scrooge's eyes were down cased, he felt Marley's sorrow and regret.

The specter continued, “Why did I walk through the streets with my eyes turned down and never raise them? I missed the Blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode, to their salvation. Why did I not look up to see the Star which would have led me to many a poor home in need of kindness and my charity? It would have led me to my salvation.”

“Ebenezer Scrooge, I am here tonight to warn you that you have a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance which I have procured for you. You will be haunted by Three Spirits.”

“I think I'd rather not have three more spirits.”

“Ebenezer! Expect the first tomorrow when the bell tolls One. The second on the next night at the same hour. The third, upon the next night when the last stroke of Twelve ceases to chime.”

“Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over?” hinted Scrooge.

“Scrooge!” howled the Ghost.

Scrooge bowed his head for shame of asking.

The specter took its handkerchief from the table and bound it round its head as before. Scrooge knew this by the grinding sound its teeth made when the jaws were lashed together. The apparition walked backward from him. When it reached the window, it was wide open.

The ghost beckoned Scrooge to approach, which he did. But Scrooge stopped in surprise and horror, for he became aware of confused noises in the air—incoherent sounds the wailing of inexpressible sorrow and self accusation. The specter joined the mournful dirge and floated out into the bleak, cold night. In desperate curiosity, Scrooge followed to the window to see the ghostly realm of spirits haunting. The air was filled with phantoms wandering restlessly, many had been business associates of Scrooge.

Whether these creatures faded into mist, or the mist enshrouded them, Scrooge could not tell. But they and their spirit voices faded together, and the night returned to the living. Scrooge closed the window. He felt overwhelmed by the emotions he had undergone during the ghastly conversation and felt unsettled by his glimpse of the Phantom Realm.

Exhausted by the lateness of the hour, which was past 2 AM, he climbed directly into Marley's old bed, a king sized four poster bed with curtains between each post. Without undressing, he closed the bed curtains, slipped under the covers, and immediately fell asleep.

The First of the Three Spirits

It was dark when Scrooge awoke. He checked the clock next to his bed. It was not twelve noon, but twelve midnight! “I have slept through a night and day, and far

into another night,” said Scrooge to the darkness. “It isn't possible.”

Scrooge lay there in a quandary three quarters more of an hour, when he remembered Marley's Ghost had warned him of a visitation when the bell tolls One.

“Ding, dong!” chimed the grandfather clock followed by the melancholy dong of One AM. Light instantly flashed into the room, his bed curtains were yanked aside. Scrooge found himself face to face with an old man wearing a tunic of the purest white. The strangest thing was the luminous light which sprung up from the crown of its head making all things visible. Under its arm, it held the light's extinguisher, a cap.

Bewildered, Scrooge asked, “Are you the Spirit whose coming was foretold?”

“I am,” said the Spirit in a gentle voice.

“Who, what are you?”

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.”

“Long Past?”

“No. Your past,” said the spirit. “Now rise and walk with me. Bear but the touch of my hand, and you shall travel safely.”

They floated through the wall, the city vanished, and they alighted onto a rural village street. Here it was a clear, brisk, winter's day, with snow on the ground.

“Good Heavens!” said Scrooge, wringing his hands as he glanced about. “I grew up here as a boy!”

Coming towards them were boys with their fathers, all were in great spirits, all shouting to each other until the crisp air was full of merry, musical laughter. Scrooge

knew and named every one of them. Why did he rejoice beyond all bounds to hear them exchanging a “Merry Christmas?” What was Merry Christmas to Scrooge? What good had it ever done him?

“These are but shadows of the things past; they have no consciousness of us,” the Ghost said. “The house in front of us has a solitary child, a boy neglected by his friends.”

Scrooge frowned, “I know.”

The mansion was a large house of broken fortunes, a window boarded up and decaying doorways leading into spacious offices that were little used. His father was an inept business man during challenging times. Scrooge could see he had followed his father by partitioning his house into offices. It was little comfort knowing he was a better business man than his father had been.

At one end of the family apartment was a lonely boy reading a book under a dim light. The scene fell upon the heart of Scrooge with softening influence. He sat down upon a chair and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he once was.

The Spirit touched him on the arm and pointed out the window to a beagle strolling toward a dog house.

“Why, it's Snoopy!” Scrooge exclaimed in ecstasy. “It's my dear dog Snoopy. One Christmas time, as yet an only child, I was given a dog so I would not be alone. He was my best friend.”

Then a number of children came near carrying a small pine tree. Scrooge grew more excited, “My friends have come with a Christmas tree.”

They braced the tree erect, then decorated it. On

finishing, they sang, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the new born King."

Scrooge looked back to see the boy Scrooge. It was then he read the book's title, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. He came to the realization that Snoopy and the children were only his imagination of a scene from a book. He never had a real Christmas tree, nor a dog, nor a group of friends singing Christmas carols outside his house.

"I wish," said Scrooge. "There was a group of children singing a Christmas carol outside my office last night. I should liked to have given them something."

The Ghost smiled thoughtfully, and waved its hand, saying as it did, "Let us see another Christmas."

The room became more dismal and there he was again, alone. All the other school boys had gone home for the jolly holidays. He was pacing back and forth despairingly. The door opened and a girl, much younger than the boy, came darting in. He bend down to receive her as she put her arms about his neck and kissed his cheek.

"I have come to bring you home, dear brother!" said the girl, clapping her tiny hands and bending down to laugh. "To bring you home, home, home!"

"Home with my dear sister, my little Fan," said the boy Scrooge. "Are you sure father wants me to come home?"

"Our home is so much better, it is like Heaven! And father is so much kinder. We're to be together this Christmas, and have the merriest time in all the world."

"You are quite the little lady, little Fan. Always thinking of her big brother," smiled the boy. He had nothing but loathing for that dreadful boarding school, he could not leave quickly enough.

The Ghost said, "Fan was always a delicate flower."

"She certainly cared for me," said Scrooge. "She saved me from that faithless place."

"She died a woman," said the Ghost. "Had she children?"

"One child, my nephew." Scrooge felt uneasy as he thought of his Christmas Eve conversation and invitation.

Scrooge and the Ghost left the school behind and stopped at a certain warehouse door.

"I apprenticed here!" said Scrooge

They went in. At the sight of an older portly gentleman sitting behind a desk, Scrooge cried in great excitement, "Why, it's old Fezziwig! Alive again!"

Old Fezziwig laid down his pen, rubbed his hands together and laughed all over himself. He called out in a rich, jovial voice, "Ho ho ho! Ebenezer! Dick!"

Scrooge's former self, now a young man, came briskly in accompanied by his fellow apprentice.

"Dick Wilkins," exclaimed Scrooge to the Ghost. "Bless me. There he is, he was my best friend, he was."

"Ho ho ho, my boys," said Fezziwig. "It's Christmas Eve. Let's ready this place for the party."

Those two fellows went at it, clearing the floor, putting up Christmas lights and setting up tables and chairs to make the warehouse into a ballroom. There was nothing they wouldn't have done, or couldn't have done for old Fezziwig.

In came a DJ with his sound system, in came Mrs. Fezziwig and the three Miss Fezziwigs beaming and lovable. In came all the employed men and women. The

music started and away they all went. There were platters of appetizers, roast and ham, and there were cakes and apple pies, and plenty of beer.

“Such a small matter to make these silly folk so full of gratitude,” said the Ghost.

“Small?” echoed Scrooge.

“He has spent but little of your mortal money. Is it so much that he deserves this praise?”

“It isn't that,” said Scrooge, heated by the remark, and speaking as his former self. “He has the power to render us happy or sad, to make our work a pleasure or a toil. The happiness he gives is worth a fortune.” He felt the Spirit's glance, stopped his speech and looked around.

“What is the matter?” asked the Ghost.

“Nothing particular,” said Scrooge as he once again put his hands in his pockets.

“Something, I think,” insisted the Ghost.

“Well maybe I should like to be able to say a pleasant word or two to my clerk just now. That's all.”

“My time grows short,” observed the Spirit. “Quick! We have more Christmases to visit.”

At the next place, Scrooge saw himself as a man in the prime of life. He sat beside a fair young woman in a cute dress. In her eyes were tears sparkling in the light from the Ghost of Christmas Past's crown.

“It matters little to you,” she said softly, “very little that an idol has replaced me.”

“What idol has replaced you?” questioned the man Scrooge.

“One of gold.”

“There is nothing more comforting as the pursuit of wealth. There is nothing so appalling as being poor.”

“We started a poor couple in love, happy, and content. We hoped to improve with time and hard work. But along the way you changed, you are another man.”

“I was a boy then,” he said impatiently.

She looked into his eyes, “Everything in your heart that made my love of any worth has gone. Once you looked forward to the joy of our meeting after the working day's end. Now I am but a cost in your balance sheet, no longer an asset. Best wishes in the life you have chosen.” She then took leave.

“Spirit, why do you do this? You show me a happy party, and then you show me a sad parting. Show me no more. Take me home!” He wanted no more because the last of his happiness had left with her.

The relentless Ghost forced him to observe a Christmas in later years. It took place in a house of modest size, full of comfort. On the sofa sat a beautiful young woman so much like his past girlfriend that Scrooge believed this woman to be her, until he saw her enter the room. Belle was now more than twice the age as in the previous scene.

The noise level of the room rose and fell with the energy of his former girlfriend's young children as they raced around. At first, this agitated Scrooge's state of mind as he was not accustomed to being around young children at unbridled play. He never would have been so rude. His father was not of a mind to allow it, let alone to join in with little Fan and young Scrooge for fun.

As the laughter continued, Scrooge got down on the floor with the young ones as the games went on. To have such joy with such a family, and join in with them here

and now, for real.

There came a knock at the door. The boisterous group rushed to greet their father who was laden with Christmas presents. The shouts of delight heightened as the packages were placed under the Christmas tree. It was a fitting crescendo as the children began to tire and their emotions subsided as they went off to bed.

Scrooge looked on the master of the house who had his daughter leaning fondly on him. When Scrooge thought that another graceful creature might have called him father, his cold heart warmed and his eyes filled with tears of what could have been.

“Belle,” said the husband turning to his wife with a smile, “I saw your old friend Mister Scrooge as I passed his office window. I hear his partner lies upon the point of death, and there he sat alone. Quite alone.”

“Spirit,” said Scrooge in a broken voice. “I don't like what you are showing me.”

With no visible resistance on part of the Ghost, Scrooge seized the extinguisher cap and quickly pressed it down on the lighted top. The Spirit evaporated under the cap. Having returned to his bedroom, his hand relaxed, he was exhausted and overcome by an irresistible drowsiness. He fell into bed, closed his bed curtains, and sank into a deep sleep.

The Second of the Three Spirits

In the middle of a prodigious snore, Scrooge woke up with the feeling it was almost time to hold conference with the second messenger dispatched to him through Jacob Marley.

When the bell struck One, he became aware of a ghostly light in the adjoining room. He got up softly and shuffled in his slippers to the door. The moment Scrooge's hand was on the lock, a strange voice called him by name and bade him enter. He obeyed.

The room, his room, was warm and wonderfully decorated as never seen while Marley and Scrooge had lived there; it was decorated for Christmas. Crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy were hung on the walls and from the ceiling. In a corner was a tall evergreen, a beautiful Christmas tree with colorful lights, items of the holiday, topped with a brightly lit angel of white. There were tables with turkey, ham, duck, deserts of decorated cookies, apple pies, plum puddings, bowls of walnuts and almonds, juicy oranges, luscious pears, Christmas cakes, and drinks of apple cider, sparkling fruit juice, flavorful teas and coffees. It was an overwhelming accumulation of delicious aromas.

Upon the couch sat a jolly round Giant holding a glowing wand. The wand shed its light on Scrooge as he came peeping round the door.

"Come in," said the Ghost. "Get acquainted with this Christmas time, for I am the Ghost of Christmas Present."

The ghost wore a simple red robe bordered with white fur. It had hair and beard of white curls, long and free, free as the gentle face, sparkling eyes, cheery voice, unconstrained demeanor, and joyful air.

"Have you never seen anyone like me before?" asked the Spirit.

Unbelieving Scrooge asked, "Are you also the Santa Claus?"

"No no no." With a wink, the Ghost of Christmas

Present asked, "Do you still believe in Santa Claus?" It then rose.

"Spirit," said Scrooge submissively, "conduct me where you will."

"I will," said the Spirit looking into Scrooge's face.

The Christmas room vanished instantly, and they were now standing on a city street Christmas morning. The sky was gloomy, the air a bone-chilling cold, snow piled everywhere, dirt and slush in the streets. There was nothing cheerful in the climate or the town, and yet there was an aura of lightheartedness, the very same as found on the clearest summer day, under the brightest summer sun.

The people shoveling snow away from walkways were jovial, and gleefully calling out holiday cheer to their neighbors. Some children were building snow houses, now and then exchanging mischievous snowballs, while laughing heartily. Soon the steeple bells called the faithful to church and chapel.

The poor and homeless were walking the streets, going nowhere because they had no where to go, and no one to go with. Once or twice, when there were angry words between those going some where and those going nowhere, the Spirit used his Christmas wand to shed light on them, which restored their good humor.

Scrooge heard one say, "It is a shame to quarrel on Christmas day." The other responded, "And so it is!" God love them all, and so it is! Scrooge saw another, after receiving the light from the Spirit's wand, turn around and offer a homeless man some money. The receiver said, "Thank you, Merry Christmas!" The giver felt he was the merrier for the exchange.

"Is there a particular magic in your wand?" asked Scrooge.

"There is. Mine. The magic of Christmas Cheer."

"Would it apply to any person on this day?"

"To any person of a mind to kindly give."

They went on to another city, to his clerk's home. On the threshold of the door, the Spirit smiled, and stopped to bless Bob Cratchit's dwelling with a sprinkling of sparkles from his wand.

Inside was Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit's wife, dressed drably in a plain dress of no particular style. She laid the table cloth assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also dressed poorly in sweat pants and a t-shirt. Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the potatoes that were boiling in a pot of water to see if they were soft enough to be finished cooking. Gallantly attired, he rejoiced in his new fashionable clothes. And now two smaller Cratchits, a boy and girl, came tearing in, screaming that the turkey smelled ready to eat as it sat there basking in luxurious poultry seasoning, sage, and onion. These young Cratchits danced about the table and exalted their big brother Peter while he waited until the potatoes were done to perfection.

"Here comes Martha, mother!" said her other daughter.

"Why bless your heart alive my dear, how late you are!" remarked her mother, hugging her.

"We'd had a good deal of work to finish up last night," replied the girl, "and this morning, I closed the accounting books from home."

In came her father with Tiny Tim upon his shoulders. Alas, Tiny Tim carried a little crutch and had his limbs

supported by a steel frame. Martha ran into his arms. The two young Cratchits hustled Tiny Tim off into the kitchen to enjoy seeing the dinner preparations.

“How did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs. Cratchit after Bob had hugged his daughter to his heart's content.

“As good as gold and better,” said Bob. “He gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much. On the way home he told me that he hoped the people in the church saw him because he was a cripple—that it might be humbling for them to be reminded this day who it was that made lame beggars walk and blind men see—especially this day, the day we celebrate His birth.”

Bob's voice trembled when he told them this, and trembled more when he said Tiny Tim was growing stronger in heart, if weaker in body.

They all went in to the kitchen. Peter fetched the turkey to the table. Mrs. Cratchit put the cranberry sauce, turkey dressing, and gravy out. Belinda added bowls of mashed potatoes and butternut squash. Martha set the plates, knives, spoons, and forks. They all sat. Grace was said, then Mr. Cratchit sliced the turkey with the carving knife.

Bob praised the turkey's tenderness, flavor, size, and congratulated his wife on finding such a low price from the supermarket. When everyone had their fill, fresh home-baked apple pie and ice cream was brought to the table. Bob Cratchit declared it the best, “It is the greatest success achieved by my wife since our marriage. What a delicious pie!”

“Spirit,” started Scrooge, “They have a good amount of food, natural and made with loving care. However, your tables had far more choices to eat than the Cratchit's. You also had bowls of nuts, fruits, cakes, and many drinks.

What's wrong with them?"

"You might as well ask, 'Why on earth did they get married so young? So poor?'" Then added, "How much do you pay this man anyway?"

Scrooge did not need the reminder.

At last the dinner was done. Bob proposed a toast, "A Merry Christmas to us all. God bless us!" All the family echoed, except Tiny Tim, at last added, "God bless us every one!"

"Spirit," said Scrooge with an interest he had never felt before for this family, "tell me if Tiny Tim will live."

"I see a vacant seat," replied the Ghost, "and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die. What of it if he dies? Better do it and decrease the surplus population."

Scrooge regretted hearing his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.

By-and-by Tiny Tim performed a Christmas Carol. He learned the song listening to carolers the previous night. He sang out in his angelic little voice, "Silent Night, Holy Night, All is calm, all is bright. Round yon Virgin Mother and Child. Holy Infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace." Tim told his family the carolers were poor, had no money but wanted to give a gift to all, and to all they gave Joy to their listeners. His father was again amazed at his Tiny Tim's insight into the hearts of others.

Scrooge was greatly surprised to hear a familiar hearty laugh, it as his own nephew's, and then, found himself in a bright decorated Christmas room, with the Spirit

standing smiling by his side and looking at his nephew with approving affability, his wife, a pretty woman with the sunniest pair of eyes ever seen.

Their assembled family and friends, roared out, “Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Humbug Scrooge is a comical old fellow, that's the truth,” said Fred, “And not very pleasant. However, my mother, his little sister, loved him dearly.”

“She did have good words for him,” said Scrooge's niece, shaking her head, “God knows why?”

Fred continued, “She remembered he was not always this way, that he had a lonely, troubled childhood. Their father had been a difficult man.”

“Your mother may have had patience for him, but I have none,” said his wife.

“I still have time for him, and I am sorry for him as well. Here he takes it into his head to dislike us and he loses out on a festive dinner.”

After dessert some played Monopoly, a favorite of Scrooge. When his nephew landed on Park Place, he cheered. But when Fred did not buy it. Scrooge was upset because Park Place and Boardwalk are the best properties, with these his nephew could win the game. Not long after his niece landed on Park Place and bought it.

Scrooge celebrated and said, “There is a smart woman. She could teach my nephew something of business.”

His niece went on to gain Boardwalk through wise negotiations. His nephew went on to lose and was soon playing the role of host, entertaining their guests with drinks and conversation. Scrooge's niece was declared the winner, he was proud of her.

Scrooge's niece and nephew went into the kitchen. The Ghost asked Scrooge to follow them.

“Congratulations!” Fred said to this wife. He had felt joy when his wife beat their friends.

“Thanks.” Then she asked the question Scrooge wanted to ask, “Why didn't you buy Park Place when you had the chance?”

“You were having such fun with your sisters, and Topper was getting close to one of your sisters. Someone needed to take care of our guests.”

She gave him a kiss, “Thank you for being so thoughtful.”

Scrooge now understood his nephew's wise strategy which had lost him the game, and yet, won him the heart of his wife.

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The scene faded and he and the Spirit were again on their travels. Far they went—the Arctic, the Americas, Antarctic, Africa, Europe, Russia, China, South and East Asia, Australia, New Zealand. Scrooge was amazed at the zest and care with which Catholic families of the Philippines celebrated this day with a feast, colorful decorations, a Christmas tree, karaoke singing and dancing. The Chinese city of Hong Kong was spectacularly lit up for Christmas.

When they returned to Scrooge's city, they came upon two wretched children, hiding in a door way, fighting over a stolen wallet. Where angels might have sat enthroned in their bosom, devils lurked and glared out menacingly.

Startled, appalled, Scrooge asked, “Whose are they?”

Looking down upon them, he pointed and said, “The boy is Ignorance. The girl is Want. Beware of them. Unless the writing is erased by the people of this city, he is doomed.”

“Have they no one to take care of them?” asked Scrooge. “No where to stay?”

“Are there no orphanages?” said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time, his own words, “Is there still Juvenile Hall for kids that go bad?”

Scrooge shamefully stared at the ground, then looking up at the first chime of Twelve signaling the end of December twenty-fifth, the end of Christmas Day. Scrooge looked about him. He had returned to his room, and the Ghost of Christmas Present...was gone.

The Last of the Spirits

At the last stroke of Midnight, Scrooge lifted his eyes to behold a Phantom draped and hooded coming toward him like a mist along the ground. Abnormally tall, shrouded in a deep dark garment concealing its head, face, figure, leaving nothing visible; filling Scrooge with dread.

“Am I in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?” Scrooge asked. “You are about to show me shadows of the things that have not happened, but will happen.”

The upper portion of the garment tilted for an instant, as if the Spirit had inclined its head in answer.

As the phantom floated forward, the City seemed to spring up around them. They were in the heart of the financial district where people of commerce hurried

around, obsessed about money, looking at their watches, as Scrooge often did, himself. The Spirit stopped and pointed to two business men. Scrooge listened attentively to their conversation.

“No,” said the stout man, “I only know he's dead.”

The other man, skinny as a broom stick, lit a cigarette, and asked, “When did he die?”

“Last night I believe.”

“Why, what was the matter with him?” he asked, as he blew smoke into the air.

“God knows. He had been sick for some time, I thought he'd never die,” yawned the fat cat business man.

“What happened to his money?”

“All I know is he hasn't left it to me.”

They had a good laugh at that.

“It's likely to be a cheap funeral,” said the skinny necked fellow. “I don't know anybody going to it. Suppose we should go?”

“I don't mind going if drinks are provided.”

Another laugh.

Their conversation over, they strolled off. Scrooge knew the men and looked towards the Spirit for an explanation, but none was offered. Scrooge was surprised the Spirit should attach an importance to such trivial conversations. He could think of no one connected with himself and these business men, who might die in the near future.

He walked over to look into his office window for his own image, but it was not there. It actually gave him hope that he had carried out a new direction in life.

The Phantom stood again with its sinister, outstretched hand pointing to an obscure part of the town where Scrooge had never ventured because of its lowly reputation, crowds of people in worn dreary clothes, some pushing their life's possessions in shopping carts.

Scrooge and the Phantom came to a Pawn shop where anything would be brought for resale, anything. As they came into the presence of the shop manager, two women entered with heavy bundles, closely followed by a man in faded black with a bundle of his own. Upon recognition of each other, they burst into laughter.

The first woman threw her bundle on the floor and sat down in a flaunting manner on a stool. With a look of bold defiance, she said, "Us three together again. What're the odds then, eh?"

"Every person has a right to take care of themselves. He always did." said Mrs. Dilber. "It was a judgment on his life."

"It would have been a heavier judgment on his death, if I could have carried anything else," laughed the woman.

The man in black mounted the breach and produced his plunder, a few items from the dead man's house.

Old Joe severally examined and appraised the items, listed numbers, added a total, and said, "That's the amount, and I won't give more even if you tortured me. Who's next?"

Mrs. Dilber went next, "Open my bundle and let me know the value." Towels, a few clothes and boots, silver serving spoons, and kitchen utensils. She was given her total in the same manner.

"And now my bundle, Joe," said the first woman.

Joe opened it, and dragged out a large heavy roll of cloth. "What do you call these? Bed-curtains? You don't mean to say you took 'em down, rings and all, with him lying there?"

"Yes I did. Why not?"

"And his blankets?" asked Joe.

"He isn't likely to take cold without 'em, I dare say," she said. "Those dress clothes is the best he had. They'd been wasted, if it hadn't been for me."

"Oh, you don't mean—"

"Yep he'd been buried in them," chuckled the woman, thinking about her boldness. "Someone was fool enough to waste them good clothes, but I took 'em off him." She looked up at the frowning funeral man, "Don't worry, I dressed him in one of his cheap business suits. He lived for business, might as well spend eternity dressed in his business suit."

Scrooge listened in horror as this brought the memory of Marley's Ghost, destined to roam the earth for eternity dressed in his business suit.

As the scene quickly changed, Scrooge recoiled in extreme horror, he was almost touching the bed, the bed bare of bed-curtains. "Oh my God," he cried.

Beneath a plain sheet there lay a figure, though it was dumb in speech, it announced itself in a mournful cry. No voice pronounced these words, however, he heard them,

"During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a

singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit."

He stared at the body, plundered, unwatched, uncared for; then glanced towards the Phantom, its steady hand pointing to the head. Scrooge had a morbid creepy curiosity to draw back the dead man's bed sheet to reveal the identity. But because of the sickening of his heart, he had no will power to move.

"Spirit!" cried Scrooge, "This is a horrible place. I shall remember its lesson, trust me. Let's go!"

Still the Ghost pointed to the head.

"I understand, and I would do it if I could. But I don't have the will. Spirit, I don't."

Again it seemed to look upon him with intense consideration.

"Spirit, are all men doomed to an uncaring death? Can there be tenderness and caring when someone dies? Can you show me some warmth connected with another's death or I will forever be haunted by a dark inevitability."

In the search for tenderness, the Phantom returned them back to the street near Scrooge's office. The Spirit pointed to a new pair of men. Scrooge brightened at recognition of these two warm souls. He listened in.

Scrooge's nephew, said, "Why Bob, you look a little bit down, what's wrong?"

To Scrooge's distress, Bob Cratchit told his sad story.

Fred said, "I am heartily sorry for it, and heartily sorry for your good wife."

"Thank you, I will pass on your kind words to her. She is a wonderful wife, does for us all she can."

Before the conversation ended, the Ghost led Scrooge to poor Bob Cratchit's house. The mother and the children were seated around the table. Quiet, very quiet. The normally noisy little Cratchits were as still as statues, looking up at their brother Peter who had a Holy Bible in his lap. Not a word was spoken!

Then, from the Bible,

"And he took a child, and set him in the middle of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said to them, *Whoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receives me.*"

The words seemed to drift across the room as if in a dream. Had Peter read them out loud? Why did he not go on?

Cratchit's wife said, "When will your father come home. It must be time."

"It's past his time," Peter answered, closing his book. "I think he walks a little slower than he used to, mother."

At last she said, and in a steady, cheerful voice, that only faltered once, "I have known him to walk with—I have known him to walk with Tiny Tim upon his shoulders very fast indeed."

"And so have I," said Peter.

"And so have I," exclaimed another. So had they all.

"There is your father at the door," she called and hurried out to meet him.

His tea was ready on the table and they all tried to help him to it. Then the two young Cratchits got up on his knees, and each child laid a little cheek against his face, as if to say, "Don't mind it, father, don't be grieved, you still have us."

Bob was cheerful with them, and spoke pleasantly to all the family.

At the table, Bob told them of the extraordinary kindness Mr. Scrooge's nephew had shown him. Seeing that Bob looked a little—"Just a little down, you know," said Bob. "He inquired what had happened to distress me." On which, Bob commented, "He is the most pleasant gentleman you ever met. I told him why I was sad. 'I am heartily sorry for it,' he said, 'and heartily sorry for your good wife.' I don't know how he knows."

"Knows what, my dear?"

"Why, that you are a good wife," smiled Bob.

"Everybody knows that," said Peter.

"Isn't it true," said Bob. "It really seemed as if he had known our Tiny Tim and felt with us."

"I'm sure he's a good soul," said Mrs. Cratchit.

"I am sure none of us will forget our sweet little Tiny Tim, shall we?" asked Bob. "For his is the first parting among us."

Again the words drifted across the room, "And he took a child, and set him in the middle of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said to them, Whoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receives me." The Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was from God, and is now with God.

"Specter," said Scrooge, "I'm thinking our time is

short. What was the name of the man lying dead?"

The Ghost transported him back to the street near his office, though the Spirit's hand pointed elsewhere. In time, they reached an iron gate to a churchyard cemetery. The burial ground was choked up with too many corpses. It was fat with an unfulfilled appetite. Here, the unloved man lay six feet under the cold hard surface.

The Spirit stood among the graves and pointed to One.

"Before I look at the stone," said Scrooge, "Answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be?"

The Ghost continued pointing down at the grave.

"A Man's choices foreshadow a certain end, to which, if persevered, must lead to that end. But if the choices are not persevered, the end will change. Say it is so with what you are about to show me. I don't want to be that man."

The Phantom's pointing hand screamed at Scrooge to see the writing on the grave stone.

Scrooge crept towards it and read, read his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Taking in the full impact of this premonition, he fell down upon his knees crying, "I am that man lying on that bed, dead and neglected. No, Spirit. Oh no, no, no!"

The Phantom stood stolid.

"Spirit!" he cried, seizing its robe, "Hear me! I am not the man that I was. I will not be that man. Why show me this, if I am past all hope? Tell me I can erase the words written in stone!"

The hand appeared to shake and tremble.

"Good Spirit, your wavering makes me feel that I may

choose another path to change these shadows of this future yet to come. I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year long.”

The Phantom lowered its spectral hand and placed it on Scrooge's shoulder.

“Kind Spirit, I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons taught.”

The Spirit began to change, the hood and cloak shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

The Joy of Christmas Day

Scrooge was in his own bed, his own room. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own.

“Oh, Jacob Marley! The Spirits of all Three Christmas Times shall live within me,” praised Scrooge.

There was the glorious morning sunshine through his window. He scrambled out of bed, all a flutter and glowing with good intentions.

“I don't know what to do,” laughed Scrooge, crying in the same breath. “I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as giddy as a schoolboy on the last day of school. A Merry Christmas! to everybody! A Happy New Year! to the whole world! Yahoo!”

“I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits,” said Scrooge. “I don't know what day it is.”

Running to the window, he opened it, and put his head out. No fog, no mist, it was a clear bright golden sunlit day. What a glorious day!

“Hello young man,” yelled Scrooge, calling down. “What day is it?”

“Eh?” returned the boy with wonder.

“What day is it today?” asked Scrooge.

“Today?” replied the boy, “Why it's Christmas Day.”

“It is Christmas Day!” said Scrooge to himself. “I haven't missed it. The Spirits have done it all in one night. They are the same as Santa Claus who goes to homes all over the world in one night. Of course they can, of course they can do it.”

“My fine fellow! I need help getting a Christmas gift.”

“Are you crazy? All the stores are closed.”

“Do you know the Denny's Restaurant on the next street corner?”

“I sure do.”

“They are open. I want them to make up a gift basket of Christmas desserts and drinks. Tell them to put it on my tab. They can phone me to confirm. My name is Ebenezer Scrooge. Bring it quickly back here,” he threw money down to him, “and I will double your bonus for helping me!”

The boy was off like a shot.

“Then I'll send it to Bob,” whispered Scrooge, rubbing his hands, with a laugh. “He shan't know who sent it. Bill Murray never made such a joke as sending a surprise to Eliot Loudermilk's!”

After the phone call from the manager, Scrooge went downstairs to receive the basket, which soon showed up.

“Here it is. Woo hoo!” It was a Christmas basket as big as Tiny Tim. Scrooge said, “Please help me with one more favor, take a taxi and deliver it. Tell them it's from Santa Claus, the Spirit of Christmas Giving.”

He chuckled when he paid for the taxi, and he chuckled when he compensated the boy. He went back inside and sat down breathless and chuckled till he sobbed.

Scrooge dressed himself in Christmas colors and went out onto the streets. The people by this time were pouring forth as he had seen with the Ghost of Christmas Present. He went walking with his hands behind him, head held high, and regarded every one with a delightful smile. He looked so irresistibly pleasant, that three or four good humored fellows said, "Good morning, and Merry Christmas!" People greeting Scrooge with pleasantries was quite new to him. He thought this a wonderful sound.

After a time, coming towards him was the portly gentleman who had walked into his office the day before, and been so cheerful and hopeful, only to be turned away. It sent a pang across his heart to think how this old gentleman would look upon him when they met. However he knew what new path lay before him, and he took it.

"My dear sir," said Scrooge, taking the elderly gentleman's hand and shaking it. "How do you do? I hope you succeeded yesterday."

"Mr. Scrooge?"

"Yes," said he. "I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to ask your pardon for yesterday. Will you accept my donation of —," Scrooge whispered in his ear.

"Lord bless me!" said the gentleman, as if his breath were taken away. "Mr. Scrooge, are you serious?"

"Nothing less which includes a many back payments. Come and see me. Will you come and see me?"

"I will!" exclaimed the old gentleman.

"Thanks," said Scrooge, "Thank you fifty times over.

Bless you! And Merry Christmas!”

In the afternoon he went to his nephew's house. Once he had the courage, he went up and knocked. “Is your father home, my dear?” said Scrooge to the very nice girl.

“Yes sir.”

“Where is he?” said Scrooge.

“He's in the dining-room. I'll show you if you like.”

“I would, thank you.” Upon entering the room, Scrooge said, “Fred, Merry Christmas!”

“Why, bless my soul!” cheered Fred. “It's Uncle Scrooge.”

“It is me. I have come to dinner as you asked. Will you still have me?”

“Of course we will have you join us,” said Fred extending his hand in welcome.

For Heaven sake, if his uncle didn't almost shake his arm off.

In a few minutes, Scrooge felt right at home. Nothing could be more heart-warming. His niece looked just the same as in his journey with the Spirit of Christmas Present. So did Topper when he came in, and everyone else. It was a wonderful party, wonderful music, wonderful games, won-der-ful happiness!

The next morning he was early into the office. Oh, how he wanted to catch Bob Cratchit coming in late. And he did, yes, he did! A quarter past nine, no Bob. Scrooge sat with his chair turned to see him come in. When he did, he was a full eighteen minutes late.

His hat and coat were off before he opened the door. He was on his chair diving away at the stack of papers.

“Hello!” growled Scrooge in his accustomed voice as near as he could feign it. “What do you mean by coming here late?”

“Excuse me?” said Bob. “I’m only a bit late.”

“You are,” repeated Scrooge. “Step this way.”

“It’s only once a year,” explained Bob. “It shall not be repeated. It was a rather Merry Christmas yesterday.”

“Now, I’ll tell you what, my friend,” said Scrooge. “I am not going to stand for this sort of thing any longer. And therefore,” leaping from his chair, he gave Bob such a dig in the side it caused him to stagger backward. “And therefore I am giving you a salary raise!”

Bob looked warily at his boss, and took step backward. He had a momentary idea of knocking Scrooge down should he come closer. The man’s gone crazy.

“Merry Christmas, Bob!” said Scrooge as he clapped him on the shoulder with an earnest smile that could not be mistaken. “I wish you a Merrier Christmas than I have ever wished anyone. I’ll raise your salary, and I will endeavor to assist you and your family. We will discuss your affairs this very afternoon over a holiday lunch.”

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. To Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. To his nephew Fred and his wife, Scrooge was everything one could wish for in an uncle.

Ebenezer had no further interaction with Ghosts, their principle lessons he remembered ever after. It was said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, as well as anyone. May that be truly said of us all. And so, as Tiny Tim observed,

“God bless Us, Every One!”

A Bad Good Idea

“If only our workers didn't have a life,” Roman yelled out in frustration. The contractors had missed another deadline and Roman was mad enough to decapitate someone.

The meeting room had the blinds drawn to keep out the hot sun. The air conditioning was second rate, everything in this country was second rate. He hated the heat. He hated the lousy roads, the traffic, the bloody constant horn blowing.

“Don't I pay you enough?” Roman asked? “God damn it.” The only reason he was in India was low wages. He was getting five Bangalore managers, for the price of one manager back home in Novosibirsk.” The profit generator was the cheap factory workers. But, if Roman had to spend time in northern India, he wanted more out of them.

“If you can't produce more,” he stated, “I might as well go back home and hire Russians.” Scanning the room, with the exception of his stout comrade, the group of ten Indians avoided his his eyes. “All I want is boring, family-less, friendless drones. Control, control, control, and productivity.”

One scientist took notice and wrote down Roman's words verbatim, I want is boring, family-less, friendless

drones. Who could have guessed, that those words, said in anger, would lead to the destruction of the civilized world?

After the meeting, before leaving the room, the Indian scientist beside the Russian, said to the Russian, “Sir, I can make Roman’s request for controlled workers.”

The scientist went on to propose an idea. He would develop a psychiatric drug to affect the neurotransmitters of the brain. The drug would modify the personality of the users, they would care only for work, they would be friendless drones.

“That’s bullshit,” Ruskin said.

“Yes, yes sir,” the soft spoken Ragget responded while doing the Indian head bobbing, tilting left, right, left, right. “It is easy. With your money to support my project. My drug will modify the pleasure centers of the brain to only respond to the accomplishment of work.”

Ruskin scrutinized the tall dark skinny man. “Tell me more.”

“The factory worker feels pleasure when completing a repetitive routine task, a factory task. Other pleasures—family life, Cricket, the taking of women—become painful, terrible things to do.”

Ragget grinned and bobbed his head faster, then stopped. He concluded, “These these factory workers, would be family-less, friendless drones.”

The Russian investor’s eyes lite up with rising stock prices. “We will support a small research team,” Ruskin stated. “But where? Such research must be kept secret.”

“In the Indian country side,” Ragget said. “There are lawless places where foreigners are afraid to go. The

people are poor uneducated stupid countryside peasants. Life is cheap.”

Z-Research

Ruskin created an international corporate structure, vainly named Corporation-R. This would give him business leverage over Roman. Ragget's team worked developing serums and testing. At first, most of the hapless souls, the test subjects as Ragget referred to them, went home dazed, uncertain of what was happening. Since they were well fed, and given a sippet of food to take home which was their incentive to return each day.

When the experiments went bad and subjects lost their minds, became comatose; they were disposed and buried. Ragget's accountant, removed the failures from the books. The workers were merely an item of cost, an erasable number. Anyway, Ragget said to the account, “In a country approaching two billion, no one would miss a few.”

If anyone did miss the dead, bribes were paid to quiet the questioning families. However, one distraught father did not accept the bribe, he could not accept the mysterious disappearance of his eldest son. And so, the father, the mother, the younger son and daughter, forcibly became test subjects. After all, it was wiser, and cheaper, to have thugs on the payroll, than to have news going beyond the village borders.

Progress was not quick enough for Ruskin, so he increased his incentive package, the Russian fists of motivation to push the scientists to achieve faster results. They of course became reckless. However, success followed. The subjects started to live for work. They

would not leave the test factory. They slept only when passing out from exhaustion, or dying on the job.

This pleased Ruskin. He set up a production sweatshop factory. It was a dingy shithole of a place, mud floors, crappy tools, stale air. The drones were wildly enthusiastic to have their improved work environment. They produced weapons for distribution through the Russian mob in Moscow.

In the test factory, to measure output gains produced by the drug, the management had one line of workers using the drug named Serum-C, and a second line of non-drugged up workers. The test drones productivity far out reached their non-drugged counterparts.

However the drugs had a side effect which caused the done subjects to easily anger. Fights broke out. Drugged up workers banded together and beat their competitors with bare fists, knocking them down and putting the boots the poor slower non-drugged workers.

Factories and Corporate Growth

Ragget's team wrote reports for the money man. Ruskin gave him more cash to build larger factories. During contract negotiations, Ragget received half the money he had asked from the Russians for the construction. Ragget, the greedy little bastard he was, used his family's construction companies to build the new factory. Part of the money was used to built Ragget a compound surrounded mansion in the countryside.

In the new factory, the drones were fully focused on their work, they would stop for nothing. They became skin and bones, eyes bulged from shrunk heads, and yet, they continued to work. Ragget was not worried that

groups died off from continuous work and malnutrition, but the cost to quiet families was a big expense.

The Russian's push Ragget. Ragget pushed the scientists as they began development of the next generation drug. They first developed a counter drug to allow the drones to rest before dying or becoming uncontrollable. The drug was administered when a drone became sullen, shifty, agitated, and started fighting. The drone's life increased, and profits increased. The factory was enlarged, more bribes were paid.

More drones needed to be brought into the fold. Local tribal chiefs were brought into Corporation-R. The community leaders traded complete villages of men, women, and children, for money to build their own personal wealth.

Ruskin and Ragget were getting rich, and they still wanted more, a lot more. It was time to talk to Roman. Roman seen potential beyond what Ruskin and Ragget could accomplish. After reading the reports and viewing the factories for himself, Roman wanted in. He could make the huge investments needed to take it to the next level. He put together a team to redesign production lines, franchise the factories, and moved up the Indian political ladder to authorize further company growth. Workers were needed from towns, villages were no longer large enough. Roman wanted an empire to rival old Rome. Roman would take over Corporation-R from Ruskin and Ragget.

It would take a lot of money to reach the next level: genetic modification. Ragget had a dream of injections to modify a worker's genetic makeup, thereby changing them once and for all time. This meant reduced drug administration costs. He had a vision of bigger houses,

more cars and boats for himself. This would require more from his scientists.

The breakthroughs were steady. Then the day came, the scientists did it, genetic human modification! Roman would have his worker army, his dream of boring, family-less, friendless drones.

The factories spread across the border into the back country of China. Corporation-R built new factories based on the Chinese model of worker factory and dorms: cafeterias, in house doctors, everything contained in the factory complex that was required for a worker to live, no need to leave the factor grounds.

Anyway, they didn't want to leave, they wanted to stay. They were worker bees, a hive of killer factory worker bees. Ragget used the term killer bee because when a few became agitated and escaped, they ran crazy down the streets and in a frenzy, beat up anyone in their path.

Next Stage of Insanity

In the new factory, the new drones, the genetically modified workers were again productive in teams. There were of course, bugs to be worked out of the new factories. When a machine broke down, a maintenance man was needed for the fix. The delay caused the drones to yell, scream, and fight with each other. The reason was, when idle, their genetically reconstructed brain issued pain sensations through out their body.

When the manager returned from break, one of the drones took a wrench and smashed his scull, swinging the steel instrument over and over. Drones, with ugly contorted faces of pain, tore the dead body apart. The ripping effort, tearing a body limb from limb, was hard

work which caused pleasure in the drone's minds. There was a temporary calm.

Surrounded by guards with clubs and guns, a nervous maintenance man got the production line working again.

Security was beefed up. The next time the drones were enraged, the guards went in with trained attack dogs. But the drones were mindless with brain pain, they ignored the injuries the dogs inflicted. The attack dogs were torn to pieces. Then they went into a feeding frenzy. Only bits of bone remained.

The scientist solution to the problem was to develop management and maintenance drones. Roman believed this a break though was key to the future. Drone genetics moved up the management chain and across the production job roles.

Roman was furious when the scientists got greedy, and asked for more money and more resources. He then came up with his most dangerous idea, drone scientists. What he had not considered was the side effect of obsessively driven, unstable personalities of genius.

The squad of mad scientist drones were productive. They worked faster and were more reckless and daring in their experimentation. As in the case of factory drones, the genius drones were intolerant of their non-drone counterparts.

A point came when the humans refused to share data with the drones because they were afraid the drones would take over the project—non-drone people would be obsolete. This new generation of scientist drones next showed a side as not yet seen on the factory floor; they went quiet, secretive, sneaky.

When Roman, the chairman of the board, supported the

superior drone progress and had the human team members give their resources to the drones, and the humans were to support the drones.

Security was informed that the scientist drones where to be left alone and fully supported. The drones were enthused by their corporate leader. But the humans scientists had lied to the drones. The drones developed weapons to kill two security guards. They entered the human's lab at night where one poor man was working late. He was torn apart and devoured, organs and muscles, blood was splattered on the wall, it was a feeding frenzy.

After their feast, they took everything they needed back to their lab and continued work. Work was their life, to be idle was a torture. As if nothing unusual had happened, they continued working to achieve the corporate goal of genetic modification through out the production process, to produce drones for the factory floor, for maintenance, for shipping, inventory, and management. They also increased drone efficiency: they required less rest and food.

Roman was summoned, the human factory managers were concerned for their lives. Roman had been in India implementing a secret personal project with a separate squad of scientist drones. He came quickly and quieted the situation. He then made a fatal decision that would turn the tide of the human control over drones. He implemented his secret project, security drones.

The new drones captured the rest of the human scientists. The scientist drones turned them into drones. Those mean sons of bitches, killed and ate the human security team. Roman had given control of the hive to the killer bees.

Corporation-Z Goes to Washington

Surveying his audience, Edgar concluded his story, “That my friends is how Corporation-Z got started.”

A teenager sitting at the back said, “The original name was Corporation-R.”

“That's right,” Edgar replied. “As the drones moved up the corporate ladder, the day finally came when Roman was slow to react, and the other board members, quartered him and ate him for lunch. The drones were in control. An outsider named it what it really was, a corporation of mindless, ruthless, zombies; Corporation-Z.”

About the Author

Stacy David is a traveling computer instructor. His writing and teaching skills have taken him many times around the world. Paris was one of his stops while returning from a tour of work in India. He had stopped in London for a day, then traveled by Eurostar, the high speed train, under the English Channel, through the Chunnel, to Paris to see the Louvre and visit his uncle.

His writing career began while attending the University of Manitoba where he wrote regularly for their computer department and professors. Now, while traveling, he applies his writing talents to create travel articles.



Photography was his teenage hobby, and he continues to improve with each trip.

About the Publisher

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About the Book's Producer,

While getting his degree in economics, Stacy David worked with university editors and publishers. In the corporate world, he worked with business editors and publishers, including the book producers of Prentice Hall.