

Michael
Rosen

Bah! Humbug!

a magical retelling of
Charles Dickens's

A
CHRISTMAS
CAROL

illustrated by

Tony Ross



Bah!
Humbang!

Bah! Humbug!

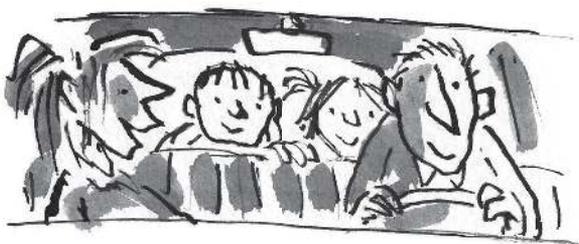


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WALKER BOOKS

Chapter 1



your Scrooge mask?” Ray Gruber yelled as the family climbed into the car. “Your Scrooge mask, Harry? I have no idea where it is. I’m just guessing . . .” He switched to his sarcastic voice. “Let me see . . . I wonder, just wonder, if it’s . . . *exactly where you left it?*”

Harry Gruber felt himself shrink under his father’s words. He had only been allowed to bring the mask home because he had pleaded with Miss

Cavani to have it overnight so he could practice some Scrooge expressions in the mirror. He loved seeing himself turn from somebody no one noticed, an eleven-year-old guy with cheeks that were really annoying, he thought (too wide one day, too long the next), into a mean, crabby, whiny old man whom hundreds of people would be staring at in a show—all done with what his drama teacher called a half-mask. It covered his forehead, eyes, and most of those annoying cheeks and gave him a new, narrow, slightly twisted nose. And yet underneath that was his own mouth: somehow looking like a new, not-his-own, very old mouth. How amazing was that? In front of the mirror he had practiced sneering, cackling, bullying, being shocked, being afraid, being regretful . . .

What you feel, Harry, we feel, Miss Cavani had said, *but we have to see it, dear, see it in your face and in your shoulders*. That was a challenge. How do you show how you feel in your shoulders?

But now—oh, rats! He had left the mask back in the house, somewhere no-idea-where, and this had

annoyed Dad. Again. *Why am I so good at annoying Dad?* Harry wondered. He looked up at the street-lamp throwing its light on them. *Wouldn't it be great if every time you felt bad, you could turn yourself into a thing?* Like the streetlamp. Being useful and never feeling bad. Just standing there throwing light on this street of town houses.

Dad's voice interrupted his thoughts: "And I'm not going to ask why, in the name of the stars above, your school thought it was a good idea to do *A Christmas crummy Carol* on the night before Christmas. If they were going to do anything on the night before Christmas, it should have been 'The Night Before crummy Christmas.' Ha!"

Harry hadn't waited to hear the whole speech and had scuttled back into the house to hunt down the mask. His mom had switched off the lights as they were leaving, so now he had a touch of heart-hopping as his own shadow, cast by the street-lamp reaching into the house through the window, chased him up the stairs.

"Ray," said Harry's mother, Lisa, in the most

soothing voice she could conjure up, but it came out as a voice that sounded angry that she had to try and make soothing. She glanced at herself in the mirror on the back of the car's visor and moved a lock of hair onto her forehead.

"I'm ready," said Ray, sitting down heavily in the driver's seat.

"We can't go, Ray, until Harry's got his Scrooge mask. So we're not 'ready,' are we?"

There was a lot of weight in the "ready."

Ray started the car.

"And my chair's not in," chipped in Eva, Harry's younger sister.

"What?" Lisa exclaimed. She was shocked.

Ray furiously untangled himself from his seat belt, muttering curses and excuses to himself or to the car or to the gatepost or to the chair itself, all to the effect that if Harry hadn't stuck his Scrooge mask in some deep dark recess of the house, he, Ray, wouldn't have forgotten to put Eva's chair in the car.

"I don't even know why we all have to go, anyway . . ." He went on digging in his own irritated

groove as he deftly heaved the chair into the back of the car.

Lisa turned from soothing to not-soothing. “I’m going to see our son doing his very best at something. That’s all. I thought you’d want to do that too.” Her voice crackled through the open windows of the car, as frosty as the frost that was crouching, ready to pounce at that moment in the middle of the night when the street would turn out its lights and fall asleep.

Eva agreed. “I want to see Harry do Scrooge. He’s shown me tons of it already.”

Lisa said, “Oh, well, if he flubs his lines, you can call them out.”

Eva giggled. “He’d never forgive me.”

Ray got himself behind the wheel again. His tone changed, dropping the irritation and sarcastic whine, as he said, “I want to see this thing too, I do, but look. You know and I know if we had gotten this material up online over Christmas, the site would increase its traffic by—what?—ten percent? Twenty percent? But that’s fine, I’m coming . . .”

Then the old sarcasm cut in again: “If my family thinks it can wait, it can wait-widdly-wait.”

“You always say that,” Eva said quietly, spotting the change in Dad’s tone.

But Ray was working himself up, and nothing was going to stop him now, not even Eva. “Hello? Hello? Can anyone hear me? I’m talking about what pays for all this.” He waved in the general direction of everything.

The family knew all about Ray’s “everything.” When he waved his “everything” hand in the air, it could mean the egg they were having for breakfast, the TV, the car, the hoodie that Harry would die for, the beach vacation they took in August, the local neighborhood’s offerings of such delights as a Greek diner and a fifties replica ice-cream parlor, or the whole world—all of it. And they all had to be grateful.

Harry loomed up beside the car. He had the Scrooge mask in his hand. His face looked panicked.

Ray slumped forward over the wheel, his jacket stretched like a sausage skin over his shoulders.

“It’s broken,” Harry whimpered. “I must have . . . have . . . er . . .”

“Get in,” Lisa said, using the soothing voice again. “The most important thing is being on time for the show. The mask comes second. Drive, Ray.”

Eva looked at the mask. Though she could see the break, she said, “It’s not too bad, Harry. No one will notice.”

Harry groaned. Sometimes, Mom and Eva being so darned nice and helpful was nearly as bad as Dad being sarcastic.

Ray eased into gear.

“But . . .” Harry looked at the mask with despair.

Lisa flicked her fingers. Harry passed it to her. She ran an expert hand over the cracked part just below the eye, dug around in her bag, pulled out some robust-looking white tape, and, as the car headed off and down the road, with the headlights pouring over the newsstand on the



left, the barber's and the drugstore on the right, she neatly stuck it together.

Eva looked sideways at her mom; their faces lit then darkened as the car shot past the street-lamps. The white tape that solves everything! Eva remembered how proud she had been when, at school, they were talking about the jobs their parents did, and she had said, "My mom's an assistant director—she tells actors where to stand and sticks bits of tape on the floor to mark where their feet go."

Lisa tucked the roll of tape back in her bag.



In truth, Harry wasn't as late as the Ghost of Christmas Past, who said he was late because he had to come all the way from the Past to the Present.

No one laughed at that, least of all Harry, who was by now nervous *times four*. He was nervous because he was worried about his lines, nervous about whether he was any good at saying the lines,

nervous about whether his mask would fall apart, nervous about whether . . . about whether Dad would think it was worth coming. On the way home later, would Dad talk on and on and on about how the show wasn't all that good and how it would have been better if he had done some work . . . ?

The pre-show chatter was building to the level of a playground after a pop quiz: mascara wands were passing from hand to hand; umbrellas, Victorian shawls, top hats, and pewter mugs were being gripped and twisted. The “street sellers” (Rory, Sunil, Crayton, Rasheda, Stefan, and Désol'é) were pitching their laughter up to the level of cheerleaders stirring up a crowd.

Even in the midst of his nerves, Harry knew he loved this excitement. Stefan and Désol'é looked like they had a thing going, but everyone had been saying that for months now. Rasheda, serious Rasheda, who was always the first to stop anyone from goofing around in class, had turned into some kind of fireball; the show seemed to have made her just slightly crazy, Harry thought. Miss Cavani had

recruited Rory, Sunil, and Crayton from the basketball team. She had barged into the Monday-night practice, announcing that she needed three kids who could move and shout. “That’s what you, you, and you have been doing for the last five minutes. Perfect!” There was something about the way Miss Cavani said things that made everyone do what she asked. Off went the floppy jerseys with the big numbers on the back, on went the black Victorian gear. But they were still being all slam dunk and high fives right now. Harry smiled to himself behind his mask.

Miss Cavani clapped her hands. “Breathing. Remember? In—and one and two and three and four. Out—and one and two and three and four.”

As she breathed in, her eyes gleamed and her chest expanded. The laughter and hugging subsided. Through the door of the offstage classroom G29, which Miss Cavani insisted on calling the “Green Room,” she caught sight of Harry, peeking at the audience.

“Come away from the curtain, Harry. They’ll see

your eye staring out at them, kiddo. We want them to be scared by the show, not by your eyeball.”

A snicker snaked through the cast. The now-quiet street sellers silently reassured each other with touched fists. Harry ducked back in. He loved being chewed out by Miss Cavani.

He had spotted Mom, Dad, and Eva. It had been easy: Dad had his cell phone on, and the light lit up the frown on his face.

Dickens: Marley was dead. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Mind! I don't know what's particularly dead about a doornail.

Scrooge: Marley and I were partners for I don't know how many years. I was his sole friend, and sole mourner at the funeral. I never painted out Old Marley's name. There the

firm's name stood, years afterward, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called me Scrooge, and sometimes Marley, but I answered to both names. It was all the same to me.

Dickens: Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! And solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red and his thin lips blue. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, "My dear Scrooge, how are you? When



will you come to see me?" No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. But what did Scrooge care!

Scrooge: That's how I liked it.

Miss Cavani had warned Harry that there would be times when the audience would hiss at him.

"They won't be hissing at you, Harry. They'll be hissing at Scrooge," she had reassured him.

Sure enough, they hissed.

Harry stared back at them. He caught sight of his father, his head attached to his phone. Harry's stare turned into contempt, which brought on yet more hissing.



Dickens: Once upon a time — of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve — old Scrooge sat busy in his countinghouse.

Scrooge: It was cold, biting weather, and I could hear the people outside, wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them.

Dickens: The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already. The dense fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole. The door of Scrooge's countinghouse office was open . . .

Scrooge: . . . so that I could peek through the door to keep my eye upon my clerk . . .

Dickens: . . . who, in a dismal little cell beyond, was copying letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much

smaller that it looked like one coal. Which is why the clerk put on his white scarf and tried to warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being a man of a strong imagination, he failed.

Scrooge's Nephew: A Merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you!

Scrooge: Bah! Humbug!

Back came a loud booing. Harry wasn't ready for that. For a split second, it annoyed him. Without knowing why, he threw back at them a second:

Scrooge: Humbug!!

He sensed that Shona, playing Dickens, was caught offbeat with her next line, but she took another

breath and came in with the little insert that Miss Cavani had written for, as she said, “your younger brothers and sisters.”

Dickens: What is this “humbug”? I’m famous for putting this in this story, but people have sometimes mistaken it for a sweet, a hard-boiled minty sweet. No, no, no, “humbug” means “false,” or as you might say, “bogus” or “phony.”

Harry glanced at Eva as Shona spoke. He wanted Eva to like Shona. He wanted Eva to like it that he liked Shona.

Nephew: Christmas a humbug, Uncle! You don’t mean that, I’m sure.

Scrooge: I do. Merry Christmas! What right have you

to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.

Nephew: Come, then. What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough.

Scrooge: Bah! Humbug.

Nephew: Don't be cross, Uncle.

Scrooge: What else can I be, when I live in such a world of fools out upon Merry Christmas! What's Christmastime to you but a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer? If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!

Nephew: Uncle!

Scrooge: Nephew! Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.

Nephew: Keep it? But you don't keep it.

Scrooge: Let me leave it alone, then. Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!

Nephew: I am sure I have always thought of Christmastime, when it has come round, as a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem to open their shut-up hearts and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave. And therefore, Uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it *has* done me good, and *will* do me good; and I say, God bless it!

Dickens: The clerk applauded. Becoming

immediately aware that he shouldn't have, he poked the fire and extinguished the last frail spark forever.

Scrooge (*to the clerk*): Let me hear another sound from you, and you'll keep your Christmas by losing your job.

Scrooge (*to his nephew*): You're quite a powerful speaker, sir, I wonder you don't go into Parliament.

Nephew: Don't be angry, Uncle. Come! Dine with us tomorrow.

Scrooge: I would rather see you in hell.

Nephew: But why? I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you; why cannot we be friends?

Scrooge: Good afternoon.



Nephew: I am sorry, with all my heart, to find you so stubborn. We have never had any quarrel, and I'll keep my Christmas humor to the last. So a Merry Christmas, Uncle!

Scrooge: Good afternoon!

Nephew: And a Happy New Year!

Scrooge: Good afternoon!

Dickens: His nephew left the room without an angry word.

Nephew: Merry Christmas, Mr. Cratchit.

Bob Cratchit: Merry Christmas to you, too.

Scrooge (*muttering*): There's another fellow, Bob Cratchit, my clerk, with fifteen shillings a week, and a wife and family, talking about a "Merry Christmas." I'll retire to the madhouse.

Ray mouthed silently to Lisa.

Lisa didn't understand. Or pretended not to understand. She was gripped by the show and had already felt teary several times seeing how well Harry was doing. Now Ray was mouthing at her.

Ray insisted, saw he was getting nowhere, and then whispered in Lisa's ear, "I've got to go in. This is big. Mumbai."



Lisa turned to look at the man she thought loved her and their family more than anything in the world. And here he was, whispering in her ear—

not “Isn’t Harry doing great,” not “I’m glad you made me come to the show,” not “I love you, Lisa,” but instead whispering “Mumbai.” She didn’t even know why he was whispering “Mumbai.” Worse: it infuriated her that he was whispering “Mumbai.”

His eyes were full of passion. He leaned into her ear once more: “Ka-ching!” he whispered with a little squeal at the end. It was his moneymaking sound he loved to make. Ray started to lift his backside off the chair.

Lisa put her hand on Ray’s leg and pressed down.

Dickens: In letting Scrooge’s nephew out, Bob Cratchit let two other people in. They were portly gentlemen, pleasant to look at, and now stood, with their hats off, in Scrooge’s office.

Gentleman: Scrooge and Marley’s, I believe. Have I the pleasure of addressing Mr. Scrooge or Mr. Marley?