

**M**arley was dead.

This is a thoroughly uplifting start to any story I'm sure you will agree, although it should be noted that if Marley were not dead from the outset then he would have to die sometime around now or we would not be able to have a tale at all. On the whole it is better to begin with someone dead than having to find a suitably macabre, clever and visually pleasing way to pop them off. This is Dickens not Agatha Christie!

So anyway, Marley was definitely deceased and living it up somewhere on the south coast of heaven, getting a nice tan from an updraft from hell.

In the world of the living, situated near Chessington World of Adventures, you would be mistaken for thinking Marley was still alive. His name was there clear to see next to that of Ebenezer Scrooge outside their business premises. It would have taken only a few minutes to paint over Marley's name, but Scrooge had never been fond of decorating – he preferred debt collecting.

Scrooge and Marley had been business associates for many years. They had been somewhat married to each other in their misery-making. Neither man had come close to having a meaningful relationship with a female other than of a business nature and it was clear to most that the partners were obviously a pair of whoopsies.

That was in the past, of course. Marley was now, without room for doubt to poke a pinkie through, dead; the usual outcome for someone whose heart no longer beat and whose body had been buried for seven years. Scrooge had overseen the funeral and aided the filling in of the grave just for his own peace of mind. He had applied for Marley's life insurance and wanted no last minute hitches.

It is at this point in our story that we should remind ourselves of one thing; Marley was definitely dead. He was passed over, stone-cold croaked, the rabbit on the tyre, the lamb in the abattoir, ding dong the partner's dead...well you get the idea. It is just to say that Marley was, positively and terminally, dead and buried.

The seven years since Marley's demise had not been kind to Scrooge. He aged gracelessly, had no bingo wins and occasionally suffered incontinence. In short, shit happened. That had not prevented Scrooge enjoying his daily routine every day.

Scrooge liked to think he coined the phrase, "Be a bastard all day, lots of work and no play." The Mars Company had declined to use it as their slogan. To live by his motto, Scrooge packed his time with many hours of penny pinching, moaning, beating the living shit out of his one member of staff and generally having a merry old time.

He was a rough-skinned hand at the potter's wheel and he would never admit that his favourite film was *Ghost*. Scrooge was every bit the stubborn old goat he was made out to be both inside and out. His nose could be mistaken for a barbeque skewer, so was it pointed and sharp, while his eyes were red rimmed and his lips had a blue tinge. Some would think he had mixed up his eye shadow and lipstick again.

Scrooge was not the type of person to be stopped in the street by anyone, only by no one. People did not feel inclined to ask of his welfare, passing drivers did not feel inclined to tip their hats and dogs showed their appreciation of him by shitting on his shoes. He subsequently showed his appreciation by reinserting the turd where it came from with the aid of his toe.

When Scrooge walked by, tramps leaped into dustbins, children under the age of sixteen hid in their mother's knickers, boys over sixteen hid in their girlfriend's knickers instead – randy buggers will use any excuse – and guide-dogs jumped off bridges to escape him with unfortunate consequences for their owners.

Not that this bothered Scrooge. It made it easier to get through the crowds in Tesco and meant there was always a free checkout for him.

On a particularly cold Christmas Eve in Scrooge's Counting House, two pieces of coal burned slowly in the fireplace giving off the heat of an ant fart. A large bucket of coal stood beside the hearth but Scrooge refused to burn any more than was strictly necessary to prevent his blood freezing in his veins. A thermometer next to the fireplace was constantly speckled with frost, and occasionally a lost penguin would stray into the office mistaking it for the Arctic Circle. Scrooge charged them a transit fee and sent them on their way.

This day, Scrooge's gaze had fallen on the street outside a number of times. He filed a compensation claim against the council and forced them to repave the road.

Fog rolled in from the sea, drunk on pirate's rum and cursing like a sailor. It was virtually impossible to see from one side of the street to the other, and only the dim glow of window candles signalled that there was anything there at all. They also signalled that all was well, dinner was on the table and a flight from New York was cleared for landing.

Inside the Counting House, Scrooge was counting out his money. Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's one employee, was in toilet blowing his nose which had been runny. I could tell you what a maid was doing in the back alley with a blackbird but it would lead to this book being banned in the UK, although I'm sure it would have no such trouble in America.

It was not unfair to say that Scrooge was as tight as a frog's fanny. Trying to get his lottery syndicate money on a Friday was a torturous process that lasted until the following Thursday and a resolution could only ever be agreed by the introduction of a chainsaw and pliers. He never put money into any birthday collections, didn't give money to charity and occasionally turned over his toilet paper to use the other side at a later date.

Scrooge's unfortunate employee, Bob, appeared to be a little weed of a man who found it hard to stand up against a wall. In this instance looks were not deceptive. To Scrooge he was the perfect employee a tight-fisted old bullying goat could wish for.

Cratchit worked tirelessly every day, wrapped in six shirts, two duffel coats, a king-sized duvet and a body warmer, and quite frankly always felt like he was being pissed on from a great height by some monstrous bird with a bladder the size of a dolphin tank. He spent his days in a small room, being constantly watched by Scrooge as hour after hour he copied letters and scrawled entries in ledgers. If the fire smouldering in Scrooge's part of the office was barely adequate then the one provided for Cratchit appeared to be a campfire made by Tom Thumb. Most times it was easier getting heat from his desk candle, although not as easy as burning himself on it, which he did frequently.

The only time Bob had anything to smile about was when he was finally allowed to go home at night and on the few occasions Scrooge received visitors. Seeing someone come into the Counting House with a

cheery smile on their face, and leave with their lips trailing in the dirt was always a sight to raise the spirits. Very appropriate.

The arrival of Scrooge's nephew on Christmas Eve was one such occasion. Unlike Scrooge, the other members of his family were hyperactive balls of goodwill and fluff, and his nephew was so unwittingly bright and happy that he had once made a hyena feel inadequate. Of course the blazing joy that erupted from his nephew's every pore had the same effect on Scrooge as a jelly baby thrown at the Great Wall of China.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle!" Scrooge's nephew bellowed, his breath turning to snow inside the Counting House. He stopped to build a snowman out of it.

Scrooge threw his nephew a look of contempt, then reeled it back in to reuse later in the conversation.

"Bah! Bonbons!" Scrooge snapped.

"Shouldn't that be Humbug, Uncle?" his nephew asked.

"Yes, it should but they copyrighted "Bah! Humbug!" and I don't intend to pay to use it!"

"Don't be like that, Uncle. It's Christmas!"

"Really? I thought it was Summer Solstice! I must be going senile."

"I doubt that will happen, Uncle. You don't give anything away so you wouldn't let your mind go without charging it some kind of fee."

Scrooge thought about this for a moment. His mind turned to thoughts of tax, but then he remembered he was not the Sheriff of Nottingham and returned to his paperwork.

"Can I use two pieces of coal for the eyes, Uncle?" Scrooge's nephew asked, patting the last of the snowman's head in place.

"Only if you pay for them."

"How much?"

Scrooge quickly counted on his fingers. There were ten of them. Someone had stolen his thumbs and cunningly replaced them with spare fingers. Scrooge bit one of them. They were chocolate fingers. He pulled them off to have later with his tea.

"Fifty pounds," Scrooge said finally.

"For two pieces of coal?" his nephew exclaimed.

"No, as a reward for the person who finds my thumbs!"

The room suddenly went dark. The window was full of faces.

"I wasn't being serious," Scrooge shouted.

Light returned to the room. It had a tan and was wearing a sombrero.

“You’re a bit of a grouch, aren’t you Uncle?”

“You’re like the Laughing Fucking Policeman. What’s your excuse?”

“I’m high on Christmas spirit!” Scrooge’s nephew bellowed, blowing off the snowman’s head.

“Can’t you check into rehab?”

“I really can’t say I would want to. Anyway, don’t you want to know why I’m here, Uncle?”

“No.”

“Well I’m here to invite you to Christmas Lunch.”

“I said I didn’t want to know.”

“If you didn’t know what I was going to say then how could you reject the offer?”

Scrooge looked up. “This is true. I reject your offer.”

“You do the same thing every year, Uncle.”

“Then that just shows how thick you are to keep asking me, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all, Uncle. It means that we’ve bought too much food again and are trying to get as many people as possible round to eat it. We’ll still be eating turkey sandwiches at Easter if not.”

“Well I won’t be one of your guests,” Scrooge grumbled. “Besides I’ve seen your wife’s cooking. It always reminds me of cheery, family gatherings.”

“Uncle, that was almost complimentary. Are you feeling well?”

“You didn’t let me finish. I was going to say cheery, family gatherings usually attended by cannibals. You’re never quite sure what it is you’re eating. Perhaps if there wasn’t always a thick layer of charcoal on everything it would be better.”

“Ah. That sounds more like you, Uncle. So I definitely can’t tempt you then?”

“A whole host of demons from beyond the grave couldn’t drag me there. They’d have to bring me in a wheelbarrow.”

“What if I send the mother-in-law round?” Scrooge’s nephew enquired.

“I’ll send her back square.”

Scrooge’s nephew hovered around the desk like a boomerang in human form until Scrooge pleasantly asked him to fuck off.

“Will you pleasantly fuck off, nephew? And take that holly wreath with you!”

“But I brought it for your office, Uncle. To brighten the place up!”

“Can’t you take a hint? I don’t want your Christmas cheer, or your Christmas Dinner, or your holly wreath! You deal with Christmas in your way and I’ll deal with it with rat poison. It’s not as though it has done any good for anyone.”

“Maybe I have not become richer for it, but I consider that my life has. I feel love and joy and Christmas cheer that you don’t seem to want. I share my Christmas with as many people as I can whether they are rich or poor. Ok, it is mainly to help get rid of that bloody turkey but that is beside the point. What I am saying, Uncle, is that while you sit here with your piles of cold money, I can spend Christmas in the warmth of my family where any family man should be!”

A round of applause burst into the room. It carried a placard bearing the words, “Free Speech For All.”

Scrooge shot it dead then turned to Bob Cratchit. “One more clap from you and you’ll be looking for a new job.”

Bob was about to say he had never had the clap, but thought better of it and returned to his work.

“As for you,” Scrooge said to his nephew. “You are very good at rallying the brainless. Have you considered a career in Parliament?”

“Unfortunately, Uncle, I would be no use there. I’m not a good liar.”

“Neither are most of the buggers in there but that doesn’t stop them trying.”

“So I really can’t convince you to come around tomorrow, Uncle?”

Scrooge vaulted over the desk with the agility of a champion hurdler, sending coins scattering everywhere like pennies from heaven, picked up the wreath and forced it over his nephew’s head. He opened the door, spun his nephew around and kicked him out into the street.

“I’m sure you will agree that actions speak louder than words, nephew. And so we are perfectly clear, to your Christmas I say, Bah! Sherbet Lemons!”

“Hpy Nw Yrr, Ncle,” his nephew said through a mouthful of pavement and holly wreath.

Scrooge slammed the door so hard that all of the coins in the Counting House jumped to attention and restacked themselves on his desk.

As he walked back to his desk a knock came at the door. There was a hand on the other end of it.

Scrooge opened the door to reveal the knocker. It was brass and still attached to the wood. Scrooge was glad to see this still in place, but less happy to be faced with two people who looked very much like charity collectors.

“Yes?” Scrooge asked bluntly.

The two men stood in stunned silence for a moment before one of them spoke.

“Eiiiiieooooo,” he said.

“I must apologise for my colleague,” said the other. “He is easily tongue-tied. Excuse me while I undo the knot. We won’t be a moment.”

Scrooge tapped his foot while he waited then pulled a pint of lager from it.

A moment later the second man spoke again.

“Am I talking to Mr Scrooge or Mr Marley?” he asked.

“Marley has been dead for seven years,” Scrooge said.

“So you must be Mr Scrooge?”

“You’re bright, aren’t you? Have this dunce cap.”

“Oh, well, thank you.”

“And now I’ll have it back.”

The man handed over the hat with a look of genuine sorrow. He really wasn’t that bright, certainly no more than about 20 watts.

“You want money from me, don’t you?” Scrooge said.

“Erm, what makes you think that, Sir?” the first man said.

“You look suspiciously like charity collectors to me. And you’re carrying a box that says “Please give generously” on it. It’s something of a giveaway.”

“Ah. Yes. Not very subtle is it? Well, would you like to give to the Suspicious Charity? We aim to help all those unfortunate bad eggs who can’t fund their own lurking and world domination plans.”

“It’s different from the usual do-gooders I suppose,” Scrooge said thoughtfully.

“We like to think these people are often victimised against and need our support.”

“Have you had any success?”

“Moderate. A man who needed some face reconstruction was one of our more recent beneficiaries. He had a bad experience with a man in a bat costume and ended up in a vat of acid. Nasty business. And if it isn't Fathers for Justice causing them problems, there's a particularly irritating man called Bond who has a habit of blowing them up before their plans take off.”

“Tragic,” Scrooge said. “Should these people not be in prisons with the poor? I hear they get air conditioning these days.”

“I believe they do, Sir. It sometimes seems that crime does pay.”

“Is it a good wage, do you know?”

“I think it depends on the crime, Mr Scrooge.”

“Ah, a pay on performance business.”

“Precisely,” the first gentleman said with a spreading smile. “Now the only thing left for me to ask is how much are you going to give us?”

“Fuck all,” Scrooge replied.

“How many fuck alls would that be?”

“I'm sorely tempted to let you keep the dunce cap. At least I would know it had gone to a good home. I wish to thank you fine, porky, well-fed gentlemen for your bit of bad cheer and it is nice to know there are people out there who are looking to bring misery to others by funding the villains of the world. Unfortunately, I am too busy funding my own misery factory to contribute. So all I have to say to you is good day.”

Scrooge slammed the door. From the other side he heard a short series of scratching sounds, a tinkle of metal and footsteps running down the street. He opened the door to find the knocker had been stolen. Hanging out of the door, he saw the shapes of the two thieving charity collectors trotting down the road.

“Bastards!” he shouted. “I hate people fiddling with my knockers.”

“I know just how you feel, darling,” said a passing madam.

Scrooge looked momentarily puzzled then a light burst into his head like a match in a gunpowder store. “Bah! Pear drops!”

Scrooge slammed the door and returned to his desk.

Bob Cratchit had not moved during the whole episode. He found it difficult to do much of anything while wearing half his wardrobe and his earlier applause had knackered him. Nonetheless he had been thoroughly entertained to see someone other than himself being bullied by Scrooge. It made his day worthwhile, which was just as well as his wage did not warrant getting out of bed on a morning.

Outside a thicker fog had come in from the sea. It brought a haul of cod and a basket full of crabs. Somewhere in the middle of town the church bell chimed every quarter of the hour. By eight o'clock at night it was becoming a fucking nuisance.

As the hour drew on, it became yet colder. The number of people out in the streets grew fewer, and those who remained out had either no home or no sense. One such person paused by Scrooge's establishment on his way to warm himself in the freezer section of Tesco. He bent to the letter box and began to sing his favourite Christmas song.

"My grandma got flattened by a drunken reindeer..."

The singing halted when the caroller felt something cold and metallic emerge from the letterbox and come to rest on his tongue.

"Go ahead, punk," Scrooge said from inside. "Make my Christmas."

The caroller wisely decided to keep his brain intact and fled. Inside, Scrooge dropped the gun into his drawer and locked it. Bob Cratchit was pulling his coat on. From a distance he bore a passing resemblance to the Michelin Man.

"I guess you won't want to come into work tomorrow?" Scrooge asked.

"Well it is Christmas Day, Mr Scrooge."

"So it is. I'd completely forgotten. That wonderful day when I pay you a full day's wage and you do fuck all for me."

"That's right, Mr Scrooge. I'll make up for it when I come back the next day though."

"Damn right you will, Cratchit, or I'll be using your head to poke the fire."

Bob and Scrooge both turned to the fireplace. The piece of coal went out. Scrooge watched it leave in a taxi with a stone and a twig.

"Or I'll find some other way to punish you," Scrooge said lamely. "You'd better be in here early on Thursday."

"That would be Boxing Day."

"I'll be boxing you if you aren't early."

"Ok. Merry Christmas, Mr Scrooge."

"Will you piss off?"

Bob hurried out of the door and almost strangled himself when his scarf caught on the door handle. He quickly untangled himself and rushed off

down the street towards home and his family. Scrooge followed soon after, locking the property for the night.

Scrooge stopped into The Pig's Head Tavern, the same grubby little establishment he had called in every night of his working life. He ate a small meal, drank a small drink, had a small piss and paid in small change. As always he made his way home using small steps for continuity, and a long time later he arrived at his front door.

Scrooge lived in a house that had been owned by his former partner. It was not exactly the House of Fun, but Scrooge did make money on the side renting it to horror movie makers. The large yard outside the building was unlit at night, and even though Scrooge knew the yard like the back of his hand, he had gone arse over tit on a number of occasions.

As he stood on the doorstep, fog played around Scrooge's ankles.

"Piss off," he snapped. "That tickles."

He put the key in the lock and turned it.

"Scrooooooge," it said.

Scrooge looked at the lock. It usually made a creaking sound.

He turned the key again.

"Scrooooooge," the sound came again. This time he realised it was a pitiful voice.

Scrooge spun around with the finesse of a ballet champion, and raised his cane ready to hospitalise someone. There was no one there. Turning back to the door, Scrooge noticed something strange about this door-knocker. Those bloody charity workers had stolen it and replaced it with a hockey mask. He made a mental note to hunt them down in the morning.

"Bah! Jelly Babies!" Scrooge muttered as he opened the door and stepped inside.

Scrooge lit a candle which flared unexpectedly and singed his eyebrows. He fastened the door and made his way up the stairs to his residence. The staircase was broader than an elephant's arse and Scrooge's candle could barely light the next step. When he finally made it to the landing, he had stumbled twice, tripped over three times and burnt his hand with candle wax.

Upstairs he walked through his rooms; sitting room, bedroom, toilet. All of them were still there. Everything appeared to be normal. The rooms were empty, his toilet paper was still drying on the radiator, his morning

leftovers were still on the table ready for in the morning and his fridge was still empty.

Satisfied, Scrooge locked his door, strung his crossbow to the handle and removed its safety catch. No one was getting inside with both eyes intact.

He poured himself a drink and slouched into his chair. His copy of Miser Monthly was just out of reach and he refused to exert himself to reach out for it. Instead he just sat and waited for nothing to happen.

He was not disappointed – nothing happened.

Then Scrooge heard a tinkle. He checked to make sure he had not done it in his pants. He realised it was an old bell above the fireplace. This was no time to have a fire drill in the building. Suddenly another bell began to toll. A third followed, and another until all the bells in the building seemed to swinging. Scrooge held his crotch as it began to twitch.

“What the hell is this about?” Scrooge yelled over the cacophony.

The room fell silent. Somewhere below him there came the thump of a heavy door being thrown open, then the sound of it swinging closed and finally a muffled voice saying, “Oww. That was my nose.”

Scrooge listened as further thumps and bumps and frequent bursts of profanity came from below. The sound of heavy, lumbering footsteps approached, first up the stairs before plodding along the landing outside Scrooge’s door.

Remaining still in his chair, Scrooge heard what sounded like a lumberjack chopping logs. Wood splintered, and Scrooge was certain someone was chopping down a door with an axe.

From somewhere on the landing, a little beyond Scrooge’s door the echoes of destruction ceased and a voice could clearly be heard to say, “Here’s Jacob! Oh fuck, not again. I get the wrong one every time!”

The clock on Scrooge’s mantelpiece chimed twelve. Scrooge realised something wasn’t right. He looked around the room. Everything seemed ok. There was nothing out of place he could see. His thumbs were still missing, but he had been living with that all day. All of a sudden he realised what was wrong. His trousers had fallen down.

Scrooge bent over to pull up his pants just as a large machete split the chair behind him. Scrooge jumped up, tripped over his trousers and fell flat on his face.

Over the top of the chair, a large shape wearing a hockey mask struggled to pull the machete free. Scrooge was slightly unnerved.

“Who the fuck are you?” he asked, a quite plausible question to ask someone who has just tried to lop your head off.

“Ask me who the fuck I was?”

“I’ll kick your arse unless you tell me.”

“Don’t you recognise me, Scrooge?” the mask asked.

“Were you in the keeper in the Durham Wasps vs Newcastle Vipers match the other week?”

“No, I’ve never played Ice Hockey. I have trouble with my balance, as you should know.”

“I haven’t hit you with my cane before, have I?” Scrooge asked.

“No.” said the mask.

In a blur of naked leg, loose trousers and flying stick, Scrooge launched into a frenzied cane attack that left the mask wearer in a heap on the floor.

“Well I have now.” Scrooge said, hoiking up his trousers and giving the groaning heap a final dig in the ribs.

“Scrooge, it’s me,” the heap wheezed. “Jacob Marley.”

Scrooge looked momentarily puzzled. “Why are you dressed like a homicidal sportsman?”

“I got sick of the chains and having that scarf wrapped around my jaw. Thought it was time for a change and this was all I could get my hands on.”

“Oh,” was all Scrooge could think to say. “I thought you were dead. I signed to say you were anyway. And I got the life insurance.”

Something that looked like pound signs flashed in Scrooge’s eyes. He quickly pulled them out and tucked them in his pocket then recommenced thrashing the death out of his former partner.

“I’m not going to give the life insurance money back!”

“Scrooge. I am dead.” Marley managed to say between cane blows. “You’ve been watching too much of *The Matrix!*”

Scrooge stepped back. “Oh, sorry. Just making sure.”

Marley stood up and dusted himself down. His face fell off.

“Shit,” his mouth said from the floor. “I hate it when that happens.”

“It’s not amazingly appetising from where I’m standing either,” Scrooge commented.

Marley picked up his face and slapped it back into place.

“Can you sit down?” Scrooge asked the shade.

“Have you tried to sit down dressed like this?”

“No I can’t say I have. How do I know you’re real?”

Marley put a hand to his head. “I could get the machete out again.”

“No, it’s fine,” Scrooge said quickly. “I believe you’re real, or maybe you’re really just in my imagination. Perhaps The Pig’s Head used out of date gravy on my meal tonight, or someone slipped something in my drink. To you I say just one thing. Bah! Aniseed Balls!”

Suddenly Marley’s Ghost opened his mouth to release an unearthly sound that rattled the windows in their frames and caused Scrooge to hold onto his chair as a great, raging wind whipped around him. After a few seconds the wind died and Scrooge dropped to the floor with a thud.

“Sorry,” Marley said, patting his chest. “It must have been something I ate.”

“It smells of garlic,” Scrooge said, wrinkling his nose. “No more! Please, no more! Just tell me why you are here and be gone.”

“I’m here to warn you to change your ways.”

“And you think trying to slice my head open with a machete and burping in my face will help achieve your goal?”

Marley shrugged. “You were always hard to get through to. I thought a different approach might work better.”

Scrooge began to wonder if he had underestimated his partner all those years. Although Marley had always seemed to be the more reasonable of the two, Scrooge now saw that perhaps he did have something of a psychotic streak running through him. Such a shame he was dead and couldn’t be used to demand money with menaces...or maybe he could. Hauntings were all the rage these days.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sit down?” Scrooge asked. “You’re rather intimidating standing up.”

“No.”

“Do you want a drink?”

“Yes.”

“Good you can get me one while you’re there,” Scrooge said, picking himself up off the floor. “I thought ghosts were meant to carry their chains with them. You know, the ones they have gathered from the wrongdoings of their lives.”

"You talk shit sometimes, Scrooge. They went casual years ago. No more regulation uniforms. It just really irritates me that I couldn't get the costume I really wanted."

"What was that?"

"The Ballerina one. Goddamned Ghengis Khan beat me to it."

Scrooge felt a sudden need to change the subject.

"So what exactly are you warning me about?"

"Oh yes, I almost forgot in all the excitement. I came to warn you that you will be haunted by three Spirits."

"You're not making me feel any happier," Scrooge said sourly.

"Do I look like a clown?"

"No. Who got that costume?"

"The shade of Charlie Chaplin."

"Figures," Scrooge said.

"As I was saying, you will be visited by these Spirits whether it pleases you or not. They've already been booked and you really don't want to know what their cancellation rates are. They go by the names of Gin, Vodka and Whiskey."

"Catchy," Scrooge commented.

"They do tend to linger with you the morning after. You will receive the first tomorrow night at the chime of one."

"I didn't know Royal Mail did night deliveries."

"He is coming special delivery from the other side."

"All the way from Australia. He'll be tired."

"Expect the next Spirit the same time the next night, and the last at the stroke of twelve the night after that. "

Scrooge looked aghast. "Don't any of them sleep? I'll be knackered by the time they're done. Can't they just all come together? We could play poker or something."

"Do you want the chance of redemption or not?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"Be prepared, Scrooge. The Spirits will make you see things differently."

"I can handle my spirits, Marley."

"We'll see. Now it is time for me to go."

"Where will you go now?" Scrooge asked. "Do you have an apartment nearby?"

“Don’t be a dick, Scrooge.”

Marley backed away towards the window as he talked. Scrooge raised his hand to speak.

“Scrooge, I don’t want you to plead with me. Save that for the others, I can’t be bothered.”

“No I was just going to say—”

“Save it. I’m really not one for the whole “spare me please from these ghosts” routine. I just want to be on my waaaaaaaaa—”

A thump from below cut off Marley’s surprised yell. Scrooge walked over to the window. From down in the street he could hear a series of grunts and moans that sounded like someone being trampled on by a great crowd of people. He looked out into the street.

Marley was lying on his back being trampled on by a great crowd of people. Scrooge squinted to try and find some faces in the crowd. There were plenty of them but they seemed to be strangely detached from the bodies they belonged to. Every single one of them was dead. They were ghosts like Marley, although Marley was somewhat worse for wear under their spectral feet.

Scrooge stepped back from the window. He could surely not have just seen what he thought he had. One of the ghosts had been naked!

“I’ll send you an invoice for my time in the next few days,” came Marley’s voice from the street.

Scrooge stuck his head out of the window again.

“What?!” Scrooge yelled but Marley had already vanished along with the other spirits. “Bastard!”

Scrooge closed his window against the draft. Maybe he had imagined the whole thing. On turning around he was drawn to the large chunk missing from his chair.

No, he had not imagined it. There was only one thing for it – drastic action was required. He would have to wait until one o’clock tomorrow morning to see if Marley’s warning proved true.

Scrooge retired to bed and fell into a deep, dark sleep. Soon he was snoring to wake the dead and drooling like a pervert at an Ann Summers party.

And in the silence of the room, wrapped in the arms of sleep, Scrooge muttered into his pillow.

“Bah! Cola Cubes!”