



Marley's Last-Minute Miracle



George Bishop was hardly a master of disguise, but he knew how to wear a fake moustache. He traced his finger along his upper lip, smoothing it with the confidence of a Bond villain. ‘The trick is not to sneeze.’

The moustache was made of tinsel, and in the falling evening its reflection glittered in Nana Flo’s eyes. She tapped the side of her nose. ‘When it comes to sneaking, George, glamour is absolutely key.’

The Christmas Fair at Hyde Park unfurled before them like a magnificent metropolis, its fairy lights winking at George through the bustling crowds.

‘Call me Mistletoe Marple,’ said Nana Flo, excitement quickening her steps. ‘Didn’t I tell you we’d find it?’

George grinned. ‘Well, it’s not exactly hid—’

A loud grunt startled him from his sentence. The smile died on his lips as a broad-shouldered businessman jostled past them, the end of his black coat flapping in the breeze.

George stiffened. ‘Is that —’

Nana Flo threaded an arm through the crook of his elbow. ‘He’d never find us here, love. Not today of all days. And *especially* not in your fine disguise.’

George slumped with relief. Nana Flo was right. It was late afternoon on 23 December, and his father was at work. Just like he was every other day of the year, rain or shine, weekends and weekdays, holidays and all the billable minutes in between. Hugo Bishop wouldn’t *dream* of setting foot outside his office, especially not with Christmas floating about so infectiously.

Overhead, the milk-bottle clouds were thick with the promise of snow, the air dusted with the scent of cinnamon. George inhaled a generous lungful as he followed it through the fair gates.

He was happy here in the belly of Christmas. Full of mince pies and candyfloss and the kind of self-assuredness that only a tinsel moustache can bring. ‘I think I’ll keep it on,’ he told his nan on the Ferris wheel. ‘It makes me feel important.’

‘You do look a bit like Clark Gable,’ said Nana Flo, around a mouthful of fudge. ‘One of my all-time favourite film stars.’ A pause, then: ‘Or a festive broom handle, at the very least.’

She adjusted her own carefully selected Christmas accessory: a holly hairclip, adorned with bright red berries and jade leaves. It sat just above her left ear, and made the green of her eyes seem brighter, somehow. Almost . . . mischievous.

Hours later, when the moon was climbing into an indigo sky, and their legs had grown heavy from wonderland wandering, Nana Flo pressed a £5 note into his hand. ‘Why don’t you run and get yourself a hot chocolate from Gino’s.’ She gestured to a row of identical wooden cabins that looked out on to the carousel. ‘Save me a marshmallow. I’m going to see about a mulled wine, or three.’

George was already off and running. He thought Gino’s Cioccolata was the last shop on the little row, but when he reached it, he spied another cabin tucked away at the very end. It was absent of decoration, except for the crooked sign hanging above the door.

It read:

MARLEY'S CHRISTMAS CURIOSITIES

And underneath, in fine print:

Strictly No Grown-ups Allowed
Enter At Your Own Whimsy

The bell above the door tinkled as he pushed it open.

George was surprised to find himself in a room much larger than he was expecting. It was cosy too. The floor was blanketed with fresh pine needles that made the shop smell of evergreen trees. Overhead, garlands of fairy lights hung from the low ceiling, setting a dim glow about the place. A girl and a boy were examining the shelf nearest the door. They were a little younger than George, and were arguing over a bright yellow parcel of sweets.

‘Mum’s allergic to toffee, you *dunderbrain*.’

‘You’re thinking of *nougat*. There’s a *massive* difference.’

At the back of the shop, behind a wooden desk heaped with books, an old man sat reading a newspaper. His spectacles were perched on the very end of his nose.

He peered at George over the top of them.

George lifted a gloved hand in greeting. ‘Er, hi.’

The old man – Marley, George supposed – looked at him closely now, his bushy brows hunching together. ‘Age?’

‘Uh.’ George shuffled closer, arcing around a cluster of children, who were chattering excitedly by a table in the middle of the shop.

‘Ten,’ he told Marley.

‘And?’ prompted the old man.

‘Ten . . . and four months?’

Marley tapped his upper lip. ‘That’s an unusual amount of facial hair for a ten-years-and-four-months-old. I’m not saying I haven’t seen it before . . .’ He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. ‘But it’s rare as a purple reindeer.’

‘There’s no such thing as a purple reindeer,’ said George.

Marley stared at him. ‘Excuse me?’

George shifted uncomfortably. ‘The moustache is fake. It’s just tinsel.’

‘I see,’ Marley said, unconvinced.

George was distracted by the date on his newspaper. ‘1843?’ he said, squinting to be sure. ‘Why are you reading something from 1843?’

‘I prefer the classics,’ said Marley in a tone that conveyed the word *obviously*.

‘*Hmm.*’ The silence stretched, George frozen in place by the sudden, searing brightness of Marley’s gaze until, with a sprawling yawn, the old man returned his attention to the

events of 1843. ‘You certainly are ten and four months old,’ he said, with a dismissive flick of his wrist. ‘Crackers are free. *One* per child. Everything else comes at a price.’

‘Right. Thanks.’ George drifted towards the table in the middle of the shop, poking his head between two sets of shoulders to find a teetering heap of Christmas crackers.

A red-haired girl had just pulled one apart to find a perfectly tuned music box inside. Her sister’s cracker, meanwhile, contained a live butterfly, its wings glittering silver and gold as it flitted between them.

Beside them, a pair of wide-eyed brothers were trying out matching miniature telescopes.

‘I can see a *whale* in mine!’ fizzed the older one as he squinted into the eyepiece. ‘What have you got?’

‘Marbles,’ said the younger glumly. He stiffened, then, his voice jumping an entire octave: ‘No, wait. *Planets*. I’ve got the universe in mine!’

George steeled himself. With his heart cartwheeling in his chest, he plucked a bright red cracker from the pile and ripped it open.

Pop!

All four children turned to stare at him as he flipped the cracker upside down, and shook it.

And shook.

And shook.

And *shook*.

‘You can stop now,’ said the red-haired girl, eyes round with sympathy. ‘It’s a Scrooge.’

George frowned at his hollow cracker. ‘What’s a *Scrooge*?’

The girl gestured at the foil, already tarnishing in his hands. ‘It’s an empty cracker. It happens sometimes,’ she said, her attention already shifting back to her music box. ‘Bad luck.’

George laid the cracker down, his gaze drawn to the miniature sign on the table.

Strictly one cracker per child.
WARNING: Scrooge hazard.
Satisfaction not guaranteed.

‘That’s not very fair,’ he mumbled, but the others weren’t listening any more. They had returned to marvelling at their gifts, leaving George to his own stirring curiosity.

He wandered away. A row of sapphire-eyed rocking horses peered up at him as he paused to inspect a shelf called JINGLES, which housed an extensive collection of bells. Below it, a shelf called TRICKSIES was packed with wooden elves in bright green hats, sitting shoulder to shoulder. Their little legs dangled over the edge, their wide faces wearing blank-eyed stares and toothless smiles that stretched too wide.

‘Creepy,’ muttered George as he hunkered down.

He swore he heard an answering grunt, but when he looked around there was no one there. Most of the children had left with their new toys, leaving just the arguing siblings from before. They were stationed all the way across the shop. He decided it must have been the floorboards, squeaky beneath the pine needles.

WHY NOT? included the most impressive collection of Christmas hats George had ever seen – woolly creations with humongous bobbles, Santa hats that came complete with cloudy beards, and stripy ones that wound round and round and round, all the way towards the ceiling. There were flashing red noses and candy-cane earrings, elf-shoes with golden bells on top and an array of woolly Christmas jumpers of all sizes, including one tiny enough to fit a bumblebee.

‘But why . . .’

‘I think you’ll find the question is *why not?*’ Marley piped up from behind his newspaper. ‘Bees are famously festive. Many animals are, in fact.’

George fleetingly thought about putting Coco the cat in a Christmas jumper, but he could already picture the disgruntlement that would earn him. He moved on, past jars of *Jolly-Making Jam* (one spoon at a time), pots of *Talkative Teabags* (after school only) and stacks of *Belligerent Bath-bombs* (luxuriously insensitive), which were arranged artfully around

a big blue tin of *Melancholic Mints* (have yourself a nice cathartic weep).

ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE housed miniature chimneys no bigger than George's fist, each one made of real brick and sprinkled with soot. In one of the chimneys, George swore he could see a tiny black boot dangling inside the grate but when he poked his finger in, it disappeared. Beside it, IMPOSSIBLY ABSOLUTE was full of delectable treats: gingerbread Santa Clauses, cinnamon-biscuit trees and snowball-shaped cream cakes. Their glittering labels promised *Christmas in every nibble, delight in every bite*.

George bumped into the sniping siblings at a shelf called CHRISTMAS CAROLS. They were poring over a line-up of glass birds, trying to decide between the bluebird and the nightingale. Every time they picked one up to inspect it, the bird chirped a perfectly tuned Christmas melody. On the shelf below, labelled CHRISTMAS QUARRELS, the same set of birds surrendered angry squawks and shrill screeches when touched. After lifting the first one, George returned it promptly and backed away from the shelf, spouting, 'Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,' until the siblings stopped glaring at him.

He found himself then at LAST-MINUTE MIRACLES.

It was a shelf of snow globes. There were churches and houses and cities and villages, whole worlds populated by tiny figures twirling in feather-soft snow. He studied each

one in turn, his breath catching when he came to the final snow globe.

With trembling fingers, George lifted it from its perch and brought it to his nose. It was almost empty, save for one familiar figure.

‘That’s impossible,’ he whispered.

This time, Marley said nothing.

George peered into the glass. A lopsided snowman stared back at him, with one blue-button eye, one yellow as the sun. His smile was a crescent of turquoise beads – George’s mother’s necklace. His nose was a bright orange carrot, and on his bulbous head sat a familiar dark green trilby hat, scuffed along the rim. It belonged to George’s father. *That was the beginning of my fashionable phase, Georgie*, echoed his voice in George’s head. *Sometimes, a spark of colour makes all the difference in the world.*

George’s breath fogged against the snow globe.

This wasn’t just *any* snowman.

It was *George’s* snowman.

The three of them had made it together at Nan’s old house on Christmas Eve morning, heaving and stacking and packing and chiselling, their laughter chattering happily through their teeth, while his father’s nose turned red and his mother’s fingers went numb.

He looks like a Fred, doesn’t he, darling?

Our perfectly imperfect Fred.

Somewhere behind George, a bell jingled.

Old Marley ruffled his newspaper. 'Age?'

'Um. Eleven?'

'And?'

A tremulous response. 'Eleven . . . and three quarters?'

George might have recognized the voice if he hadn't been hopelessly lost in the folds of his own past at that moment.

'And the smaller one?'

'Clementine is six.'

A younger voice then, loud as a foghorn. 'SIX AND ONE DAY ACTUALLY.'

Clementine.

George didn't hear the name.

'I'M A CAPRICORN. JUST LIKE JESUS.'

An appraising *hmm* from Marley. 'And are you quite sure you're not secretly thirty-seven, Clementine? There's a boy over there with a fully-grown moustache. It's impossible to tell these days.'

A delighted giggle. 'NOPE.'

There was nothing then but the rustle of curiosity, two satisfying *pops!* and the murmurings of two children utterly engrossed in the contents of their Christmas crackers.

Across the shop, George was afraid to move. He might lose it then – the sound of his mother's laughter, undusting itself in the farthest corner of his mind.

There was a tap on his shoulder. ‘George?’

George was so startled he nearly smashed the snow globe. He whirled round.

His cousin blinked back at him. She was taller than when George had last seen her, but her hair was just as curly and her eyes were the same chestnut brown. George would have known them anywhere.

‘B-Bobbie,’ he spluttered. ‘W-what are you doing here?’

‘I can’t believe it’s really you, George.’ Bobbie shook her head in disbelief. ‘And *here* of all places. We haven’t seen you in . . .’ she trailed off, a blush rising in her cheeks. ‘Well, since the funeral.’

George wanted the ground to swallow him up, gulp him down and then digest him for good measure. ‘Yeah . . . It’s been ages.’

‘HALLO, GEORGE!’ Clementine appeared beside her sister, waving a clump of red foil in greeting. ‘I’M SIX NOW. DID YOU KNOW?’

George stared down at his littlest cousin. What she was missing in front teeth, she made up for in enthusiasm. She was wearing a scarf made of pine cones and smiling with her whole face. ‘Happy birthday for yesterday, Clem.’

‘YOU HAVE A CATERPILLAR ON YOUR FACE, GEORGE.’

Embarrassment roared in George's ears as he suddenly remembered the moustache. He whipped it off in one painful swipe.

Clementine screamed.

A chair screeched as old Marley leapt to his feet. 'What the Dickens is going on over there?'

'It's all right, Clem,' hushed Bobbie. 'It's only pretend.'

George gestured at the crumpled foil in Clementine's fist. 'Did you pull your cracker?' he asked, flipping the subject like a coin in his palm. 'What did you get?'

Clementine caught a shuddering breath, and nodded. She peeled the foil away to reveal a tiny white snowflake. 'Bobbie says it's called a *Forever Flake*.' She frowned as she turned it over. 'I don't think you can eat it.' She nibbled at its edges just to be sure, then made a face. 'It tastes like a tree.'

'I got a *Grow-Your-Own Christmas Cake*.' Bobbie held up an iced Christmas cake the exact size of a £1 coin. 'Apparently you just add water.'

George eyed the tiny cake with great suspicion.

'Hey, remember the Christmas when you ate four slices of cake in a row and had to lie down for an hour?' said Bobbie. 'You completely missed Pictionary.'

George blushed. 'Yeah, I remember.'

‘Do you still draw?’ she asked. ‘You and your mum made such a good team. The rest of us never got a look-in.’

‘Not really,’ said George, struggling to remember the last time he had even tried. ‘It’s hard to think of stuff these days.’

‘DRAGONS!’ Clementine burst out.

George smiled. ‘That’s a good idea, Clem.’

Clementine beamed with pride. ‘Why did you disappear, Georgie? We miss you.’

George’s throat throbbed with the words he wanted to say. *I miss you, too. All of you, including Doodle, and sometimes at night if I think about it too much I want to cry.* ‘Oh, er. Well . . .’

‘What have you got then?’ said Bobbie awkwardly. She pointed to the snow globe in his hand. ‘How did that even *fit* in a cracker?’

‘Oh, this? No. No, this isn’t mine. I didn’t get anything in my cracker. I got a Scrooge. Bad luck. I was just looking around really.’ George slid the snow globe back on the shelf, glanced at the cuckoo clock high up on the wall. ‘I should go. Nana Flo is probably looking for me.’

‘You’re still not allowed to talk to us, are you?’ said Bobbie, crestfallen. ‘I’m surprised you were even allowed to come here today.’

Saying goodbye is never easy, George, echoed George’s father’s voice in his head. But a full farewell heals the heart faster.

‘Nice to see you both.’ George slammed his teeth into his bottom lip as he bolted through the cabin door, leaving old Marley staring after him.

I need you to trust me, George. I know what’s good for you.

Outside Gino’s Cioccolata, Nana Flo was twirling on the heel of her boot. Her face lit up when she spotted him, her hair a halo of bright silver in the dark. ‘There you are! I’m sorry I was a bit delayed, love. I ran into Martha from bridge, and I swear that vulture was wearing my new scarf. I left it behind last week.’ She scowled, the fullness of her Irish lilt rearing up with her anger. ‘That woman would steal the polish from my fingernails if I looked away long enough. Honestly, it’s – Oh, Georgie, your eyes are all red. Have you been crying?’

‘I just ripped my moustache off,’ said George, steering her away from Marley’s Christmas Curiosities. The air was thick with cloying sweetness, and it was suddenly making him feel queasy. ‘Let’s go home.’

‘George! Wait!’

Nana Flo glanced over her shoulder. ‘Ah,’ she said, with dawning understanding. ‘Do you want to see to that, love? I’ll wait here for you.’

George waded back through a tide of bobble hats and frost-nipped cheeks. When Bobbie caught up to him, she stuck her hand out. The snow globe rested on her gloved

palm. ‘The old man wouldn’t wrap it for me. He said he deals in “curiosities” not “frivolities”. Apparently, there’s a big difference.’ She shrugged, looked at her boots. ‘I only had £3.22 with me, but the man said that’s exactly what it cost, so it seemed a bit like fate. Sorry about earlier. I know it’s not your fault. Merry Christmas, George.’

George felt like he had swallowed a fist. ‘Thanks,’ he managed.

‘You know, Mum and Dad are always saying they wish you’d come to ours for Christmas again. Just like it used to be. Why don’t you?’

‘We’re staying home this year,’ said George quickly. ‘Thanks, though.’

Bobbie shrugged again. ‘Tell your dad, anyway. And Nana Flo is welcome, too. Not Coco though. Doodle is terrified of her.’

George smiled. ‘Yeah, I remember.’

‘Do you, George?’ she said quietly.

‘BOBBIE HURRY UP I WANT FUDGE!’ Clementine’s voice barrelled across the fair, startling them from their conversation. Bobbie turned away before George could answer. He stared after his cousin. He caught sight of his aunt Alice then. She was standing with Clementine and Uncle Eli by the carousel, and looking at him with his mum’s

eyes. They were big and glassy, and her smile – George’s mum’s smile – was crooked.

The last time George had seen his aunt Alice, she’d been on crutches, her left leg wrapped in a cast that went past her knee, her face a mural of fresh scrapes. She couldn’t look him in the eyes then. She just kept shaking her head, saying, *Sorry, sorry, sorry*, while George’s father, stiff-backed and pale-faced, batted each one away. *Please let’s not, Alice. Please, don’t.*

The memory passed through him like a shudder, and George blinked himself back to the present. He realized Uncle Eli was cradling something in his arms – a bundle of blankets.

No – not a bundle. A baby.

A new cousin.

Alice raised her hand, but George was already turning from her, his throat full of half-formed words.

Certain people are better left in the past, George. They’ll only remind us of what we’ve lost.

George’s chest tightened as he moved through the crowds, away from his family.

On the bus home, George and his nan shed Christmas like a cloak, binning the last of their candy canes and dusting the powdered sugar from their hoods. With a heaving groan, the bus pulled away from the fair and at that precise moment, as

if the magic of their wonderland adventure had finally sputtered out, Nana Flo's phone began to ring. The noise hung in the air like a siren, as Hugo Bishop's name filled the screen.

George shrank into his seat. Three long years had passed since his father first cancelled Christmas. Not just the tree, but the stockings and the presents too. The games and the turkey and the gravy and the carols and even the adverts on telly. They were not to speak of it any more. Not to each other, and not even to themselves.

Christmas is over, George, and it's not coming back.

There's nothing left to celebrate.

George tucked his hands into his pockets. In two days' time, Christmas would be upon them once more and his father's mood was as foul as ever. George brushed his fingers against his new snow globe, the last-minute miracle cool against his skin.

Old Marley's magic was beginning to stir.

Though he didn't know it yet, George was going to need every last drop.