



A  
CHRISTMAS  
CAROL 2:  
BE A LITTLE MORE  
SCROOGE

By Chad

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Cover art by Aidan Hennebry

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## Dedication

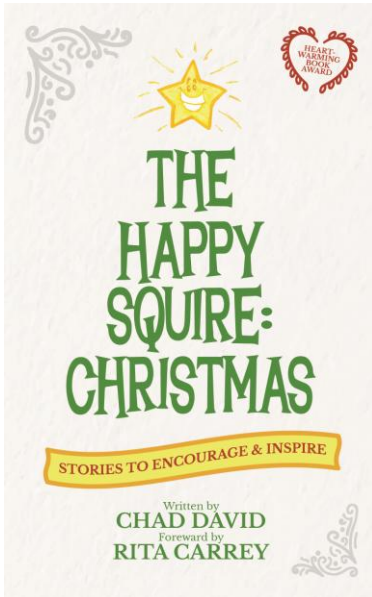
This book is dedicated to Rita Carrey. Your family's love of *A Christmas Carol* helped inspire the idea for writing this book. Working with you on our various projects has been a wonderful blessing.







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## Author's Note

As a psychotherapist who regularly hears stories of how people act and change, this is my guess for what the year after would likely look like for Ebenezer Scrooge. After a life changing experience, we often swing too far the other way, and the pendulum needs to come back to the healthy middle. I'm very proud of how this story developed. My only regret is that I have a fraction of the writing talent of Charles Dickens... obviously. Fortunately, he won't be turning over in his grave because of this since... he's not in a grave; he's in Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey. A joke that teaches something? Yeah, you know this book is going to be special.

*May you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.*







## Chapter 1: A Year Later

“**M**erry Christmas!” Ebenezer Scrooge cheerfully called out to another passerby. The anniversary of Scrooge’s miraculous transformation was only a day away. It was Christmas Eve morning and he walked to work the same way he always did now – with a big smile and cheerfully greeting everyone who might possibly respond. Earlier in the year he had been surprised to discover how many people lived a lot like he had with a scowl on their face and staring into space without any consideration that anyone else was around while they walked down the street. It made Scrooge sad they were in that spot, but he knew the futility of trying to convince them to change their attitude – he’d let the Spirits do that; they were very good

at it. Fortunately, the last few weeks had seen an improvement in people's friendliness. It was like their hearts became a little warmer when Christmas was close. For Scrooge, being welcoming had become part of who he was. The only difference for him at Christmas was there were more people who wanted to say hi back, which encouraged his own friendliness. It was a nice change, and it made smiling a little easier. The one thing he increased at this time was his handouts to those begging on the streets. He tried to do a little extra for them because of the season. Scrooge truly was an incredibly kind and generous person now.

Unlike the previous Christmas Eve day, Scrooge made sure Bob Cratchit had plenty of coal to heat the office and there weren't any charities knocking on his door asking for money because he had already made arrangements for his hefty contributions. The one thing that was the same as the year before, his nephew, Fred, stopped by to say hi and remind his uncle about his annual Christmas party. Unlike the previous year, however, Scrooge said he looked forward to it. Overall, it was a very pleasant day.

One of the most glaring differences from the previous year was Scrooge had a surprisingly large number of money borrowers asking for deferrals on their mortgage payments since it was Christmas, and he actually gave it to them. The frustrating thing was, the more Scrooge gave, the more he was asked; at least by certain people. At times, it didn't even seem like there was appreciation. It was as if it was expected by these particular

individuals, but he told himself it must be him misreading the situation.

Near the end of the day, Scrooge insisted Bob leave early to get home to his family. Bob asked if there was anything he could do before he left, but Scrooge said he would close up. As Bob was about to head out the door, he stopped. He seemed to hesitate, but slowly he turned, lowered his hat, and paused as if he wanted to ask something. Scrooge noticed this gesture, and hiding his dread, he asked, “Can I help you with something?” He’d normally be happy to help Bob with anything he needed, but Scrooge didn’t have a lot left to give emotionally or financially.

Bob cleared his throat as he tried to reduce some of his nervousness. Scrooge braced himself for an exorbitant request. Instead, Bob simply asked, “Are... are you okay?”

Scrooge was dumbfounded. He couldn’t remember ever being asked a question like this with such sincerity. Instinctively, he put his hands over his elbows where the material was thinning in his shirt. He had given up spending any money on clothing that year because it made him feel guilty to spend anything on himself when others had it worse.

Since Scrooge didn’t answer, Bob continued, “Do you need anything?”

Scrooge couldn’t help but look awkward. Was *he* okay? Did *he* need anything? He had been so busy trying to help others, he never even thought about himself and if *he* needed anything. Until

that moment, he hadn't noticed that no one else had asked him if *he* needed anything. People were always just asking for something *from* him.

"I don't mean to pry," started Bob, "but I thought I should ask in case you needed... help. As inspiring as you've been this year with your kindness and generosity, lately... you seem... tired."

Scrooge felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment. The truth was he had been feeling exhausted lately, but he didn't want to be a burden on anyone, so he tried to hide it. It was like this past year of being kind and generous had worn him out. He had even developed a fear of looking at his accounts. Where he had once been excited to see how his numbers were growing, his money was steadily dropping and he didn't know how to stop the decline because there were so many people he wanted to help. The more he did, the more he wanted to do, but the more he did, the less he had available to do anything.

After a few moments of awkward silence where all those thoughts flashed through Scrooge's mind, he thanked Bob for caring enough to ask, but reassured him all was fine and that he should hurry home to his family. Scrooge even added that he looked forward to having some time alone in the office in order to make Bob feel better – he truly was a very thoughtful person now. Looking forward to being alone in the office, however, was the most accurate statement Scrooge had said in a long time. He really did look forward to it because that meant there was no one for him to worry about or take care of; it would just be him – bliss.

After saying good-bye and locking the door, Scrooge went back to his desk and slumped in his chair as he sighed. Bob was right; he was tired. This had been a very long year... good, but long. In fact, it was the best year Scrooge had ever had... at least it had been. Lately, he was wearing down, and it wasn't like it was the first half of the year. Back then he had more enthusiasm and drive, but now it was... different.

Scrooge took longer than normal leaving the office. He enjoyed the silence and as much as he wouldn't want to admit it, he was hoping to avoid seeing people in the streets. He was too tired to be cheerful, and would feel obligated to look happy if he crossed paths with anyone. Sometimes forcing a smile can help you feel happier, but when you're a certain level of emotionally exhausted, forcing a smile can be what causes you to break.

Unlike other nights, the streets only seemed to get busier as the evening progressed as Christmas Eve revelers were out singing and greeting people. Too tired for the merriment, Scrooge snuck out the back door and took the darkest allies he knew home in order to avoid seeing anyone. Normally he'd feel too guilty doing this, but he told himself it was because he didn't want to be a bother.

Scrooge was very grateful for the spirits he met last year and he had tried to do his best to take full advantage of this second chance at life they gave him, but it was starting to feel like being nice was going to send him to an early grave. No matter what he did, it never seemed to be enough. When he gave to one charity, there was three more knocking on his door. When he gave a little

leeway to clients on their payments, the more they asked of him. It was starting to feel like he was drowning from being kind and there was no way out.

Arriving at his house, Scrooge stared with hopeful anticipation at the doorknocker that this time last year came to life. He desperately wished it would tell him that later in the night he would have life altering encounters. He wanted to feel the surge of joy he experienced after his visits from the three spirits. Actually, he would've been happy to feel anything besides the emotional exhaustion he had been feeling for awhile now.

Between being tired and desperately hoping for the doorknocker to come to life, Scrooge stood in front of his door for an unusually long time with an expression like he had forgotten how to open a door. But he soon relented and disappointedly went in the house to continue his nightly routines. Even with this disappointment, however, all night he hoped for a sign that would suggest something special would happen later. But as he feared, it was a very normal night; nothing unusual happened, and he continued to feel... tired.

As the evening came to a close, Scrooge's hope for something special to happen continued to dwindle and be replaced by a deep sadness. Exhausted and without any real purpose for staying up, Scrooge went to bed early weighted down by his sadness.

Shortly after Scrooge's transformation, Tiny Tim had taught him how to pray, and before he closed his eyes to go to sleep, he sat up



in his bed and prayed: Dear LORD, I need help. I don't know if I'm doing things right. If I am, why am I so tired? I don't know what to do, so if there's any help you can pass my way, I'd really appreciate it... but I'm sure you're busy helping others, so... I'll understand if you don't. I should be grateful for what I have and not complain. Amen.

A year before, had someone told him that he would be praying in bed, Scrooge wouldn't have believed it. He wouldn't have believed a lot of what he had done that year, but he was a very different person now. As grateful as he was for the second chance, Scrooge closed his eyes and went to sleep wishing something could change.





## Chapter 2: A New Encounter

**B**oom! Scrooge was startled awake. He quickly opened his bed curtains and anxiously looked to see what made the noise hoping it was a spirit there to help him. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything wonderful or even scary. It was just a coat rack that had fallen over.

Scrooge slowly closed his bed curtain again and slumped back in bed disappointed. He was, however, confused as to how his coat rack had fallen over.

“Why do you look so sad?” asked a nearby voice.

“I was hoping for something miraculous to happen,” answered Scrooge who started to curl up for sleep until, suddenly, he jumped out of the bed as he realized he wasn’t alone... or he had officially lost it.

As Scrooge looked around, the voice stated, “Now you look scared.”

“Who’s there?” demanded Scrooge with hope filling him again. The idea of a friendly burglar hadn’t crossed his mind as the previous year trained him to expect any bedroom visitor to be some type of spirit.

“It’s strange. I thought with all your looking for signs that something would happen, you’d be happier to have a visitor,” replied the voice.

Scrooge spun around to see that a spirit was now beside him sitting on the bed with his feet up. He didn’t recognize the spirit, but by Scrooge’s response, you’d think he was being reunited with a long lost relative. Scrooge cheerfully wrapped his arms around him for a hug. “Thank you... thank you... I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I wouldn’t thank me yet,” said the spirit in an ominous voice that was followed with a sinister laugh. Scrooge leaned back and was suddenly very scared... until the spirit smiled and said, “I’m just kidding. I should be the one thanking you.”

“Why is that?” asked Scrooge bewildered.

“Because you have made an incredible change from how you were living,” announced the ghost. “That and I’m the Ghost of Encouragement, so that’s kind of in my job description.”

“Encouragement?” Scrooge felt his excitement be accompanied by relief. “I can definitely use some of that.”

“There’s a reason I’m the popular ghost,” laughed the spirit.

“If it’s all right for me to enquire,” began Scrooge, “all night I had been waiting for a sign to say that spirits would visit, but nothing came and I had given up hope. Why wasn’t I told you’d be coming?”

“That’s very simple; we like to surprise people. We find there’s a better response when there’s an element of bewilderment. That way our targets are quicker to listen and be open to change. Plus, it’s really fun to mess with people,” smirked the ghost.

“Then why did I get a warning last year?” asked Scrooge.

“Even when we warned you, you didn’t believe it would happen,” explained the ghost. “The visit from someone you knew set the stage for what would happen. Plus, if we don’t give a warning before the first meeting, people tend to faint or you know...” the ghost trailed off as he made a death face.

“That strangely makes sense,” Scrooge agreed.

“And look how happy you were to see me. I may be the Ghost of Encouragement, but I need encouragement, too,” shared the ghost.

“You need encouragement?” asked Scrooge slightly surprised.

“Even the best encouragers need to be encouraged. We can’t do everything ourselves or we end up exhausted... which is something you will want to keep in mind,” suggested the ghost. Scrooge took in this information, but he still did not quite understand why the Ghost of Encouragement would need to be encouraged. While he was thinking, the ghost said, “Let’s take this to...” Suddenly, there was a flash, and Scrooge found himself on the sidewalk of a simple street. Because of his previous experience and the title of the spirit – the Ghost of Encouragement – Scrooge wasn’t shocked by the sudden change of scenery and allowed himself to be fully immersed in the moment. Encouragement sounded like needed medicine.

It didn’t take long for Scrooge to recognize where he was. “It’s Bob’s house!” Scrooge announced with excitement. He had become quite familiar with Bob’s home over the last year as he was now a weekly visitor. Having dinner with Bob’s family had immediately become the highlight of Scrooge’s week as Bob’s family became like his own.

At that moment, Scrooge saw Bob enter the front door. Scrooge quickly followed him except he chose to go through the wall because he remembered how much he loved doing that – the perk of being visited by the spirits.

“You’re home from work already?” asked Mrs. Cratchit. “This truly has been a year of miracles.”

“I am one lucky man,” shared Bob. “It’s Christmas Eve, and I’m home early ready to enjoy the perfect night with my wonderful family.”

“It’s crazy to think that this time last year I was telling you to find a new job, but now you have the greatest boss a man could have,” stated Mrs. Cratchit. “Last year when Mr. Scrooge was suddenly a very different man, I assumed he was dying and trying to prepare his soul, but he proved me wrong... I guess there’s a first for everything.”

Bob laughed and said, “You just admitted you were wrong? *That* is a Christmas miracle.”

“I thought I’d give you your Christmas gift early this year,” joked Mrs. Cratchit.

“And I will cherish it with my whole heart,” quipped Bob who embraced his wife and gave her a kiss.

Scrooge smiled as he watched Bob and his wife look so happy. He never saw this kind of intimacy between them because they were always respectful of him, but seeing this was very encouraging. It made him feel a sense of hope for humanity in general.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” shared the ghost.

“Yes, thank you for showing this to me,” Scrooge quietly replied.

“We’re not done yet,” exclaimed the ghost. Again, there was a flash and Scrooge found himself in a whole new location. This

time it was in a local pub where two men were having a drink and talking to each other.

“A toast!” the first man declared raising his glass. “To our most successful year of donations for helping the poor.”

“Here, here,” the other man responded.

After taking a drink together, a man from another table came over and interjected, “I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation. Congratulations on your success. I was wondering what the difference was this year.”

“The answer is simple,” replied the first man.

“Please tell me, so I might learn something,” requested the outsider.

“It’s not going to help you,” smirked the second man.

“Why not?” asked the outsider a little hurt.

“Because the difference was one person,” answered the first man starting to smirk to himself, “Mr. Scrooge.”

“Scrooge? Why have I heard that name before?” asked the outsider.

“He was known for being the miser who never gave anything to anyone and used to make his customers cry,” smiled the first man.

“But last Christmas something changed... like really changed.”

“He was suddenly our most generous benefactor and once he started giving, he challenged others to donate and many of the

local business owners joined him with giving more,” shared the second man.

“That is incredible,” remarked the outsider. Just one person could make that big a difference?”

“Absolutely... if you’re rich,” joked the second man.

“At first I thought it was a joke or Mr. Scrooge was dying and trying to prepare his soul, but he wasn’t. He just somehow changed from being one of the worst people in the world to being one of the kindest and most generous gentlemen you could meet,” stated the first man.

“For a rich guy,” added the second man with a smile.

At that, the outsider lifted his glass and exclaimed, “To Mr. Scrooge!”

“To Mr. Scrooge!” repeated the other two.

As the three men reached up with their glasses, the scene appeared to freeze as the ghost said, “You have made a remarkable change. I hope you can be proud of yourself.”

For a brief moment, Scrooge felt a flicker of healthy pride, but it quickly disappeared as he sheepishly asked, “If I’ve done so much good, then why don’t I feel better? Why am I so worn out?”

Again, there was a flash and Scrooge was in a new location. This time it was a beautiful home that was lavishly decorated.



“That’s Mr. Smith,” announced Scrooge like the ghost wasn’t aware. “I let him defer his mortgage payments several times this year including this month’s because he said he was struggling.”

“I’m home!” announced Mr. Smith.

“What did he say?” asked his wife.

“He gave me the deferral without a second thought,” announced Mr. Smith.

“This new Scrooge is amazing,” cheered his wife as she hugged her husband. “We can get away with anything!”

This last statement caught Scrooge by surprise.

“I know. I was afraid of borrowing money from him, but the rumors were true. He’s become the most gullible man of England!” proudly exclaimed Mr. Smith. “We can now have the caterer that you wanted to prepare our Christmas feast. We have nothing to worry about. If this keeps up, who knows, maybe we’ll never have to pay off our debt. God bless Mr. Scrooge!”

Scrooge was confused. He looked at the scene and then back at the ghost. And back at the scene and then back at the ghost. Bewildered, he asked, “Are they taking advantage of me?”

With another flash, Scrooge found himself in a tiny room. There was a woman sick in bed with a boy feeding her soup.

“I was able to buy you soup again today, Mama. I’ve saved some of it for us to have again tomorrow in case I can’t find anything else for us to eat,” shared the boy.

“How?” asked the sickly woman in bed.

“Mr. Scrooge gave me a little extra money again today,” smiled the boy who lifted another spoon of soup to his mother’s lips.

Before taking the soup, she gently said, “God bless Mr. Scrooge,” and then she started coughing.

The anger at the previous scene was now erased and Scrooge could feel his eyes start to well.

“What you share with others makes a difference,” noted the ghost right before another flash and Scrooge found himself in an alley. There were two boys taking off some grubby clothes to reveal clean school uniforms.

“What do you want to spend your money on today?” asked the one boy wiping his face clean.

“I’m thinking candy. I’ve saved enough of the money Scrooge has given us that I can treat myself,” replied the second boy.

“Buying food for your poor family?” asked the first boy.

Both boys suddenly started laughing hysterically.

“Scrooge is such a sucker!” laughed the second boy. In an innocent child’s voice he added, “Please sir; do you have any change you can give so we can eat today?”

In a mocking grownup voice, the other boy joked, “No one cares about me, so I have to buy love giving money to kids.” After taking a moment to laugh, the two boys ran off in the direction of an expensive looking private school.

“Why are you showing me this?” demanded Scrooge whose anger had returned. “You’re supposed to be the Ghost of Encouragement!”

Unfazed by Scrooge’s emotion, the ghost calmly answered, “I need to encourage your spirit as well as your ability to have discernment.”

“Discernment?” repeated Scrooge.

“You must be aware by now that we spirits only visit when we are very needed,” continued the ghost, “and you were in great need.”

“I knew I needed something,” confessed Scrooge, “but I still don’t understand what that is.” Scrooge was starting to feel some of the same overwhelmed feelings he had felt the previous year when the spirits had visited him. After a moment to gather his thoughts, he asked, “Can you explain more with what you mean by discernment?” Instead of an answer, however, there was another flash and Scrooge found himself in his bedroom again. This time, he was alone; the ghost was gone.





## Chapter 3: The Importance of Discernment

In his bed chambers Scrooge was no longer as excited about the idea of there being three spirits visiting him... assuming there'd be another two. Last year he was visited by three, but maybe it'd be different this year. What if that was all there was? Why didn't the Ghost of Encouragement leave him feeling better? Wasn't he supposed to be encouraging? Scrooge remembered what the ghost told him when they first met: "Even the best encouragers need to be encouraged," and then later: "I need to encourage your spirit as well as your ability to have discernment." With built up frustration, out

loud Scrooge exclaimed, “What does that mean?” For a brief moment, the frustration disappeared as Scrooge smiled as he thought, “I guess I do need discernment.”

Suddenly, there was an explosion of light in Scrooge’s bedroom, and he jumped up ready for there to be another spirit. This time there wasn’t a trick or joke. As the light faded, there in front of Scrooge was a very sharp looking spirit. He looked older to give an impression of wisdom, but there was also a youthfulness to him that gave the look of cool and sophisticated.

The spirit began with perfect articulation, “Ebenezer, I am the Ghost of Truth. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Scrooge began to stand a bit straighter and present himself the way he was taught as a boy at boarding school with proper posture and etiquette.

“Good evening... or night... or morning...” Scrooge struggled to speak with eloquence as he was overwhelmed by how perfect this ghost appeared.

“I apologize if I intimidate you. I know some people find me a bit much,” smiled the ghost.

“Oh... well...” Scrooge stammered, “It’s not you. I’m just not much of a night person... or being blinded by a bright light kind of person,” he tried to joke to cover up his anxiousness.

“You have had a very impressive year,” stated the ghost. “You have proven many wrong about you.” Scrooge sheepishly lowered

his head not sure how to respond. “I am here to give you direction. As a being who doesn’t like to waste time, let’s begin.” The ghost reached out and placed his hand on Scrooge’s back and they began to float. “I hope you enjoy flying like you’re standing on a magic carpet. I try to make it as comfortable as possible.”

“Yes, thank you,” Scrooge responded. He could feel his anxiety for what was about to be revealed fade. This moment was very enjoyable. The feeling of controlled weightlessness was incredible. It was possibly better than going through walls.

“You seem comfortable, so let’s officially begin.” While standing upright, the two floated together through the walls and into the streets. Even though they were moving at a high speed, Scrooge didn’t feel like he needed to hold onto anything to keep his balance. He felt completely secure, which allowed him to enjoy the view. This lasted several minutes before they floated into a grungy alley where there were a number of homeless people huddled up sleeping. What was strange was Scrooge hadn’t noticed there being any smells until he saw these people, and now the odors were quite overwhelming. As they floated past, Scrooge was surprised by the number of people living in the allies through which they floated. It was a sad sight that was soon replaced as he and the ghost floated into the dreariest bar Scrooge had ever seen. Inside, the smells weren’t better or worse – just different. There were a few guys passed out and some rough looking characters singing slurred Christmas carols at a beaten piano while a fist fight broke out near the middle of the bar.

Scrooge and the ghost continued floating by. They were soon out of the bar and they continued down a street where there was more fighting and people passed out. Everywhere they went Scrooge was surprised by the odors. It was as if they were much more pungent than normal.

Scrooge couldn't help but feel his comfort fading despite being with the ghost and securely flying. Soon, they went through the walls of an orphanage, which was as sad as the alley they passed through earlier, and then a hospital where they floated through several areas where Scrooge saw sick person after sick person, and then entering a room without windows they stopped. It took a second for Scrooge to gather his bearings, but they were now in the morgue and the smell was worse than ever.

“What did you see tonight?” the ghost somberly asked.

Thrown off by the question, Scrooge wasn't sure what was going on and needed a moment to gather his thoughts because all he could think was he missed the Ghost of Encouragement. “Um, to summarize it in one word,” Scrooge choked on the smell of the morgue. “I guess the best word to describe it is sadness.”

“That is a very good answer,” remarked the ghost.

“I don't mean to question your methods... but why did you show all this to me tonight?” asked Scrooge.

“I showed you the truth,” replied the ghost with stirring confidence.

Scrooge hesitated, “You mean life is about sadness?”

“No. Is it not obvious?” questioned the ghost. Scrooge didn’t know what to say and stared with the fear of someone about to be hit by a train. “The world is a mess.” Still unable to speak, Scrooge nodded in agreement. “And... it’s your fault.” Scrooge suddenly stopped nodding and had a puzzled look on his face. “People are suffering because you’re not doing enough.”

“But...” Scrooge started panicking, “but I’ve been trying to be as generous as I can!”

“Have you?” questioned the ghost.

“Yes!” Scrooge blurted and then hesitated. “At least I thought I was... maybe... maybe I could be doing more?”

“You can always do more,” pushed the Spirit. “You think you’re doing a lot, but there’s always something more you could do... and should do.”

Scrooge could feel his soul crumbling. He had wanted reassurance or guidance or something to renew his spirit, but now he felt worse than ever.

The perfect looking ghost waved his hand in the air and they were now outside of Bob Cratchit’s house again. Even though this was a place of comfort, Scrooge was afraid of what he would now be told. “You have a lot to make up for and you’re acting like you’re tired,” the ghost’s tone had become very condescending. “You say you’ve changed, but look at Bob. Why is Bob still in the same



little house? Why isn't he in a bigger place like yours? You don't even have a family, yet you have far more space than he does."

Scrooge wasn't sure what came over him; perhaps it was the comment of not having family, but something snapped inside him and anger suddenly gave him a strength to speak out in defiance. "Bob loves his house. If he chooses to live there, why should I stop him? People

should be allowed to make their own choices! Everything you're showing me is beyond my control. It's like nothing can be good enough for you. You don't think I've changed? Do you know how horrible I was before? I needed spirits to change my life because I was destined for chains! This past year, I've devoted myself to being as kind and generous as I can be. There is only so much one man can do!"

Just like when the ghost first arrived, there was an explosion of light. It took a moment for Scrooge to see again, and when he did, he found himself alone in his bedroom.

Scrooge began to panic: "What have I done? I've offended the ghost!" Scrooge began running around his room chanting, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please come back. I will be better at listening.... I'm so sorry!"





## Chapter 4: The Truth

As Scrooge continued to apologize and call out for the ghost to return, similar to the earlier explosion of light, Scrooge's room had another small explosion, but this time it was followed by a cool fog. Before Scrooge could see clearly, he heard a cheerful voice say, "I'm not sure why you're apologizing. I say good riddance to that ghost."

Too confused to catch what he said, Scrooge continued to apologize, "I'm sorry for not being better at listening and following the guidance I was given. I should know better than to question what I am told..."

“You shouldn’t question what you’re told? That’s sounds dangerously foolish,” quipped the voice. “Questions are what help us learn and become better people... and keep us from believing dumb ideas.”

Scrooge simply stood looking in the direction of the voice stunned by this response. As the fog faded, he saw a tiny spirit, much tinier than he would’ve expected for such a powerful voice. The spirit was petite, but he was very confident and self assured. “Are you here to punish me?” asked Scrooge.

“Punish you?” the ghost laughed. “I’m here to celebrate your realization. I’m the Ghost of Truth.”

“I thought that was the last spirit?” questioned Scrooge.

“No,” the ghost laughed again. “That was the Ghost of Deception.”

Something clicked in Scrooge’s brain and he started to understand why his last spirit experience was so confusing. “If he was lying, how was everything he said so believable?”

“Exactly,” said the ghost. “The best lies are believable; they play to a person’s fears.”

“He was *so* believable,” confessed Scrooge.

“He’s very good at what he does,” smiled the petite ghost. “First off, never trust someone who looks perfect. They’re usually hiding something. Second, if someone is a little too complimentary at first or they try too hard to make you feel really

good, watch out. Buttering someone up is a warning sign you're about to be played. But even knowing this, the Ghost of Deception is so good at his job, most would be convinced of what he was saying because he says exactly what the fear is in your heart."

"And what's that?" asked Scrooge.

"That you're not doing enough," casually answered the ghost like Scrooge should've already known. "The most important lesson a person can learn is your brain will lie to you. There is a voice in your head that is either going to lie and say that you're better than everyone else or that you're worse."

"Like the way I used to live versus now," added Scrooge.

"Exactly," affirmed the ghost. "For some reason your human brains love to tell you things like you're small, weak, stupid, a failure, not good enough, and no one loves you. To make matters worse, this kind of thinking adds to anxiety and anger, which in turn, increases the chances of you becoming what your brain originally said you were. We need to learn discernment for deciding what is true and what is a lie whether for dealing with others or ourselves."

"The first ghost talked about discernment; what do you think that means?" As soon as Scrooge asked that question, there was a puff of fog and he found himself in a new location. He quickly looked for the ghost to make sure he was still there. After seeing he was, Scrooge felt a sense of relief. He then took a moment to look at

his surroundings. After the last ghost, Scrooge wasn't as eager for his next lesson, but he liked how things had started – was this the trick the ghost had warned about? This time, Scrooge found himself in Fred's home, which gave him a mix of hope and dread considering last year's visit left him hurt, but he'd become much closer to his nephew this year, so there was still a small sense of security.

While putting up decorations, Fred paused and then shared with his wife, "I'm worried about Uncle Scrooge."

"Is he having health problems?" asked Lily, Fred's wife, who was cleaning the floors with a dance in her step.

"No, he seems fine that way... although I still haven't ruled out he had a serious head injury last Christmas," joked Fred. "He's always been a hard worker, but now it's as if he's wearing himself out. I wish there was a way to help him."

"He's such a cheerful person now; I think you could do pretty much anything to him and he'd say thank you," replied Lily.

"I know... and that's what I'm worried about," confessed Fred. "It's like he can't say no anymore or do anything to protect himself because he's so worried about helping others."

"This time last year he was the worst person we'd ever met and now he's the complete opposite. He's incredibly kind and generous and..."

“And isn’t there a point where you become too kind and generous?” asked Fred.

“I don’t know... I’ve never thought about that,” admitted Lily as she stopped sweeping to focus on the conversation. “But he’s a grown man who has done very well for himself. I’m sure he’ll figure things out if there’s a problem.”

“Or he might snap and go back to the way he used to be. A person can only be a pushover and take so much before something has to give,” said Fred with a tone of apprehension.

Without looking at Scrooge, the ghost added, “Your nephew is surprisingly wise for his age.”

Scrooge didn’t know how to respond. He just listened and tried to make sense of things in his head while, at the same time, question whether this was really the Ghost of Truth or another trick.

What didn’t surprise Scrooge was as soon as the ghost finished his statement, there was another explosion of fog and they were now in a new room. When the mist cleared, Scrooge found himself again in Bob’s house and right where he left Bob and his wife at the first visit. It was like they had been frozen in time, but as the fog settled, the scene continued with them holding and flirting with each other until something changed in Bob’s face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Mrs. Cratchit. Bob shrugged and tried to brush it off. “Bob, I know that look.”

“I know I should just be grateful, but I... I really wish... it’s silly,” shared Bob.

“What?” pushed Mrs. Cratchit.

“I wish Mr. Scrooge would let me help him more,” Bob confessed. “I want to be able to do something to help him, but he never lets me.”

Mrs. Cratchit laughed, “I wish you’d let Mr. Scrooge do more for you. This has been the best year we’ve had.”

“He’s always doing something for someone and he has been incredibly generous to us this year. He comes over for dinner once a week and he insists on bringing it with him,” shared Bob.

“I’m good with not cooking,” Mrs. Cratchit pointed out with a playful smile.

“He’s always doing something for the kids or bringing them gifts,” added Bob.

“I’m pretty sure they’re good with that,” smiled Mrs. Cratchit.

“It’s all so wonderful... but it makes me feel guilty not being able to do something in return. I want to do something to show him how much I appreciate him, but he won’t let me,” complained Bob.

“Say thank you and move on. Don’t mess with the new system. His visit is the best part of my week. I love getting a break from

cooking,” shared Mrs. Cratchit with a flirty hug to try to cheer up Bob.

The scene continued, but Scrooge stopped paying attention. He was stuck on the thought of Bob wanting to do something for him. He had really enjoyed being able to help people. It gave him a sense of value. But was he somehow hurting others by not letting them do something in return for him?

“You hold very wise company,” the ghost pointed out. “That is one of the best things you’ve done for yourself. Surrounding yourself with good people is very important... but it’s also wise to make use of their skills.”

Scrooge didn’t really hear what the ghost was saying, but it didn’t matter because he was already thinking the same thing. He suddenly snapped out of his thoughts when Tiny Tim limped into the room (now without a cane).

“Father!” Tiny Tim cheered as he hugged his dad.

“There’s one of my favorite sons,” joked Bob as he embraced him.

“Did you have a good day?”

“I finished my gift for Uncle Scrooge!” exclaimed Tiny Tim.

“That’s wonderful,” cheered Bob.

“Will Uncle Scrooge be here tomorrow for Christmas?” asked Tiny Tim.

“He will be here for lunch,” affirmed Bob.



“Oh good,” cheered Tiny Tim as he started to walk back into the other room where he had come from when he suddenly paused, slowly turned, and looked like he had something serious to say, but was hesitant to share.

“What is it?” asked Bob with all the tenderness a caring father can have.

With trepidation, Tiny Tim asked, “Do you think he’ll like it?”

“I think he’ll be thrilled,” Bob encouraged.

“But do you... do you think it’ll make him feel better?” Tiny Tim pushed. Bob looked puzzled by this question, so Tiny Tim continued, “I mean, will it help him be happy in a real way because... for awhile now his smile hasn’t been the same.”

Bob was impressed by his son’s social awareness, and instead of glossing it over he tried to give the honest and caring response it deserved. “That’s very observant of you; it shows you really care about Mr. Scrooge. I don’t think too many adults have even noticed that. Here’s a question for you: If you run as fast as you can, will you last very long or will you get tired quicker?”

“Much quicker,” Tiny Tim replied.

“Right, so if you want to run a far distance, you need to run at a good pace that’s not too fast or too slow. The same thing happens with giving. We need to give enough that we’re helping people as best we can, but not so much that it burns us out,” shared Bob.

“Sometimes being nice can be exhausting because there are those

who will take advantage of kind hearts and keep asking for more, so nice people need to learn limits and when to say no.”

Bob’s answer to Tiny Tim was like a train screaming at someone standing on the tracks. Scrooge had his answer. That’s why he needed discernment.

“So Uncle Scrooge is wearing out?” asked Tiny Tim.

Wearing out from giving too much? Scrooge started wondering was that his problem? Was that possible?

With a sly smile the ghost pointed out, “I told you I was the Ghost of Truth.”

The ghost and Scrooge remained in silence as fog slowly filled the room again with the Cratchits’ voices fading in the background. Scrooge knew his time with the ghost was almost up, but he had so many questions he wanted to ask. Out of all the questions that were bouncing in his head, however, he ended up simply asking, “Why me? Why are you helping me?” Scrooge assumed he wouldn’t get an answer and he would end up alone in his room again, and he was right. When he realized this is what happened, he was disappointed, but he wasn’t surprised. Unlike the previous year, after his night of visits from the spirits, he wasn’t filled with joy and wanting to change the world. He remained in his bed and just stared.

When Scrooge finally opened his bed curtains, at his bedside table there was a piece of paper that wasn’t there before. He picked it up to look at it closer. In very elegant writing it read, “Why you?”

and that was it. Confused, Scrooge turned over the paper in case there was something more... and there was his answer: "You matter." Two simple words that resonated in both his heart and mind – you matter. Scrooge began to weep.

Scrooge took the next few hours before going to the Cratchit's house to process everything that he had learned that night and what that meant for him. This year his visit from the spirits didn't leave him full of joy. Instead, it left him fully affirmed and wiser. It was comforting and gave him relief from the fear of not doing enough and understanding why he was wearing out. He had to find his pace

for giving. It wasn't up to him to change the world, but to be the best version of himself he could be. He would protect himself as best he could from being taken advantage of while, at the same time, doing what he could to help those who needed a hand. After all, there will always be someone in need. He didn't need to fix the world; he just needed to make it a little better.





## Chapter 5: A Lesson Learned

**L**ater that morning, Scrooge showed up at the Cratchit's house feeling lighter and full of Christmas cheer. He brought food to cook and asked the kids to help him get it ready. He was surprised how much more fun it was working with them instead of doing it all himself or paying someone else to do it. He asked Mrs. Crachit if at his weekly visits every other meal together she would be willing to tell him what to do in the kitchen until he was better at cooking on his own with either Bob or the kids helping him, and she was delighted. "I get to boss people around and not have to cook? You know how to make a woman happy," she joked.

After the Christmas lunch together, Scrooge asked if the kids would join him on a few errands. The first stop was at the Smith's home. They were very surprised to see Scrooge and were clearly embarrassed as they tried blocking him from seeing all the festivities going on. After a few pleasantries, Scrooge asked if the Cratchit kids could pick out some special treats for themselves and another family since he knew the Smiths hired a very expensive caterer instead of paying their mortgage. The Smith's awkwardly obliged, and while the kids were getting their treats, Scrooge encouraged the Smiths to enjoy his Christmas generosity because that was the last favor he would ever do for them. He made it very clear he would no longer be overly trusting because he refused to be taken advantage of by them or anyone else. He also pointed out that it would be wise for them to work on their integrity.

As the kids returned with napkins full of treats, they, along with Scrooge, wished the Smiths a Merry Christmas and they continued on to the next stop. With this new sense of boundaries, Scrooge felt incredible. Even walking on the street was more enjoyable because he didn't feel the need to smile and greet everyone he saw. He was friendly, but there wasn't the same pressure to say hi to everyone, which gave him more energy to enjoy the Cratchit children.

Soon, the group met the boy Scrooge regularly gave money to and after a friendly greeting, Scrooge convinced the boy to take

them to his home, so they could share some Christmas joy with his mom. The boy sheepishly agreed and the next hour was filled with him and the Cratchit children singing and playing together as Scrooge put out the food and gifts they had brought. Not only did it bless the boy and his mom, it was the greatest Christmas present he could've given the Cratchit children who got to do for someone else what they had been given the year before. Being given their Christmas surprise last year was incredible and changed their lives,

but if you asked them what their favorite Christmas was, it was this year when they got to be a blessing for someone else.

After bringing the children home, Scrooge continued on to join Fred's party where he shared his new goal with Fred: To be kind in a way that helped him be kind to more people for a longer period of time. He would strive to be like a long distance runner rather than a sprinter on this journey of life.

Scrooge quickly learned the better he was at finding the balance of being kind while standing up for himself in a loving way, the more natural and real his smile became. He regained his love for giving that he had temporarily lost and this time, it was there to stay because he gave what was appropriate and not until it hurt.

Earlier in the day, during the lunch Scrooge shared with the Cratchit's, Tiny Tim's prayer was "God bless us, so we may be a blessing." And thanks to the lessons Scrooge learned

from the spirits and his friends, he was very confident that this was one prayer that would be answered.

THE END.



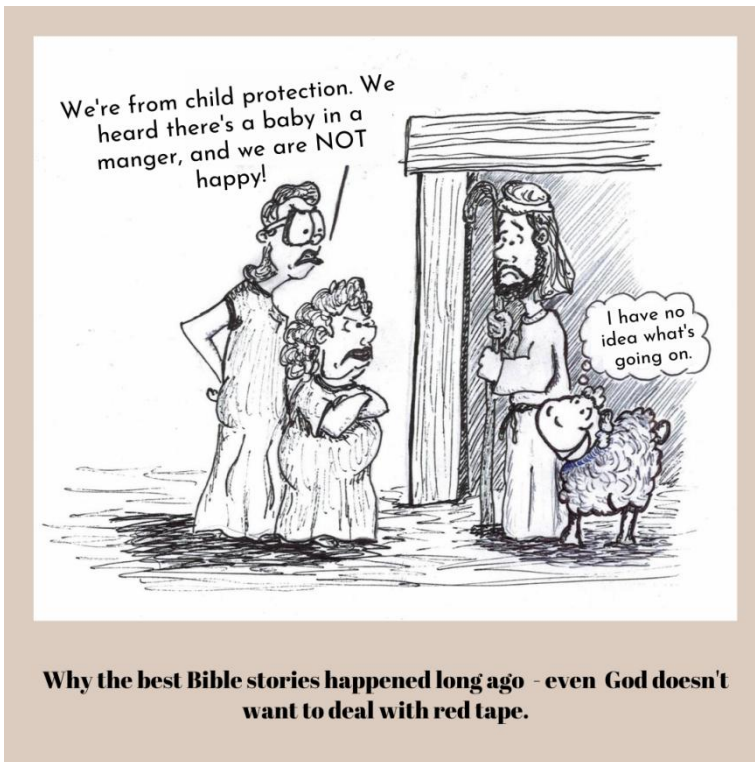






## Bonus Story 1

From *The Happy Squire: Christmas stories*  
to encourage & inspire







## Why Santa Gives Coal

**I**n a pleasant time, in a pleasant town, in a pleasant home, there was a pleasant family (this was clearly before the internet ruined the world). They were a very kind and friendly family (this was definitely before the internet).

One day, the son, Johnny, asked his mom how Santa in all his goodness could leave coal for kids who were on the Naughty List; it seemed mean. His mom told him that was a very good question and then explained that Santa wasn't punishing the kids as much as he was encouraging their parents. Santa figured if the kids were on the Naughty List, they'd be very frustrating to handle, and by giving the kids a gift the parents could use to heat the house, Santa was helping the parents. Plus, there was hope that this unwanted children's gift would inspire the naughty kids to behave better.

Johnny was really glad his mom could help him see that Santa's actions made sense. He wanted to like Santa and this made it easier.

That following Christmas, Johnny had been dreaming of Santa bringing him a Lionel Electric Train (this was definitely before the internet), and like every child his age, he would write a letter asking for it from Santa. Actually, he wrote many letters to Santa because he was so excited at the idea of having a train with its own whistle. Fortunately for Johnny, he had been raised to always do his best to be good and to be considerate of others. He was definitely on the Nice List, so things were looking good for him.

That December, however, followed a tough season. As pleasant a town as it was, business was business, and there were layoffs at the local factory. Like many others in the town, Johnny's dad was laid off, which put his family in a scary spot financially. Suddenly, Johnny's Christmas wish seemed too selfish, and he felt like he had to do something for his parents. Normally, Johnny's parents gave him a little money to buy presents for them and his siblings as he was too young to have a job and they liked the idea of their children being thoughtful and giving to others. That year, however, he'd have to be really creative because there wouldn't be any money for him to use, which was at a time when his parents were in the most need for his thoughtfulness.

Johnny was scared for his family. He didn't know what they would do or if they'd lose their house. He was also scared because he had so badly wanted a Lionel Electric Train from Santa, but how could

he receive such a wonderful gift at a time like this? Even if he was given the train, he couldn't enjoy it if he was afraid of being homeless. There must be something he could do to help his parents... and then he remembered what his mom had said: "Santa gives coal to naughty children to help the parents." That's what he could do. He could always ask for the train next year. This year he needed Santa's help to do something for his parents, and what could be better than taking away some financial stress? This idea gave him hope, but what would he do in order to get on the Naughty List? He'd been so good that year; his naughtiness would have to be even better (so to speak).

The worst thing Johnny could think of doing was murder... but that was too far – very too far. He then thought he could have an affair; that would be bad... but that would mean he'd first have to get a girlfriend and girls had cooties. Plus, he hadn't had the proper cootie shot yet to protect himself, so that was too risky. The third option was doable – he could bully a smaller kid. The problem was he didn't want to actually hurt anyone. There needed to be a line of doing something naughty, but without it being hurtful... and that's when it hit him. He could steal something! That'd be awesome! He could rob a train like in the movies... Wait, no; a nine year old isn't going to scare grownups into giving him their money with his squeaky little voice. Then he thought he could rob a bank... Wait, no; he could get arrested or shot... or worse, he could miss school hiding from the police (Johnny was a serious geek and loved school). Johnny then had the epiphany of all epiphanies. He could steal something and then return it after

Christmas. Santa wouldn't know he was going to return the item. He'd just know that he stole it, which would make him be on the Naughty List this year and back on the Nice List next year. It was perfect.

Johnny was really excited about this idea and with Christmas only days away, he had to act fast. He decided that the safest thing for him to steal would be a bag of animal feed from his friend, Tom, who lived on a farm up the street. He would steal the extra feed they didn't need for a few weeks, so he could return it after Christmas. No one would even know it had been missing. It was perfect.

That night when everyone in Johnny's house was asleep, he snuck out of bed and out of the house to go to his friend's farm. He was always a good boy and doing something that looked so bad actually made him really excited. The best part was there wouldn't be any guilt either because he knew he'd be returning the feed in a couple of days.

To see Johnny sneaking down the street, an outsider would wonder if he had done this before. He moved stealthily and was wearing all black. He was even wearing a black toque and a black scarf to hide his face. The only thing not black was the white tag dangling off the toque. Johnny had bought it with the plan to return it after using it, which was like a bonus naughty thing to go with his break and enter experience.

Everything was going as planned, Johnny was able to sneak into the barn where he knew the family kept the feed and no one was around. Excitedly, Johnny grabbed the bag... and that's when he realized the flaw in his plan – the bag was too heavy for him to lift. He tried dragging it, but he was just too small to move it. Fortunately, Johnny didn't panic. He had seen too many movies where the robber panics and does something really dumb that gets him in trouble. Instead, Johnny took a second to think and look around the barn. That's when he saw it – a saddle. Johnny realized this was just as good an idea because the only thing the horses might be used for at this time of year was to pull a sleigh and they didn't need a saddle for that. Johnny was proud of himself for keeping his cool and thinking through the problem. The saddle would be heavy, but he could manage. It was perfect.

As Johnny picked up the saddle, he heard a familiar but nervous voice. “Put the saddle down or I'll stab you with this pitchfork... this very dirty, poopy covered pitchfork.”

Johnny quickly took off his mask and said, “Don't shoot!” He had clearly watched too many bad action movies where that's what people said.

“Johnny?” exclaimed a very surprised Tom. “What are you doing?”

Johnny couldn't lie to his friend; he wasn't that bad a kid yet. He was honest about everything. He told Tom about his dad losing his job and how he wanted to give his parents coal to help heat the

house. Tom loved the idea and shared that his dad was struggling financially, too. With a smirk he said, “I want in.”

“You can’t steal from your own family,” protested Johnny.

“Then we need to do something different,” suggested Tom. “After all, you’ve already admitted your plan, so now Santa will know what you’re doing.” Johnny nodded to show he understood and then... they stared. They didn’t stare at anything in particular. They just stared as they thought about what they should do. After a long pause, Tom cheered, “I got it!”

“What?” asked an excited Johnny.

“Ummm,” stammered Tom. The next thing Johnny knew, he got punched in the face.

“What was that?” questioned Johnny.

“My ticket to the Naughty List,” smiled Tom.

Johnny paused for a moment as he thought about this new idea, and without warning – bam! He punched Tom in the face, which caused both boys to groan.

“Punching really hurts the hand,” complained Johnny.

“What about my face?” whined Tom. “Why’d you punch me so hard?”

“Sorry, I got excited,” apologized Johnny. “How about no face shots?”



“Good idea,” agreed Tom. “And we don’t have to hit so hard that it hurts.”

After a brief moment, the two boys looked at each other and then Tom hit Johnny in the shoulder. Then Johnny hit Tom in the shoulder. Looking into the other’s eyes, they nodded and then started hitting back and forth. This continued as the boys got into this strange kind of game where they’d hit each other and then they’d yell things like “Did you see that Santa?” “How about that?” and “Are we on the Naughty List now?” The boys did this until they were too tired to keep hitting each other. As bruised and sore as they were, they felt fantastic. They felt accomplished having done something to deal with their fear and they had connected with each other on a whole new level. It was the kind of connection that can only happen when two people work through their pain. It was perfect.

The next day was the last day before school ended for Christmas holidays. All the kids were sad. They weren’t sad that school was almost done (obviously), but they were all sad and scared about how their families were struggling financially. The tough fall season had affected everyone in some way. All the kids were gloomy... except Johnny and Tom. Later in the day, some of the kids noticed how they were the only ones happy. This led to one of them asking why they weren’t sad like everyone else. The boys hesitated, but they were so proud of what they did the night before, they had to tell the small group of kids around them. Very quickly, the word got out and the entire student body was soon crowded around

Johnny and Tom. They wanted to see how it worked... so the boys showed them. Johnny and Tom pointed out there were to be no face shots to limit evidence that would upset their parents and all punches needed to match in force in order to prevent anyone from feeling mistreated and limit the risk of someone getting angry. And that's when it started. Tom hit Johnny; Johnny hit Tom; and suddenly, all two hundred kids in the school were punching each other. What made this scene even stranger was the kids were soon screaming things like "Watch me Santa! I'm naughty!" and "I'm so knotty I use the improper form of 'naughty' in my outburst!" As an outsider looking in, this was hilarious (unless you were a teacher or principal at the school). It was hilarious because it was such a contrasting scene of violence and happy children; it was a fight that seemed to make the kids happier. It wasn't hilarious to the school staff, however, because they were naturally panicking about tears and possible injuries. Unfortunately for the teachers, when you have a group of kids wanting to be on the Naughty List who are having a great time punching each other, trying to stop it just means you're getting punched. In fact, the kids enjoyed punching the teachers so much they forgot the rules of not too hard and no face shots – oops.

After about fifteen minutes, the kids started to wear down and lose interest. The school staff didn't know what to do because it was such a bizarre experience having all the school children in a punching fight with a joy the teachers had never seen before. It brought even more joy than recess ever had, so that's saying a lot. Eventually, it came out that it was Johnny and Tom's plan to get on

the Naughty List to help their parents. The teachers started by affirming the students they would all be on the Naughty List, but then added since there weren't any serious injuries (minus Mr. Jacobs's injury, but nobody liked him anyway), they would pretend it never happened. The entire school body was then warned that if it happened again, there'd be serious consequences for those involved.

Johnny and all his schoolmates returned to being good and obeyed this request. It helped that Johnny figured he was safely on the Naughty List as he had been sent to the principal's office for instigating the biggest school fight ever seen. He felt good knowing he had done what he could for his family and there was a sense of community that developed with his schoolmates that would keep them connected for the rest of their lives because they would always have this crazy story to talk about: "Remember that day we broke Mr. Jacobs's nose?" (Sometimes stories get exaggerated over time... but this time it didn't.)

Christmas morning, was a mix of feelings for Johnny. He woke up dreading having to explain to his parents why he was on the Naughty List, but at the same time, he was also excited to have a gift to help them. Before going to the tree, Johnny asked his parents if he could talk to them. They said that wasn't the time because he had to go see what was under the tree. He tried to tell them that that's what he needed to talk to them about when, from the other room, he heard a whistle. The train?! Johnny was shocked. His plan didn't work! How did it not work? Was Santa

crazy? Johnny quickly ran into the other room and there was the train he had so wished for and beside it was a heaping pile of coal. Johnny was very confused, but there was a letter addressed to him. He quickly opened it and it read, “Dear Johnny, I love that you wanted to sacrifice your own gift in order to help your parents. That was very loving of you and very deserving of being on the Nice List. How about next time you just send a letter asking for some coal on the side? Love Santa. PS I have to say, you had all of us in the North Pole laughing at the scene of your entire school punching each other with big happy smiles on your faces and screaming at me to watch. Arguably the funniest part was seeing Mr. Jacobs get whacked a couple times. You know, he never made the Nice List? What you did is good for building community, but next time stick to sports or music.”

Johnny couldn't help but smile and cry at the same time. He was proud for being able to give Santa something to laugh about and, at the same time, he couldn't be more excited to give his parents his gift (provided by Santa). He then decided to tell them what had happened because they were a little confused by the coal. After the story, and when his parents had stopped laughing, they both hugged Johnny and told him how much they loved him. They also said that it was their privilege to take care of him and they would

always find a way to provide for him. He didn't have to worry. He just needed to enjoy being a kid... preferably without violence.

THE END.

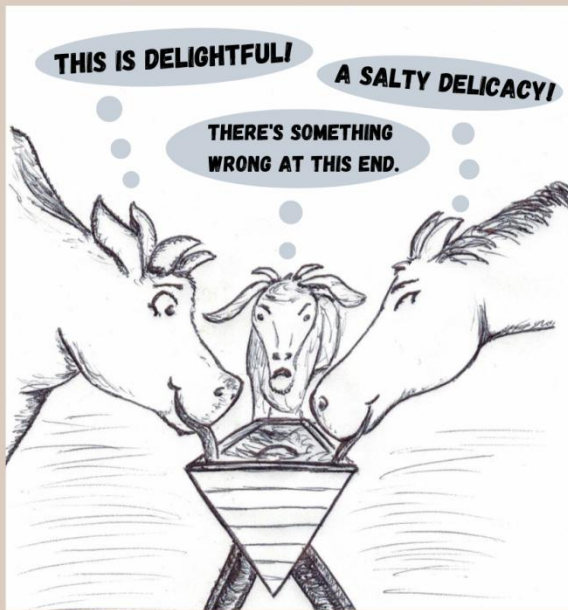






## Bonus Story 2

From *The Happy Squire: MORE Christmas stories to encourage & inspire*



**Mary quickly learned you shouldn't leave a newborn in a stable full of animals lying in a manger unattended.**









## King Herod's Terrible Command

*Please Note:* The following story is based on Matthew 2:16, which is a horrific moment in the Christmas story about babies being murdered. It often gets skipped over when pastors give a Christmas speech – genocide isn't a heartwarming topic, but I like a challenge.

**A**fter the troops had been assembled, the head soldier excitedly announced from his balcony, “We have new orders!”

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

“It’s a red envelope, so we get to kill people!” exclaimed the head soldier triumphantly holding a red envelope above his head.

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

As the soldiers shouted words of excitement (i.e. arrrgh), the head soldier ripped open the letter and read it aloud. “King Herod has given you a special mission!”

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

“He demands that we kill…” the head soldier paused for dramatic effect.

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

“All the male babies!” Suddenly, the soldiers quickly went silent. The head soldier was very confused as he reread the letter he had just announced without pre-reading.

From the back of the group, one soldier yelled, “I thought I heard you say all the male babies, but that can’t be right.”

“It says we are to kill all the boys age two and under?” announced a confused head soldier. “That can’t be right.” The head soldier began to read the letter to himself to triple check what he was reading. As he read the letter, his face showed increasing confusion. “Um, King Herod the Great wants us to kill all the boys two and under, and it doesn’t say why.”

“That doesn’t sound very ‘great’ of him,” commented a soldier.

“No, it doesn’t,” replied the head soldier still studying the letter like he was looking for a side note that said, “Just kidding.”

“Do we only kill the sick ones who are dangerously contagious?” asked a confused soldier.

“No, it’s all of them,” replied the head soldier.

“Do we just kill the bad ones that are on Santa’s Naughty List?” asked a historically inaccurate soldier.

“No, it’s all of them, so even the good kids,” replied the head soldier.

“Do we just kill the ugly ones the milkman made with the women while the husbands were at work?” asked a soldier trying to lighten the mood.

“No, it’s all of them,” replied the head soldier still in disbelief.

“What if we have sons that age?” asked a worried soldier.

“That’s not looking good for you and your marriage,” shared an increasingly worried head soldier.

“Are the mom’s supposed to just let us?” asked a concerned soldier.

“I imagine not... unless you catch one whose son has been crying all day,” replied the head soldier.

“Uh, angry women scare me, and I’m thinking there’s going to be some very angry women if we do this,” pointed out one soldier.

“Arrrgh,” chanted everyone else with concern in their tone.

“Can we just invade another land and do some carefree pillaging?” asked another soldier. “That’d be a lot safer.”

“I’m afraid not,” begrudgingly answered the head soldier.

“Uh, I’m calling in sick!” announced a soldier.

“Me too! I have what he has,” yelled another soldier.

“No one’s allowed to call in sick,” corrected the head soldier.

“My carpal tunnel syndrome is acting up, so I’m not going to be able to hold my sword,” announced another soldier.

“I have a headache,” shouted another soldier.

“A headache isn’t a reason not to do something,” corrected the head soldier.

“That’s not what my wife says,” replied the soldier who claimed to have a headache.

“Look, I don’t like these rules either, but this is what we’ve been given to do. I’m sorry, but orders are orders. We aren’t meant to question them. We are merely servants who get to do cool things once in awhile. This is not one of those times. I’m sorry.” With that, the head soldier walked away and left the soldiers to digest what their orders demanded of them. Slowly, the bewildered soldiers left in their squads to follow their orders.

Later, when all of the soldiers came back together, there was a strange mood in the air. When the head soldier came out and

asked if everyone had followed their orders, they all agreed. Part of the head soldier seemed sad at this, but also relieved because he knew if his soldiers didn't follow their orders, he would be responsible for punishing them (aka kill them). Hesitantly, he asked, "So what was it like? I mean, killing in battle is one thing, but how was this order?" He was a hardened soldier with many years of experience, but he wasn't a monster. Even he knew King Herod's orders were pretty unthinkable.

The first squad leader replied, "We were very fortunate. We only met families with girls age two and under. Not a single boy. Some looked like boys, but all of the parents confirmed that they were just ugly girls."

"We were also very fortunate. We found families only had three year old boys. Some were very underdeveloped for their ages and not walking or talking yet, but all of the parents told us their boys were at least three," shared the second squad leader.

"Oddly enough, we were very fortunate, too," announced the third squad leader. "We only found families that had goats and dogs that walked on two legs."

The head soldier began to smile. "Is this the case for all the squads? No one actually found boys two or under?" All the other squad leaders agreed. "Well then, I guess I should be congratulating all of you for following such difficult orders. I know it must have been very hard, but you have made this town proud. I

will make sure King Herod is aware that his orders have been done without any issues. Any questions before you're dismissed?"

"Can we stop calling him 'Great?'" asked a soldier in the back.

"I'm pretty sure he won't want to change that," replied the head soldier.

"Can we add 'meanie pants' after his title?" asked another soldier in the back.

"I'm guessing he won't want to be called 'the great meanie pants,' but who knows, I will look into it," replied the head soldier smiling. "If I may say, as your leader, I am very grateful you have been so diligent as to make sure you haven't harmed any innocent children; it would've been awful to kill a boy not under two or confuse a girl with a boy. Hopefully our next orders will be easier and we'll go back to killing grownups because who cares about them?"

"Arrrgh," cheered the soldiers.

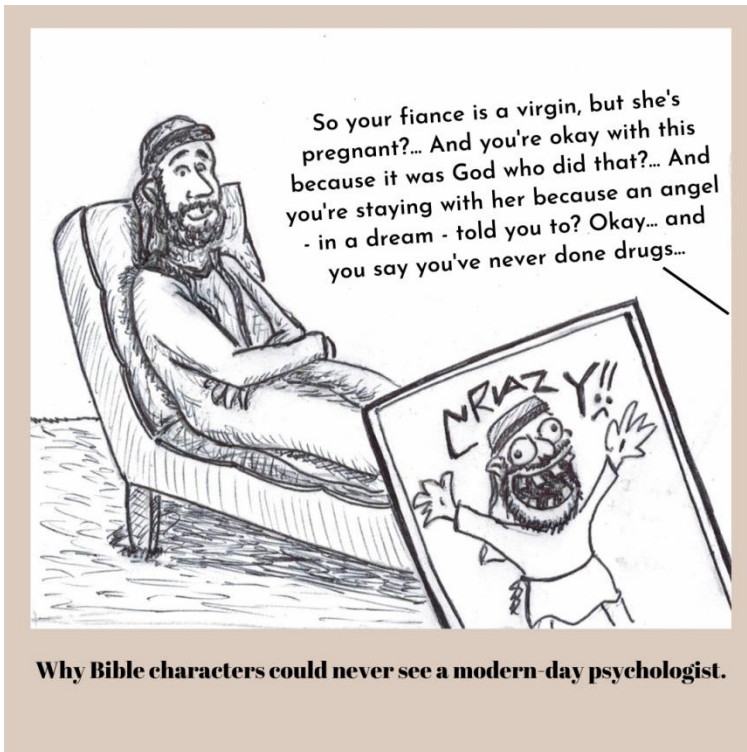
THE END.





## Bonus Story 3

Part 1 of this story is found in the first Happy Squire Christmas and Part 2 is found in the Second. Part 2 was inspired by my wife and mom finding the first part depressing. I liked it because it teaches some great communication tools, but... they were right; you'll see. Part 2 really makes it a better overall story.









## Part 1: The Importance of Being Nice

**I**f you didn't know, Elf on the Shelf isn't real. I'm sorry if being told that ruined your day. That being said, the concept isn't far from the truth. This has been one of the North Pole's best kept secrets, but it's time recognition was given where it's deserved. For too long many have been serving without proper appreciation being given. Clearing this up will also correct a risky myth: Santa doesn't directly know when you are sleeping and when you are awake; he doesn't even directly know if you've been bad or good. That's not to say you shouldn't be good for goodness sake, but Santa's not creepy. He's not a fortune teller or able to read people's minds. He doesn't have access to

people's computer cameras or phones to track anyone like the government. Instead, he has an army of trained informants who go around keeping tabs on all the children. No, this is not the job of an elf. That'd be way too obvious. Besides, elves already receive plenty of recognition for their work. These informants are so good they have even managed to avoid being associated to Christmas. They've been that covert. What's funny is as soon as I tell you who the informants are, you'll be like "That makes total sense!" because they've always been around. They've been brilliant as Santa's informants because they've been under everyone's noses the whole time. And who are these ninja like workers? Gnomes. Yes, gnomes. See? That makes total sense.

Ever notice how gnomes are everywhere? Yet, no one actually ever buys a gnome. No one is that weird. Even people who enjoy mayo won't buy a gnome (and they're the weirdest people in the world; ketchup is where it's at). Instead, gnomes just randomly show up in gardens and shelves. They pretend to be statues, so no one realizes that they're real, but they are very much alive, and they are in constant communication with Santa and his workshop to say who has been naughty and nice.

Gnomes have been doing this job for centuries and there was never a hiccup until one gnome put the whole program into jeopardy. This particular gnome, Gnick (silent "g" ... it's gnome thing), had been following this one boy, Rik (no "c" because his parents were "different," which is their word; others would say they were "weird" – they like mayo). Gnick noticed that over the five years

since Rik was born things had been getting steadily worse at home. Gnomes are typically really good at being objective and not messing with family dynamics because that isn't their job, but this particular boy stood out to Gnick. Gnick was aware he had an unusual attachment and he had asked for a transfer, but he was told to deal with it. Perhaps the boy reminded him of his own son who had grown up and moved away many years before or maybe it was because Gnick had been doing the job for so long that he had become tired of seeing good kids suffer and end up becoming jerks themselves when they got older because no one helped them. Whatever the reason, something snapped in Gnick. This snapping wasn't a total build up and explode like passive people tend to do. Instead, Gnick had started blurring the lines for several months and then one day, it was clearly not a blurring, but a blatant disregard for the code of not meddling in humans' lives.

When Ric was born, his parents were still a rather normal couple. They had the odd fight, but fighting quickly became a regular routine after his birth. Having a baby can cause a divide between a couple and this was a good example of that. Ric's mom felt that his dad didn't do enough while Ric's dad felt that she didn't appreciate all that he was doing. As far as yelling goes, his mom did most of that, but every once in awhile his dad would completely lose it and yell back even louder escalating the conflict to a major event. At an early age, Ric took to hiding under his bed whenever his mom started screaming because he didn't know how far it would go.

One night, Rik's mom's screaming was particularly bad, and when Rik ran to his room and crawled under his bed, Gnick just happened to be there frozen like a statue. Rik seemed to really like having Gnick there for company and he started talking to Gnick like he was a real person: "Don't be scared. We'll be okay. Mommy is just tired."

Gnick knew being under the bed when the yelling started was blurring the lines of what gnomes were allowed to do, but he couldn't help it. He had to do something for this poor child who was terrified and hiding. He also couldn't help that after the first couple meet ups, he just happened to always be wearing a cloth sack filled with Smarties he'd let fall out for Rik, which always put a temporary smile on the scared boy's face. And when Rik closed his eyes to try to sleep, Gnick would just happen to whisper, "You're not alone. I will protect you."

Soon the amount Rik's mom yelled increased while the actual fights between the parents became less frequent. His dad had started coming home later from work, which made Rik's mom angrier, and as soon as he walked in the door she unleashed a rant she'd been building up while waiting for him. Instead of engaging in a fight, however, Rik's dad would essentially tune her out. He'd either go to the bathroom and close the door on her or sit in front of the TV and stare at it while she rattled on. Neither one seemed to get that they were making it worse for themselves; they just continued doing the same thing day after day with it becoming a little worse than the day before.

One night Rik's mom started screaming at his dad, when Rik ran into his room to hide, in his rush, he didn't make sure the door latched shut behind him allowing the door to drift open enough for Gnick to see what was happening from under the bed. Unlike the recent fights, Rik's dad finally lost it with all the fury someone bottling up their feelings can have and he started yelling back in a rage. Rik's mom, having forgotten what it was like to be yelled at, matched his rage since he dared to yell at her when she was clearly the victim (at least in her mind). Suddenly, her hand was whipping through the air and landed on Rik's dad's face. It was hard to say who was more surprised by this, Rik's mom or dad, but his dad quickly left the hall and the front door could be heard slamming shut. No amount of Smarties could've helped Rik. He spent the whole night huddled under his bed crying and holding Gnick.

As terrible as that fight was for the couple, it became a more frequent event over the next week. Out of her desperation, Rik's mom would hit his dad and then he'd leave the house for awhile while Rik's mom cried in the other room.

After a week of these fights and watching Rik get increasingly scared and sad, Gnick finally snapped. Unlike Rik's dad, he snapped in a way that led him to pursue change. After another one of their extreme fights, while Rik had his eyes closed pretending he was somewhere else, Gnick snuck out from under the bed and went to the other room where Rik's mom was crying. With the deepest, most intimidating voice Gnick could muster (gnomes have never been known for being intimidating), he said, "What's wrong

with you?” Rik’s mom seemed to pause, but didn’t lift her head, so he repeated himself, “I said what’s wrong with you?”

While lifting her head to look around, she asked confused, “Who’s there?”

“Who’s there?” Gnick repeated surprised because he just realized what he was doing. After an awkward moment of silence, Gnick moved behind a large vase and responded, “I’m your guardian angel.”

“No, really,” Rik’s mom muttered, “who’s there?”

“I am your guardian angel,” Gnick repeated this time with more conviction. “I am here to help you.”

“Why can’t I see you?” she snapped.

“Uh...” Gnick paused to think. “Because humans can’t see angels. We are too beautiful for your eyes.”

“Well, if you’re here to help me, you’re a little late on that. Where were you six years ago when I met Tim? He ruined my life!” she bellowed.

“So you think this is all Tim’s fault?” questioned Gnick confused.

“Of course! I knew I should never have married him. If you’re my guardian angel, why didn’t you stop me?” she demanded.

“So you think the main problem is Tim is a jerk you should never have married?” Gnick was trying to wrap his head around what he was hearing.

“Yes! Why is that so hard to believe?” she demanded.

“Because that’s not actually the problem,” answered Gnick.

“Then what *is* the problem?” she further demanded.

“The main problem is... you’re mean,” Gnick replied with hesitation.

“What?” she questioned with rising anger.

“You’re mean,” repeated Gnick.

“Tim’s the one who works longer hours than he should and is never home,” she complained.

“Yeah, he does that because you’re mean,” reiterated Gnick.

“When he does come home, he never listens to me or even touches me,” she explained.

“Yeah, because you’re mean,” repeated Gnick.

“He never does anything around the house,” she added.

“Because anything he does gets criticized and redone... because you’re mean,” restated Gnick.

“He yells at me,” she whined.

“Yes, he does yell at you. You’re right, but that’s after you’ve been yelling at him and he snaps. And why does he snap? Because you’re mean,” reframed Gnick.

“Why do you keep saying that?” she exclaimed.

“Because you’re mean and you don’t seem to be getting it,” replied Gnick.

“But I’m not mean!” she announced.

“Does a nice person hit other people?” asked Gnick.

“But he doesn’t listen!” she defended.

“Does a nice person hit other people?” repeated Gnick.

“I’ve never hit anyone else!” she further defended.

“Does a nice person hit other people?” repeated Gnick.

“If I’m mean, it’s his fault!” she snapped.

“Does a nice person hit other people?” repeated Gnick.

“What kind of guardian angel are you?” she exclaimed.

“An honest one. Now answer me. Does a nice person hit other people?” pushed Gnick.

Rik’s mom paused to gather her thoughts. “How can you say it’s all my fault?”

“Did I say it’s all your fault?” gently asked Gnick.



“You’re implying it,” she explained.

“You mean, you’re assuming I’m saying it’s all your fault?” gently corrected Gnick.

“What else could it be?” she asked exasperated.

“If there’s a fight, the fault is shared equally. It takes two people to have a fight. For instance, how he acts fuels your behaviour – that’s his fault – and how you act fuels his behavior – that’s your fault. What I’m trying to say is this…” Gnick paused for dramatic effect. “You need to take responsibility for your own actions.” Again, Gnick paused to make sure his point could be heard. “Let me ask you, if someone greeted you when you came home from work with an eye roll or yelling, would you want to hug the person?”

“No,” she conceded.

“If, when you try to do something, your partner tells you what you did was wrong and then berates you for it for the next five years, will you want to do anything in the future?” asked Gnick.

“I guess not,” she agreed hesitantly.

“If your partner yelled at you almost every day, would you want to come home early from work or engage in a conversation when it’ll likely lead to a fight?” asked Gnick.

Rik’s mom was starting to get really uncomfortable. “But he’s a jerk!”

“Yea, he is, but did you start dating him and stay with him because he’s a jerk?”

“No,” she replied with defeat in her voice.

“Did he date you because you were mean?” asked Gnick.

“No,” she answered even more defeated.

“So if you changed to be mean, can you be upset that he changed to be a jerk when you both became worse?” asked Gnick.

“But it’s different... somehow... I don’t know.” Rik’s mom was really struggling to find a leg to stand on.

“If you’re mean and he’s a jerk, is only one of you a victim or both of you?” pushed Gnick.

“But I’m just so hurt!” she exclaimed.

“And if I was talking to him, would he say the same thing, that he was just so hurt?” Not sure what to say, Rik’s mom started crying.

“I’ll make you a deal, if you can be nice to him every day for one month and if he isn’t a better husband by the end, I will personally make him suffer in any way you choose. But this means you will apologize for yelling and hitting him and then spend the rest of the month giving him appreciation and praise for anything he does. If, at the end of the month, he is nicer to you, you’ll continue working at being nice.”

“You want me to be nice to *him* after all he’s done to me?” she questioned.

“You want him to be nicer to you after all *you’ve* done to him.” Not sure how to respond, Rik’s mom remained silent. “I can’t make him change, but I can help you. I’m *your* guardian angel. I will help you this month to be nicer.” Gnick paused. “You’re not alone. I will protect you.”

Later that night, under Gnick’s guidance, Rik’s mom left a note on the counter apologizing for her actions and a promise to do her best not to yell at him for one month. She also added that he was welcome to sleep in the bed if he wanted and not the couch. When Rik’s dad got home, he chose to stay on the couch for fear the letter was a trick, and for the first week he was extra cautious around her. No matter how he acted, however, with Gnick’s help, Rik’s mom remained true to her word and she remained nice. And every day she put a note in his lunch that started, “My favorite thing about you today is...”

The night of the fight, Gnick also pointed out to Rik’s mom that Rik was hiding under the bed. She had been so wrapped up in her own hurt and self pity that she never noticed he did this. Without Gnick’s prompting, she immediately went to apologize, and the next day she spent time with him making a fort that he could use if he ever felt scared in the future. It was the first time in a long time Rik had been able to have fun with his mom and he really liked it. Rik’s mom also really enjoyed it and made it a habit to spend quality time with him every day. This became the time where she refused to let herself be angry about anything or feel sorry for herself. This was her escape and she simply enjoyed reveling in

Rik's innocence and wonder. She had been so busy feeling sorry for herself she had forgotten how wonderful Rik was.

By the second week of Rik's mom being nice, Rik's dad was starting to trust this new behavior and even seemed to enjoy it. By the third week, however, he started acting out like he was testing her niceness. Fortunately with Gnick's help, Rik's mom never lost her cool. Instead, she would firmly ask something like "To clarify, are you trying to make me angry like this is some type of a test or am I misreading it?" The really amazing thing was Rik's mom needed Gnick's help less and less. She was able to get into the routine of being nice but firm. She was never a pushover or let Rik's dad be too mean to her. She'd even excuse herself for ten minutes if it looked like things could get heated. Every time Rik's mom kept her cool, asked a clarifying question, or excused herself, Rik's dad would stare at her in amazement. "Who was this woman?" he seemed to be asking himself? By the fourth week, the couple was starting to spend time together and even laughed. Everything seemed to be coming together incredibly well until the end of the month when Rik's dad exploded, "Why are you being so nice?"

Being nice had become more natural for Rik's mom, so she calmly responded, "I know if I'm mean to you, you'll likely be mean to me, but if I'm nice to you, there's a chance you'll be nice to me. Plus, I'm trying to be the wife you married and deserve."

"Where did this come from?" he asked bewildered.

“Let’s just say I had help from my guardian angel. Out of curiosity, are you angry at me for being nice or am I misreading this?” Rik’s mom questioned.

“Why do you have to be so nice? You’re making this so much harder!” he bellowed

“What is it?” Rik’s mom gently asked.

“Gah!... I...” Rik’s dad started pacing and flailing. “I... I...” Suddenly, he stopped flailing, turned, and announced with frustration, “I’ve found someone else!”

“What?” Shocked by this response, Rik’s mom turned away, back again, and then quickly ran away slamming the bedroom door behind her. She had just enough self control to run out of the room. Any longer and she would’ve lost it on him like she used to do.

Rik’s dad went to the door and started speaking through it so she could hear. “I didn’t mean to find someone. It just happened. You and I were miserable for so long... and... this last month has been great... and terrible because I was all geared up to leave after the last fight, but then you apologized and you were this nice person again. I kept waiting for you to be mean, so I could breakup, but you never were... and... this is really hard for me... I’m sorry.” Dejected, Rik’s dad left the house. Unlike the last time he did this, he left with hesitation and much regret because of his own shame. This time it wasn’t to get away from a mean person or

because of anger, which made it incredibly hard on him (deservedly so).

After he left, Rik's mom started yelling, "Where are you? Where are you my so-called guardian angel? Is this what you meant to happen? Was this all a cruel joke?"

For the first time in a month, Rik's mom's guardian angel didn't answer. She started to wonder if she was going crazy. She paced back and forth for a few minutes and then she started punching the bed like she'd been taught by Gnick. She continued punching the bed with all her might for several minutes until the hitting started to slow down and become weaker and slower. As the anger was replaced with tiredness, she started to weep on her bed. After a month of things seemingly getting better because of how hard she was working, she felt more rejected and alone than ever before.

Curled up on the bed with her legs dangling off it, Rik's mom was crying so hard she didn't notice the door slowly open. She was crying so hard she didn't hear the little footsteps getting closer to her at the bed. She was crying so hard she didn't realize she wasn't alone until she felt a small head and hand on her knee. She was too emotionally worn out to be startled. Instead, she slowly lifted her head and saw her five year old son now standing beside her holding a random gnome figure in his arms. When she looked at Rik, he gently removed a cloth sack that the gnome had around his neck and he lifted it towards her. Following his lead, Rik's mom reached out and received the small sack. She had never seen this gnome before and had never seen a ceramic gnome holding a cloth sack,

so out of curiosity she opened the ties that held it together and looked inside. She was surprised to see it had a small handful of Smarties in it. Not sure what to do, she just stared at the small sack in her hands until Rik reached into it and picked out a Smartie. Then, with all the love a small child can offer, he reached up and put the Smartie into her mouth like he was teaching her how to eat. Rik's mom started to chew the Smartie and Rik gave a sheepish grin. Figuring she knew what to do with the rest of the Smarties, Rik took a step back and wrapped his one free arm around her leg dangling off the bed. As she took a second Smartie, Rik whispered, "You're not alone. I will protect you."

It suddenly occurred to her that this was the first time her son had ever come into her room while she was crying. As painful and scary as being without her husband would be, she wasn't really alone and that was because she had stopped feeling sorry for herself and lashing out. By being nice and doing her role as a mom this month, she may have still lost her husband, but she had gained the trust of her son. Looking at her son hold her leg, she smiled to herself. She had forgotten how good it felt to know she'd been a good person even if it was just for a month. She could hold her head high because she had stopped being so mean.

Shifting her body in order to sit on the floor with her son, Rik's mom sniffled and then asked, "And who is this little guy?"

Very proudly, Rik replied, "This is my guardian angel. He was always there when I was scared and alone under my bed. He would always be waiting for me and after I had a couple Smarties, he

would whisper, “You’re not alone. I will protect you.” Suddenly, it dawned on Rik’s mom where she had heard that before as he continued, “And now he’ll protect both of us.” And as he said that, Rik’s mom could’ve sworn she saw the gnome wink at her.

After taking her son in her arms, Rik’s mom looked at the gnome and said “Thank you for taking such good care of my son and helping me realize the importance of being nice.” Then she leaned in and whispered, “And I know what I want you to do in order to fulfill the promise you made to me last month if I was nice and he wasn’t.”

This time she knew she saw the gnome wink at her and she started to laugh. Not because of the idea of vengeance, but because for the first time in a long time she realized she had regained a sense of power. She may have just spent time screaming and punching her bed, but that wasn’t out of weakness. Instead, it was a sign of how strong she was. Attacking someone in the moment is easy; self control to get alone to let out the natural emotion takes great strength and because she was able to demonstrate how much she had, she proved to herself how strong she really was. She may have been rejected, but she knew she would be okay. She had her self control, her loving son, and a family guardian angel with a pack of Smarties.

THE END... kind of.







## Part 2: Returning Gnome

### Chapter 1: After the End

**I**t had been six months since Scott left his family for another woman. When he was living with them, Scott and his wife, Eleanor, would have such explosive fights their son, Rik, would hide under his bed scared and alone until one day a visitor showed up and changed everything. That visitor was a gnome named Gnick (gnomes don't pronounce the "g"). Gnomes have been very good at hiding the fact that they are Santa's eyes and ears in the world for who's been naughty or nice (so you'll want to be nice to gnomes for goodness sake). They've never received the same kind of fame as the reindeer and elves have largely because they've tried to hide their role in order to be more effective at their job. At one point, people were close to figuring out they weren't just ceramic figures in gardens, and that's when they started pushing the idea of Elf on the Shelf. Gnick, however,

had been tired of seeing children grow up to be mean because their parents were; he wanted to break the cycle. One fateful day, Gnick's anger at Rik's parents selfishness for not noticing Rik hiding under the bed left him willing to risk going against the gnome code in order to help. At first, Gnick didn't do anything too drastic; he simply waited under the bed in order to be there for Rik when he hid from his parents' fighting. Soon Gnick took this a step further and became a mysterious voice of wisdom that helped Rik's mom see how she wasn't the innocent victim in her conflict that she wanted to believe she was and that her son needed her. Even though Eleanor was reluctant at first, Gnick ended up teaching her how to have self-control and be nice to her struggling husband. It's never easy being nice to someone who has been as hurtful as she felt Scott had been, but she managed to be nice to him under Gnick's guidance. Gnick had promised that after a month of being patient and kind, Scott would trust her more and, in turn, be a better husband. This seemed to be working until at the end of the month, instead of Scott confessing his renewed love for her, he confessed that he was seeing another woman. Scott's honesty led to him panicking and leaving the house. Later, instead of returning home to talk about it and face the repercussions for his actions, he stayed with the other woman afraid of losing her. Scott had actually planned on leaving Eleanor weeks before, but her being so nice made him second guess his plan. Being nice has a way of making it harder for the other person to leave a marriage – big surprise (yes, this writer likes sarcasm). Unfortunately, Scott

had found himself too entrenched with this other woman to turn back to his wife... or so he thought.

To make matters worse, Scott loved his son, but his new partner had three kids of her own and she wasn't very keen on sharing. With his new partner making it almost impossible for him to have time to see Rik, Scott's visits became fewer and fewer despite his desire to see his son actually increasing. That meant that not only did Scott have to deal with the guilt of leaving his wife when she had become a better person, he had to wrestle with the knowledge he was abandoning his son. To make matters worse, like many people who are embarrassed by their bad choices, Scott had a hard time even calling or messaging Rik because every time he saw Rik's name, it reinforced his guilt for leaving and the incredible sense of loss he felt. Guilt, shame, and regret, although proper emotions to feel at a time like this, further pushed Scott to hide.

Meanwhile, since the night Scott left, Rik and his mom had become all the closer. Their bond had greatly improved after Gnick helped Eleanor see how scared and hurt Rik was, and she was able to start to help him feel like more of a priority over her own anger and spitefulness. For seven months now, they had been growing more connected and as their relationship grew, their strength as individuals also grew. Despite Eleanor losing her husband and having the first month be filled with heavy grieving and struggling with the betrayal, she was steadily pushing herself to become a better person. (Women tend to be quicker to recover because they're more likely to actually face their pain rather than hide from

it like men tend to do.) She missed Scott, but the break from the fighting and her intense struggle to be nice to him every day was much appreciated – being nice to those you live with is hard. Sometimes space can be very helpful. On top of that, with Gnick’s guidance, she joined several women’s groups where she made friends that added to her self confidence and healing. Between having a life and feeling a stronger connection with her son and other women, Eleanor found a greater sense of contentment than she had previously known. She started to feel like the person she had always wanted to be. Gnick may have been wrong when he told her that if she was nice she could save the marriage, but he was right when he said she would be proud of herself if she was nice. She liked it so much, despite Scott leaving, she continued to be nice and hold her head up high. She may have originally thought Gnick was nuts for suggesting she be nice to her “enemy,” but it really was the best way to live because holding your head high is always better than having self pity.

Rik had also been doing a lot better. Not only had it been seven months since the last time he had hid under the bed, he was doing better at school. He had made some new friends and he joined a few school teams that gave him something to practice when he was at home looking for something to do. Even more, Rik was much happier seeing his mom happy, and she was happier seeing him happy, which created this wonderful circle of increasing happiness and healing... at least there was happiness a lot of the time now. There were still some terrible moments as Rik really missed his dad.

Scott had never really been the most involved dad, but like most young kids, Rik still had a special place in his heart for his dad. Even though Scott worked a lot, which limited his time at home, Rik still had some special memories like going to the Santa Claus parade together every year. It was always cold and often drizzly, but it was worth it because it made the hot chocolate they had after taste even better. When people disappear from our lives, our brains either flood us with the good memories or the bad ones. In Rik's case, he only remembered the good, which made his dad's absence all the harder to bear. Overall, Rik was happier now that he felt so connected to his mom, but it still felt like part of him was missing. It was the same thing for Eleanor; part of her felt like it was missing with Scott not there.

With Scott's increasing distance over the last six months since he left, Rik couldn't help but feel moments of intense pain no matter how close he was to his mom. If there was a visit with his dad, it included the new girlfriend and she was never very nice to him, especially if she had brought her own kids with her. Rik had always wanted siblings, but when they were all together, there was strong favoritism to the girlfriend's kids and Scott allowed it. If there was any attempt by Scott to be close to his own son, it was met with harsh criticism from his girlfriend that caused him to shrink back and be distant again. Even if Rik understood that his dad was too scared to say no to his girlfriend, it still felt like his dad didn't care enough to fight to be near him. Fear is never a good excuse for not protecting someone you love, especially your child. Every visit with his dad left Rik crying himself to sleep at night. As terrible as

that was, however, it was still better than when Scott canceled on him because that just reinforced the feelings of abandonment and rejection.

Whenever Scott disappointed Rik or Rik simply couldn't escape feeling overwhelmed by the sense of rejection his dad caused, Eleanor and Rik would both take turns pounding the punching bag Gnick had encouraged her to hang up in the basement. Gnick had taught her the importance of physically venting out your emotions and not bottling them up, and Eleanor was glad to have a tool to use to help herself and her son deal with the hurt in a practical way.

Initially, when Scott left, Gnick's role as a comforter had been very important. In fact, without a second thought, Gnick retired from his role as a Santa informant in order to focus on helping them. He was also avoiding the repercussions for breaking the Gnome Code of having connected with people, but that was more the bonus to helping Eleanor and Rik whom he had grown quite attached. They were the closest thing he had ever had to a family of his own. That was partly because of his job on the road and partly because he had never found the right partner. Because he had never found love himself, he was a bit of a hopeless romantic and he wanted people in relationships to appreciate what they had because he knew well how lonely life can be.

Gnick had never outright revealed himself to Eleanor and Rik as he never directly talked to them. With Rik, he showed up at needed times and with Eleanor, he was just a voice since he remained hidden. Maybe it was Gnick's training or maybe he was afraid of

being that vulnerable, but he always kept a little distance between him and others. He was part of the family, but he felt that he would never really be more than the help, so why set himself up to feel rejection one day.

Gnick's role as a comforter for Eleanor and Rik had been becoming less necessary over the last six months, which was both wonderful and sad for Gnick. He couldn't be prouder of their growth, but he also liked to feel like he had a role in the family. It was like how Mary Poppins or Nanny Mcphee eventually left the families they helped because their job was done. In this case, however, Gnick was simply needed less because he had taught Eleanor and Rik how to deal with their hurt properly. That being said, the hurt that Scott could give Rik was pretty intense. Gnick wasn't needed as often, but when he was, he was needed in a serious way. As much as Gnick liked to be useful, he hated those moments more than not being needed. There were a few moments where Rik was so devastated by his dad, no amount of punching anything could help. All Gnick could really do was show up wherever Rik went to cry and be beside him with his sack of Smarties.

Like the time Gnick was so angry that he broke the gnome rules to help Rik, one moment pushed Gnick to do something drastic for Scott. It was near the end of the summer and Scott was supposed to have his annual boys' camping weekend with Rik, but at the last minute, Scott canceled and made up some lame excuse that didn't make a lot of sense. After pounding the punching bag and telling

his mom he was fine, Rik went to his bed and cried himself to sleep. He actually cried himself to sleep every night for the next week. In front of his mom, Rik had gotten better at acting like he was fine and sometimes he really was because he was distracted from the pain he felt from the rejection. Eleanor had an idea that something was wrong, and she made sure Rik punched the punching bag with her every day regardless if he said he was fine or not, but there was still a sense of sadness that was too strong to erase. Every night Gnick was waiting beside Rik's bed to give him some comfort, but overall, Gnick felt incredibly helpless in this situation because he was. When someone is in such grief, there really isn't much to do besides be there.

After a week of seeing Rik in such pain, Gnick had a flood of anger overtake his normal self-controlled self. It took a lot to get a gnome angry; it took even more to get Gnick angry because he was so old and he understood things so well, but this was one of those times it was so personal it would be impossible for him not to be angry. It would actually be wrong for him *not* to be angry. Gnick needed to do something drastic, and his anger led him to Scott's new place.

When Gnick got to where Scott was staying with his new partner, it was a nice house that was full of pictures of her and her kids with nothing about Scott. Even the decor was nothing like what Scott was used to or would have chosen. Watching Scott interact with the family, he looked like a scared little boy trying not to get in trouble. He reminded Gnick of Harry Potter with the Dursley's



except he was a grown man acting like the weak outcast. Scott's girlfriend talked to him like a child and her children talked to him like he was meant to be at the curb on garbage day. Gnick went into the house angry, but now felt sorry for Scott – his life was terrible. At the same time, Gnick was still angry because Scott was choosing to put up with this. Why would he do that?

Gnick ended up returning home to be with Rik that night at bedtime, but once he was asleep, Gnick left to return to Scott's, but this time it was to stay. Gnick felt bad leaving Rik, but he knew he had to in order to make things better for the family. Afraid of Rik feeling abandoned by him, Gnick left a note for him to find in the morning: "Even when it feels like I'm not there, I'm working for your good."

That night, Gnick found Scott in the garage drinking by himself in that way you drink when you're trying to forget everything. While Scott was slouched in a beat up recliner, he suddenly heard a voice speaking: "Is this really what you want your life to be like?" Scott looked at the beer in his hand like he thought the can was talking to him when the voice added, "You're not hearing voices in your head or from the booze. I'm a real voice." Scott started scanning the room looking for who was talking. There was a cat, but his mouth wasn't moving... obviously. The voice continued, "I'm not your imagination... or the cat. I'm here to help." It's hard to say whether Scott was too tipsy to react or if he was that miserable that he wanted there to be an intruder who would hurt him, but there was little reaction.

“Let me guess, tonight I’ll be visited by three ghosts,” scoffed Scott.

“No, you’re being visited by a gnome,” Gnick replied with a laugh.

“A what?” Scott asked.

“A gnome. I’m going to make you a better man,” Gnick assured him.

“You know what, either kill me or leave me alone,” uttered Scott in a defeated way.

“I don’t hurt people,” Gnick corrected.

“Then I guess you need to leave because there’s no helping me,” Scott quipped taking a gulp.

“Wow, you’re really good at that,” shared Gnick.

“At what?” Scott grouchyly asked.

“At feeling sorry for yourself,” Gnick observed.

“I don’t feel sorry for myself,” denied Scott without sounding like he believed it himself.

“Yes, you do,” Gnick corrected him. “You don’t think you deserve any better, so you’re accepting this garbage life you have like you can’t do anything about it while moping about it.”

Not really sure what to say, Scott protested, “Leave me alone!”

“There’s little chance of that happening,” Gnick laughed.

“Go away!” yelled Scott.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Gnick said cheerfully and then made a noise like he had closed a door leaving while staying nearby to observe Scott.

Scott started to panic not really sure what had just happened. He was afraid that it wasn’t over... or he was losing his mind. Not sure what to do, he started guzzling cans of beer like a man guzzling water after crossing a desert about to die of thirst.

The next morning, Scott woke up after having passed out drinking to find a note that stated, “The conversation last night wasn’t a dream. I’m going to help you.” On the note was a cute picture of a smiling gnome waving like a friend. Confused and upset, Scott scrunched the paper and threw it in the recycling bin as he got up for the day pretending the note was a joke from his girlfriend. Unfortunately for Scott, that wasn’t going to stop what was about to happen.

That entire day, everywhere Scott went, there was some type of gnome or gnome picture. There was one on the soap in the shower. There was a toy gnome that fell into his breakfast bowl like a prize from the cereal box. There was one hanging from his mirror in the car. When he got to work, he thought he was safe until a man in a giant gnome costume showed up with gnome cookies for everyone at the office. There was even a gnome screen saver on his work computer. Scott thought he was losing his mind. Throughout the day he started getting more and more disheveled like Bill Murray in *Scrooged* when he’s in the restaurant and he thinks

someone is on fire. (If you don't know that reference, you should really watch that movie.)

When Scott got home, he told his girlfriend he thought he had the flu and before he could offer to leave, his girlfriend covered her face and yelled at him to go to the garage and be away from the family; she didn't want her kids getting sick. She didn't even offer to make him soup or get him a glass of water.

Inside the garage, Scott immediately darted to the beer fridge that now had a lock on it. On that lock was, of course, a gnome that had a note stuck to him saying, "Not tonight." In a panic, Scott grabbed bolt cutters and cut off the lock; he ripped open the fridge and instead of seeing his beer, there was a gnome holding a sign that said, "I told you 'Not tonight.'" In a rage, Scott grabbed the gnome and threw it across the room and it smashed on the wall as he screamed, "What do you want from me?"

Scott waited to hear a reply from the voice that spoke to him the night before... but there was just silence. Bug-eyed, Scott looked around the room and not far from his feet was another gnome. Scott went to grab it when he noticed it had a sign: "Try the bat," and there was an arrow pointing to a baseball bat beside him. Scott grabbed it and smashed the gnome with it. Before he could feel good about what he had done, he saw another gnome behind that one... and another... and another... and another. The room was full of ceramic gnomes. Scott lost his mind at a whole new level than he'd ever experienced before, and he started swinging in a rage and smashing every gnome he could see. After several minutes of

gnome smashing, there didn't appear to be any left, Scott put down the bat panting after his rage fueled Godzilla like attack. As he panted and he started to breathe, he could feel his heart rate dropping to a normal level and he slouched into his chair.

Suddenly, from behind a box, a little gnome walked out to be seen. Scott stared at him like he was seeing a ghost. He was too tired to grab the bat and too scared to care. "I bet that felt good."

Not sure how to react, Scott simply said, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because your wife and son deserve better than what you've given them," replied Gnick with a firm but caring tone.

"What are you talking about? I don't live with them anymore," Scott asked confused.

"Exactly," Gnick affirmed.

"It's too late for me. I made my choice," Scott sadly confessed.

"Or you're finally ready to make the right choice," Gnick pointed out.

Scott caulked his head, "What do you mean?"

Gnick smiled. "The choice where you return to your family."

"What?" Scott quipped confused. "They'd never want me back."

"Not like this... at least they shouldn't want you back like this or there'd be something wrong with them. But there's hope if you were more of the person you could be," Gnick affirmed. "The problem is you're a hider. You were talking to another woman to

hide, you left your wife to hide, you're not talking to your son to hide, and now you're drinking to hide from all the damage your other hiding has caused. When are you going to grow some courage and stop letting your fear keep you down?"

"I'm not afraid," defended Scott with very little conviction.

"Oh yeah? Call your son right now and tell him you'll take him out this weekend," challenged Gnick.

"Well, that's different," justified Scott in a less than convincing way.

"It's okay to admit you're afraid. Fear is a healthy emotion," taught Gnick. "Having fear doesn't mean you're not a man; not facing your fears does."

"But I'm not afraid!" bellowed Scott in a higher than usual pitch and with eye brows pointing up, which are both signs of fear.

"Even now you're afraid," corrected Gnick. "You're either afraid of conflict or your girlfriend because she owns you."

"She doesn't own me," Scott protested. "I like... uh... doing things... to make her... less mad."

"Let me guess," Gnick started, "you started talking to her at work or she was an old high school connection you happened to message one day on social media and you started chatting. It was very innocent at first, but you were looking for some sense of female approval and warmth and she offered it. Soon you found yourself messaging her more and more and every time you saw she

messed you back, your heart skipped. It was exciting and the one positive in your otherwise miserable day. Because of her own situation, recently single with kids, she was very understanding of your situation and you bonded in your complaining about her ex and your soon-to-be ex. Every fight you had with your partner was terrible on one level, but then wonderful on another because it was fodder for conversation with this new girl who helped you feel really cared about. This fueled your ego, which felt particularly good because it had been struggling with feeling very defeated before her. Eventually, this relationship reached a point where this other girl wasn't satisfied with just being a "friend" you chatted with all day; she wanted more. This was too deep a relationship to have a one night stand and that's not the kind of guy you are. At the same time, you were torn because you didn't want to leave your family, but you were so 'in love' with this new girl, you didn't want to lose her. Because of her persistence and increasing threats, you found yourself being forced into this terrible situation of having to choose her or your wife. To make matters worse, your wife was now being nice and for the month of her being nice, you kept feeling worse and worse with yourself for being in this situation until you snapped and left rather than deal with the fact you were having an emotional affair. Add in the fact, that by being nice, your wife removed the main conversation piece you had with the new woman. Suddenly, you weren't having the same 'deep' connecting conversations, which scared you that maybe this new girl wasn't as perfect as you thought, but your guilt drove you to running away

from the improving situation because you would have to face the fact you had been cheating.”

“How did you know all that?” Scott asked quite bewildered.

“People aren’t that complicated. The other option was you were done with your marriage, and you were looking for any woman who would take you and be an excuse for you to leave. I didn’t guess that, however, because you’re more of a pushover than a schemer, and your current situation proves the new girl has all the power while you’re pretty pathetic.” Scott was at a loss for words. “Guys are simple. They can’t be alone whereas women are much more independent; hence, your wife is still single while you left for another woman and you stick around despite being miserable,” Gnick pointed out as a matter of fact rather than a jab. “Guys almost never break up... unless the woman is so crazy he can’t handle her anymore, but that’s like admitting defeat, so guys will typically just suffer a nasty woman. That being said, some guys will do a trade in like a car. Sometimes they trade in because they’re tired of the old ‘car,’ but that’s rare. They’re more likely to trade in because a new car keeps pressuring them to trade in the old one for them. That’s you. I bet you would never have left your wife if that was an option; you would’ve just had this other woman on the side, but she wouldn’t have it, so she pushed you to leave, which is why you’re so miserable now and trying to stuff down your emotions by drinking like a coward.”

Scott looked at the overflowing recycling bins beside him. “That’s not why I drink,” he protested. “I like the taste.”



“Sure, tell yourself that,” assured Gnick. “I’m pretty sure if you were drinking something without alcohol, you would be drinking a lot less than you do.”

Scott looked like a deer in the headlights not sure what to say until he stammered, “There are other reasons.”

“Like how you’re drinking because you hate this new relationship?” Gnick quipped.

“What?” Scott looked scared at the idea that the truth was noticeable.

“When you started talking to this other woman, she was the escape from your miserable world, but now she’s part of that miserable world. She’s no longer the escape, and to make matters worse, her kids are her main priority and you’re an afterthought. She’s probably also very pushy and makes you do things you don’t want to do. She basically treats you like a child under her control and if she hasn’t yet, soon she’ll complain that you’re just another kid in the house and she’ll build resentment toward you even though she’s a major reason you are acting so weak. The other reason you’ll be weak is because in your head you tell yourself you can’t afford to lose this girl as well as your wife because then what was all this for? You have to justify leaving your wife for this new life, so you’re trapped. Add in the fact that if you try to discipline her kids, she’ll rip you apart. You essentially have as much value as a mediocre pet like a hermit crab.”

“How do you know this?” Scott asked.

“Moms can have a hard time letting the biological father discipline the kids because they’re so protective of their kids,” Gnick noted. “The step dad figure doesn’t have a chance to discipline unless she’s on the weak side, but if she was weak, she wouldn’t have pushed you to leave your wife.”

“What do you mean?” questioned Scott.

“To be the kind of woman who goes for a married man,” Gnick began, “you have to be aggressive with putting your own needs first. She tells herself it’s to help the guy, but it’s really just she wants what she wants, and she likes feeling like the good girl. Add in the fact that she was pushing you to leave your wife and she’s a particularly pushy and selfish person.”

“She’s not selfish,” Scott protested.

Gnick smiled, “What do you call someone who pursues what they want at the expense of the lives of others?” Scott was speechless. “She may have been a good listening ear at the beginning, but a good person doesn’t emotionally invest in a married man. Being the other woman, that’s pretty low.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is the life I chose,” Scott whined.

“So now *you’re* being selfish,” Gnick pointed out.

“I’m not being selfish,” denied Scott. “I’m living the life I don’t want to live!”

“You’re being selfish because you’re choosing to suffer when you can make things right for your family,” Gnick corrected.

“Eleanor won’t take me back,” Scott complained.

“Whether she does or doesn’t, she deserves the choice. You can’t make that for her,” noted Gnick.

Scott paused. “I never thought of it like that before.”

“Even more important, you need to prove that you care about your son,” remarked Gnick.

“Of course I care about him, but how can I try to reconnect with him when I’ve been so absent?” asked Scott with hope in his voice.

“Because he deserves the chance to reconnect with you... or to tell you off,” smiled Gnick. “He’s not a teenager yet, so you have a good chance he’ll be open to letting you back into his life. It might not be right away, but you need to do something to prove that you love him.”

“I do love him,” Scott affirmed.

“Really?” questioned Gnick.

“Yeah,” reassured Scott a bit surprised to be questioned.

“Then you suck at love,” Gnick stated very matter-of-factly.

Scott paused confused. Having learned the gnome was very straightforward and not insulting, he confessed, “I guess I do.”

“Fortunately, there’s hope,” Gnick announced.

“So what do I have to do?” asked Scott.

“When we screw up as bad as you,” started Gnick, “we need to do something spectacular to show how sorry we are.”

“Are you talking about penance?” asked Scott.

“Look at you knowing your Catholic terms. Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,” affirmed Gnick. “Christmas is in four months, so that works perfectly.”

“What am I supposed to do for four months?” asked Scott a bit intimidated.

Gnick coyly smiled, “Become a real man.”

“What?” asked Scott surprised.

“You need to prove you’ve changed if you want Eleanor to take you back,” Gnick blatantly shared. “If she takes you back without you proving you’re different, she’s a giant pushover who’s setting herself up for more hurt, especially when there’s a chance you’ll return to this other woman who has been your addiction.”

“So what does being a real man look like?” asked Scott sounding ready to try.

“First, you need to be single,” claimed Gnick.

Scott seemed to panic, “Why do I need to do that?”

“For the next four months you need to be single and have zero contact with this new woman,” expressed Gnick.

“You want me to break up with her? How?” asked Scott like he was being told to do the impossible.

“You will quietly move all of your stuff out and leave notes to her kids apologizing for not being a better man and role model, and then when you’re out of the house with everything, you will text her that it’s over,” stated Gnick.

“You want me to break up over text? She’ll be furious!” Scott protested.

“Exactly, and that’s the point,” affirmed Gnick. “Here are the reasons you need to text the breakup. One, you’re spineless, so if you try to break up in person she’ll say no and you’ll obey her. Two, she’s your drug and you need to get over her rehab style – zero connection. Three, and most important, you need to text her because she’ll be so furious at you, she’d never let you back. That way even if you have a brain disappearing moment like we both know you’re capable of having, she won’t want anything to do with you.” Scott looked like he got it, but was still hesitant. “Then, as soon as you text her, you need delete and block all contact info you have of her to be safe.”

“That seems pretty extreme,” complained Scott.

“But it’s the right way for you,” Gnick told him. “After cutting ties with her, you’re going to join a cooking class, a running group, a men’s group at a church, and, of course, AA.”

“Whoa, what?” questioned Scott.

“All of these things will give you something else to do besides drink and over think your mistakes. They’ll also help you connect with people and maybe make some friends,” continued Gnick. “On a

practical level, the cooking class is so you can impress Eleanor with a new skill and exercise will help you get some feelings out... and hopefully make you look better – beer has a lot of calories. The church group will help you meet some older men who can give you some guidance on how to be a man while AA is needed for you to deal with what’s causing you to drink.”

“You’re serious about all of this?” Scott asked in disbelief.

“Oh, and the other thing you need to do is send child support for the last six months to Eleanor and start texting Rik every day to say hi and good night,” Gnick added.

“I get the money thing; I wanted to send some before, but my girlfriend wouldn’t let me... that sounds really bad. I’ll do the money thing, no problem. Messaging Rik, however... no... I can’t,” Scott protested. “Every time I see his name on my phone I feel all this guilt and shame.”

“Isn’t that exactly what you should be feeling?” pointed out Gnick.

“But... uh... I don’t want to,” Scott admitted.

“You wouldn’t have to if you had been living your life properly,” Gnick told him. “You feel guilt because you’ve been living your life wrong. You shouldn’t hide from it, but use it as fuel for becoming a better person.”

Scott was starting to calm down a little. “What if he doesn’t respond?”

“Did I say anything about conversations?” questioned Gnick.

“No,” sighed Scott.

“You’re not doing this for you; you’re doing it for him. You’ve been absent and he needs to rebuild his trust that you’ll be there in the future, so he needs to see the consistency over these four months of you wishing him a good day and a good night even if he writes nothing back,” Gnick encouraged.

Scott looked at the ground. “You are asking a lot of me.”

“Or am I asking you to be a decent dad and it seems like a lot because you’ve been living so terribly?” asked Gnick as gently as you can ask a question like that.

Scott was a bit taken aback. “You’re very straightforward.”

“I like to see it as fair honesty,” shared Gnick. “Things are going to be hard at first, but in the long run, it’ll make your life so much better. People are drawn to what’s easy in the moment, but that never leaves us feeling good. Sure, watching more TV is appealing when it starts, but after binging a show, you feel lousy because you should. Meanwhile, if you force yourself to exercise, in the long run, you’ll feel a lot better.” Scott was listening intently as what Gnick said made a lot of sense. “You might think you have depression, but you feel exactly the way you should be feeling for the life you’ve been living. Sure, medications can numb some of the pain you feel, but until you start to live your life the way you should, you’re going to feel like garbage. Our bodies are smart. If you live like garbage, you’ll feel like garbage. Your body is trying to tell you to change.”

“It’s that simple?” asked Scott with hope in his voice.

“Yeah, life isn’t that complicated,” noted Gnick. “Live properly and life is better. It’s not necessarily easy in the moment, but in the long run it’s the only way to experience life for all it’s worth.”

“For someone who is supposed to be supportive, you are surprisingly blunt,” pointed out Scott.

“I was no different with your wife,” replied Gnick. “Why do you think she changed?”

“Wait, are you the reason she suddenly became so nice?” asked Scott surprised.

“She did the work, but I gave her the guidance, which is exactly what I’m doing for you. Trust me, she was just as hesitant. The big difference is she had anger whereas you have self loathing. You also have a lot more work to do because you’ve dug yourself quite the hole. Fortunately, we have four months to turn your life around and prove that you can be the husband and father your family deserves, so let’s start packing your stuff and get out of here.”

“But where will I go?” asked Scott.

Gnick shrugged, “Do you have family or a cheap hotel near your work?”

“This is really going to be a long four months,” confessed Scott.



“It’ll be hard, but it’s a lot better living with purpose than drowning your emotions with alcohol,” reassured Gnick.

“I guess we’ll see,” uttered Scott with a lack of enthusiasm.

“The first step is to break the tentacles your girlfriend has over you, so let’s start packing,” Gnick cheered.





## Chapter 2: A New Man

**F**or Christmas Eve, Eleanor and Rik were making pancakes for dinner when there was a phone call. Eleanor answered and the strange voice said, “Put your coat and boots on and go outside,” and then hung up. Scared at the strangeness of the call, Eleanor quickly obeyed, and the two of them ran out the door after getting their coat and boots on. As soon as they were outside, Eleanor and Rik saw an older man in a red sports jacket and a whistle in his mouth and a baton in his hand standing at attention in the middle of their lawn – that was strange. When they stopped on the front porch to stare at this unusual figure, he blew his whistle, turned and started marching off the lawn – that was also strange. When he got to the middle of the road, he then blew his whistle twice and started walking down the

middle of the street like he was leading a parade... because he was. Eleanor and Rik looked at each other confused, and then a little way up the street, a small seven piece brass band standing in a line in the middle of the street started playing Christmas music walking like a marching band who had never been trained how to march and didn't care because they weren't really a marching band. They were wearing Salvation Army uniforms and they played beautifully with the brass sounds echoing throughout the neighborhood. As they sauntered up the street, from behind them, a group of runners holding poles with ribbons flying off the tops of them were running up the street and passed the musicians. While the band played, everyone who was home on the street came outside to see what was going on. After the runners with streamers went by, they turned the corner of the block and disappeared. From behind them, two runners carrying a banner saying "Merry Christmas," jogged past. Next, kids on roller blades with dogs on leashes covered in winter coats with glow sticks attached to them rolled up the street. Some dogs pulled the kids while other kids were trying to drag a distracted dog.

When the "sauntering" band reached a certain spot past the house, they turned around and played in place as the kids with dogs passed them. The last two kids, instead of holding dogs, were holding a sign that said, "Love, Someone..." When the path was clear of roller bladers, a car slowly drove up the street. On top of the car was a twelve foot inflatable snowman attached to a battery generator inside the car to keep it inflated. The driver in the car had a string attached to the one snowman hand and as he pulled it,

it looked like the snowman was waving. Right behind him was another car that had three smaller inflatable snowmen on the roof. With what looked like a red and white candy-cane pole with a flag on top that was covered by a sign reading, “Who Misses You Terribly.”

As the two cars drove by, the runners with streamers ran up the street and passed Eleanor and Rik again. This time the banner the two runners had said, “I’m so...” and as they ran past a stream of cars followed. Some were decorated and others were plain, but all of them had a simple sign on the side of the car that said, “So...” Seven cars ended up driving by and coming up from behind the cars were the runners again carrying what looked like giant lollipops instead of the ribbons like last time. On the face of the circle at the top of the stick were sad faces. Behind the lollipop runners, were the two runners with a banner. This time it said, “Sorry!” As the banner runners passed the house, the brass band had reached the end of their journey up the street, they turned around to play their last note, and then disappeared down a side street. The locals who had stepped outside to see what was going on started clapping for the band. That’s when the song “Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home)” began playing from a loud speaker on a pickup truck slowly rolling up the street. On the back of the truck, holding to a handle on the roof, a guy Eleanor and Rik didn’t know was singing. After a few minutes, they realized someone had changed the words to, “Baby, please let me come home.” The extra syllable was a little awkward, but it still worked like the theme song from *Love Actually*.

The driver of the truck stopped at the house just past Eleanor's, so they could still hear the music, but it started to be faded out, and switched to Michael Buble's "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." At that point, two of the cars with the "So" on them from earlier had turned around to have their lights aimed at the next truck coming up the street. This time the vehicle was a pickup pulling a roofer's dump trailer. The truck was decorated to look like clouds with three rows of two reindeer spread across the roof and bed of the truck (they couldn't fit all eight) to make it look like they were flying and pulling the trailer behind them. The trailer was decorated to look like Santa's sleigh. The person dressed as Santa (the real Santa was obviously busy since it was Christmas Eve) was in the sleigh waving at everyone on the street watching the parade. Santa's sleigh stopped in front of Eleanor's house. At that point, a runner past with a sign that read, "It's really him," with a second runner with a sign that read, "Santa's assistant!" After the truck was parked and the runners ran past, the music switched to the *Love Actually* soundtrack when Jamie (played by Collin Firth) goes to the restaurant to ask out Aurelia (played by... someone I've never seen in anything else). As the music played, Santa stood up, turned, and started opening his sack of toys that was behind his chair. This sack was quite large, but Santa pulled out a small box that was about a foot in all directions. He motioned for someone to come forward, so Eleanor sent Rik. When he got there, Santa handed him the package. Rik ran back to his mom and together they opened it. Inside was a familiar gnome holding a sack filled with Smarties and a sign reading, "I promised I was working for your

good.” After a short moment to admire the present, fireworks exploded above Santa who was now standing in front of his sleigh. When he had Eleanor and Rik’s attention (fireworks will do that), from the back of the sleigh there was a small explosion of smoke and light like a magic trick. As the smoke cleared, it revealed that the sack was gone. Standing in its place, dressed in a suit and holding flowers in one hand and a mic in another was Scott.

“Last winter,” began Scott into the microphone for everyone on the street to hear, “I was looking for a solution to the pain I was feeling, and I picked the worst possible option – another woman. I was a classic fool, and I didn’t realize it until I found myself trapped. I ended up leaving you and my son for a life I never wanted, but I didn’t know how to stop the destructive path I was on. The problem was, without meaning to be, I was a coward.”

At that point, one of the runners dashed by with a sign that read, “And a jerk!”

“I was ashamed of what I had done and what I was doing. The only answer I felt capable of doing was to drink myself numb every night because I desperately wanted to come back, but I didn’t know how. I also knew you deserved better. Fortunately, everything turned around when I found my own... therapy gnome.”

People on the street listening to Scott looked at each other confused – therapy gnome? Was that an APP?

“With his help, these last four months I’ve been in AA, which met at a Salvation Army Church... that should explain a few things

about tonight. I've been attending cooking classes and I joined a running club." As Scott said that, a runner sprinted past with another sign that read "We're pretty awesome."

"That should explain a few other things." Scott smiled with a glimpse of pride. "So for the last four months, I've been in therapy to deal with my bottle-up-explosive anger problem; I've been exercising; I've been sober; I've started hobbies and made friends as I tried to develop a life and drive to help me be stronger and avoid being a fool ever again. Most importantly, I've been single. That other woman was the biggest mistake I've ever made, and leaving her was one of the best things I've done. Leaving her was like a giant weight was taken off my back that had also been infecting my soul. You both deserve someone special in your life, and I've spent the last four months learning how to be the man I should be for you. So on this Christmas Eve, I've come to you in the best way I could think of to say, 'I'm so, so, so, so, so, so sorry,' and to ask if you'll let me join you tonight." After a short pause, Scott added, "I brought some food I made... it's pretty good."

In that classic Hollywood pause moment, Eleanor looked down at her son and then at the gnome he had given them. As Scott held his breath and a small bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, Eleanor pulled the gnome out of the box and then slowly started walking toward Scott holding Rik's hand. After a few steps, Rik burst into a sprint to his dad with Eleanor starting to jog a few steps behind him.

Within seconds, the family was hugging in the kind of way people at airports hug who haven't seen a loved one in a long time. Quietly, so only Scott and Rik could hear, Eleanor whispered, "You had me at therapy gnome," which made Scott laugh.

For Gnicks, he never thought he would ever feel like he fully belonged to a family, but in that moment, when he was included in the hug, everything he had ever hoped for felt real... and it was glorious. It felt like he had gone from the help to an equal member of the family.

As the family of four hugged, the singer on the truck to the side started singing "All You Need is Love," and the Salvation Army band had returned and started playing along. The people who had gathered on the streets were cheering and joined in singing as well. The runners started running in a circle around the group with their original ribbons flying. Dogs barked and cars honked, and after a few minutes for the family to enjoy their hug, "Santa" started letting off more fireworks – he's the kind of friend you want around for special occasions.

It was the perfect Christmas Eve, especially after such a difficult year. The family was congratulated by everyone who was there as they sang Christmas carols and enjoyed some hot chocolate provided by "Santa" – he really is the friend you want around. Tears were shed, hugs were shared by all, it was a night that reminded people the greatest thing about Christmas is sharing love because that night couldn't have happened without the collective love of friends.



As everyone started to return home, Scott followed his wife, son, and gnome into the house to reconnect to the family he should never have left. Fortunately, despite his mistakes of leaving and staying away, he ended up learning the lessons that would help him be the man his family needed. As Scott experienced, change is always a single choice away.

THE END.







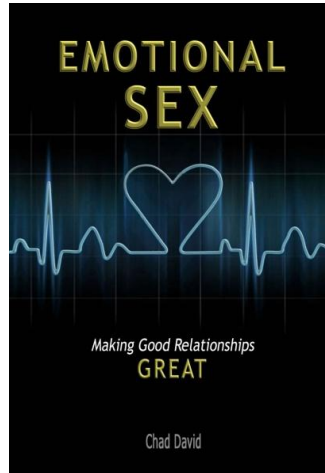
*Blessing:* May this book bring you the  
inspiration you need to become the  
person you want to become.







Other Books by Chad:







*Merry Christmas from my family to  
yours.*







