

# The Knight Before Christmas

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By Michael Weed



was the night before the night before Christmas,

and all through the town,  
every pleo was stirring,  
(although Grumpy wore a frown).

Grumpy stood in is trashcan outside of his shop as Sally walked up and wished him a Merry Christmas.

"Bah, humbug!" Grumpy retorted joyfully, seeming to smile inwardly from behind his frown.

"Still on the naughty list this year too?" Sally smiled back sweetly at Grumpy.

"I've got it covered this time." Grumpy sneered.

"Is your business not doing well?" Sally inquired. The jingle bells on the bright red Christmas bow she wore on her head added a cheery tinkle as she tilted her head to one side.

"What do you think?" Grumpy scowled, "I run a candy store! Of course I'm doing well. Christmas is my busiest time of year . . . next to Valentine's day."

"Then what reasons have you to be unhappy?" Sally smiled back. "Merry indeed you should be!"

"I finally got my liquor license approved." Grumpy grumbled and shook his head side-to-side a wee bit as if in disgust.

"That sounds like it should be good news to you." Sally kept smiling, although she was becoming a bit confused, "But . . . pleos can't drink liquids. Is that the problem that is making you so sad?" she conjectured.

"Pleos don't actually *EAT* either," Grumpy grumped back, "But that never hurt my candy sales. No, it's that the minimum drinking age is 21, and since pleos weren't around before 2006 . . . no pleo is even close to the drinking age."

"That's ridiculous. That's in human years!" Sally replied, surprised and trying to cheer Grumpy up, "Pleos reach the adult stage in a matter of weeks or months. Who set the age limit at 21?"

"The government."

"What government?" Sally smile was now fully replaced by a quizzical look. "After the fall of Pleopia, the only

*government* left is Bob, since he's a knight . . . and lord of this realm."

"Yeah. I know. . . You try talking legislative reform with that bobble-headed boob. What I need to do is use a (k)night stick on his head!! Did you know he actually has a suit of armor and a broadsword hanging on the wall like he's a *real* knight?"

"I'll bring it up at our next session of parliament." Sally smiled with big grin, enjoying her rare opportunity get Grumpy with a both an accurate and an appropriate sarcastic comeback, since she had been secretary and speaker of the House of Commons the one time parliament had met before the fall of pleopia.

"Ha . . . and again I say: Ha. Very. Funny." The skin on Grumpy's forehead furrowed down to join his frown (although he inwardly wished he had eyebrows instead of just eye patches), "That's almost as funny *Sir* Bob . . ."

"And a Bah! Humbug to you all!" shouted Grumpy as Sally walked away.

Meanwhile, somewhere deep beneath Mt. Crumpit, from the cold stone floor in depths of the the icy cave that was his

laboratory, Dr. Mel let out an evil laugh, "Bwa-ha-ha-ha! It's . . . It's . . . YES!! It's *ALIVE!*" he cried out in evil triumph.

Back in the classic alpine-style village that was the main street of Weedovia, the sun had set and the town had come alive -- illuminated by the thousands and thousands of Christmas lights strung up on and between every building and around the Christmas displays that were happily set up in every store front. This time of year especially, Weedovia really was a wonderland. The smell of hot apple cider, cocoa, and peppermint wafted from the street vendor's carts. Pleos were all dressed up in their holiday attire and out window shopping and chatting with friends and neighbors. Off in the East, lightning flashed repeatedly but unnoticed behind the twinkling lights and flashing cameras, because all the pleos were out admiring the pretty displays, sharing Christmas greetings, and having typical holiday fun as they all headed to Fred's Pizzeria for the annual Christmas party.

All, that is, except for Grumpy -- who stood outside the door to his store returning each warm Christmas greeting with a sincere and cold "Bah, humbug!"

"Aren't you coming for the party?" Bob called out as he passed by.

"It's free food. Of course I am! But let me enjoy greeting all the townsfolk first!" Grumpy called back.

"A Merry Christmas to You, Grumpy!" Teddi the tailor called out as he and his wife passed by.

"And A Bah, Humbug! to you and the Lady!" Grumpy replied with nod and tip of his hat.

"Merry your Christmas I hope will be!" Yogurt waved as he walked by.

"Humbug! And Bah!" Grumpy replied.

James snuck up beside Grumpy and whispered "Have you seen Dr. Mel? He's up to something . . ."

"What kind of Christmas greeting is that, you trigger happy limey looney-bird? And put that gun away before I smack you with a candy cane, it's a Christmas party. Now, let's try it again."

"Right. Uh . . . Merry Christmas, Grumpy!" James slid the gun into his vest holster and pulled out a bright red clip-on bow tie for his tuxedo.

"Bah, Humbug to you James!" Grumpy snapped back, "And not since he bought all the snow shovels from the hardware store this morning."

"And why are you just standing there, Mopey?" Grumpy continued to greet passers-by.

"I, uh, just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas, but I didn't want to interrupt you and James." Mopey replied. "I figured no one would notice and no one cared anyway."

"Well, you're right about that." Grumpy rolled his eyes, "But you should be more assertive with Mr. Penguin in his fancy suit. Let him know you're waiting your turn to be insulted and that he should waddle along. And, oh yeah, BAH HUMBUG! Now move that blue hide of yours along!"

Once everyone was at the party and the streets were clear, Grumpy hung some holiday decor on his top hat and strolled across the street to join the gang at the party. A cold gust suddenly blew out of the north, ruffling the red muffler wrapped around his neck.

Inside, the place was warm and decorated and Christmas music was playing. A blazing fire roared in the fireplace, the Christmas tree glittered with tinsel and ornaments, pine garland was strung around all the walls, and red big velvety bows were hung all around. Everyone was busy talking and laughing and having a wonderful time.

Sally walked up to Bob and asked "Don't you just love all the red and green decorations Fred put up?"

"It's an Italian restaurant. Fred always uses red and green to decorate." Bob replied, looking confused until he spotted the buffet table, "Oh! I see! Pepperoni and Jalapeno on the pizzas! That is a festive red and green!"

"Don't be silly, Bob. I mean the Christmas tree, and presents, and *mistletoe* . . ." Sally paused for a moment.

"That's odd. The mistletoe is missing. Oh well. So, who's your Secret Santa this year?"

"What do you mean, *secret*? It's no secret. Santa's the guy in the bright red suit sitting in the chair over by the tree. He runs Kringle's Toy Shoppe next door." Bob wasn't following what Sally meant.

"I mean, who drew your name for our gift exchange?" Sally clarified.

"I told you." Bob tried to point out, "The guy in the red suit over there."

"You mean Santa, the real Santa Claus, is your secret Santa this year?" Sally rolled her eyes.

Santa waved a black mittened hand at Sally from across the room as if to say "Hello."

"And who's name did you draw?" Sally tried to regain her composure.

"Dr. Mel. I was going to get him a snow shovel, seeing as he lives in a snow covered mountain, but the hardware store was all sold out."

Sally realized this conversation was going nowhere and quickly turned to the nearest pleo walking past her.

"Oh, Hi Grumpy. Glad you could make it." Sally said.

"Yeah, yeah. Where's the buffet?" Grumpy tried to continue walking past her, "And Bob better not have orders onions and garlic on everything again this year . . ."

"Hey, wait. It was your job to set up the Christmas tree and mistletoe." Sally stood in his way.

"The tree's over there" Grumpy shrugged his left shoulder, trying to find a way past her, "Why? Don't you like it?"

"But where's the mistletoe?" Sally insisted.

Grumpy stopped and his frown turned to a wicked grin and he looked up at the brim of his hat. "Why, right here." He said in his best fake innocent voice, and then smiled at her.

Sally followed his glance and spotted the mistletoe hanging above Grumpy's nose. "Not even in your wildest dreams, lizard lips." She retorted.

"Hey, we're dinosaurs, we all have lizard lips. So, what about in *your* wildest dreams?"

Sally quickly looked back hoping Bob was still there and she could use him as a distraction. But he wasn't . . . and Grumpy still was . . . all puckered up.

Suddenly a hand tapped on her shoulder and she turned to see Santa.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about some folks on my naughty list." Santa started talking to Sally.

Sally glanced back at Grumpy to find he'd moved on to the buffet table.

"Consider that an early Christmas present." Santa smiled and winked at Sally, and then turned and walked away.

Many hours later, long after the party had ended and everyone had gone home to sleep, in the wee early hours of the morning, before the sunrise was even a thought, Dr. Mel stood just inside the fence surrounding his frosty hideout and smiled evilly as he looked out across the fields at the sleeping town of Weedovia. He then quietly opened the gate, and waved to his newly created horde of minions,

signaling them to move out. Behind them, a trail of frozen ground spread as they moved forward.

Bob stretched all four legs and tail, yawned, and rolled over on his side. He quickly pulled the covers around his head more tightly to keep out the cold, and rolled back over to go back to sleep. But something in the back of his programming was signaling an error message. He grumbled to himself and squeaked open an eyelid just a teensy bit. But that was enough. He slammed it back shut and buried his head completely under the blanket. A layer of ice and snow covered his floor and bedspread.

But that pesky error message just kept blinking in the back of his mind.

"Oy, What is it?" he grumbled to himself.

"It isn't supposed to be so cold. There shouldn't be ice all over your floor." The voice inside himself told him.

"That's why I'm curled up under the sheets." he told himself, wondering why this point wasn't obvious to the other himself.

"It means there's something wrong, you dufus." himself said.

"All right! That's it!" Bob said out loud to himself. "You're not Grumpy, so you can't talk to me like that, even if you *ARE* me! What do you expect me to do about it, anyway? I'm not the weatherman! Hiding under these warm sheets seems like a good idea to me, even if I don't agree with myself!"

"Get up and figure out what's wrong!" his inner self yelled back. "And besides, you're not an RB." it pointed out, "Regular pleos aren't designed to feel cold."

"Oh, all right." Bob reluctantly threw the covers off, only to discover that since they were frozen, they didn't budge. Instead, he struggled to wriggle out through the opening at the top of the sheets, only to slip on the ice and slide right off the bed, across the floor, and smack into the window.

From his window he could see out over the town. That is, over the white tundra that used to be the town. The festively decorated buildings were now fantastically shaped ice sculptures. The colorfully decorated trees were all white with thick heavy snow. And the streets were empty sheets of wind-blown ice.

Empty until Bob saw Sally come running out of the library. As she started sliding across the town square, Bob saw three evil looking snowmen come sliding out of the library

after her. Sally turned to look over her shoulder at them. Bob saw the snowmen throwing snowballs at her, and then Sally was nothing more than a new ice sculpture!

The snowmen stopped, examining their handiwork, and then slowly drifted off in different directions.

Bob panicked at the sight and ran out the door, totally forgetting he lived in a castle on top of a now frozen mountain. He slipped on an ice patch and shot over the edge! Sliding on his back tail first, building up tremendous speed, he shot down the mountainside, across the fairgrounds, into town, down the main street, past two very startled patrolling snowmen, ricocheted off the frozen Sally (who otherwise would have been very offended), did a flip over the now ice fountain, crashed through the door of Kringle's Toy Shoppe, plowed through a pile of snow-covered stuffed teddy bears, and landed plunk in a D-Rex display, creating a big puff of stuffing, glitter, boxes, batteries, and layaway applications. As the snow and applications gently resettled on top of the mess, two snowmen hurriedly slid up to the door. They looked in through the broken doorframe, slowly scanning back and forth for the cause of the commotion. And then, satisfied that nothing moved, they slid away.

Bob was about to get up when a paw went over his mouth and a finger went "Shhhh!" (which is really difficult to do if you've ever looked at a pleo's feet.) Out of the shadows stepped the silhouetted figure of James. "Don't move or they'll be back!" he whispered.

"Wha . . . What's going on?" Bob stuttered quietly.

"It's Dr. Mel. He's built an army of snowmen that he's brought to life. He's frozen everything and everybody. It was just Sally and I. But they just got her. . . So now they're gonna pay!"

James slid quietly to the door while Bob watched from under the pile of toys. He edged his back along the broken doorframe and looked out between the broken panes of glass. He watched and waited for a snowman to wander into the square. He aimed carefully between two of broken glass panes of the shattered door, and then fired one shot. . . The bullet hit the snowman right between its two coal eyes, vaporizing the entire snowman into a cloud of silvery glitter. The gunshot echoed loudly several times off the ice encased buildings, and as it died off all that was left were the two lumps of coal and a carrot nose lying on the frozen ground.

This immediately brought a dozen more snowmen sliding into the square from every direction. They formed a circle looking down at the carrot nose on the ground, then up at each other, then over at the toy shop, and en masse they came sliding.

James leapt through the doorway, gun firing as he ran towards them. As if in slow motion one by one the bullets fired . . . one by one the snowmen puffed into clouds of glitter. (I say "as if in slow motion" because if you've ever seen a pleo run . . .) And then it was just James, a pistol that merely went "click . . . click . . ." and five **VERY** angry snowmen.

"Oh, pooh!" James threw the gun down. The snowmen glared at James and started in slowly . . . James held up his index toe and said "Hang on a sec . . ." The snowmen paused for a moment, forming their coal eyes into a quizzical look. James reached in to his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The snowmen looked at each other then back at James. He dialed to phone. The snowmen dove on top of him. And all Bob heard was a muffled "Hello . . ." and then silence as the five snowmen drifted off, leaving a glistening, frozen James to decorate the town square.

"I've got to get Dr. Mel to stop!" Bob thought to himself.

"He's probably in his secret hideout just outside of town." the voice in the back of his head informed him.

"Why are you telling me that?" he asked himself.

"I was just trying to be helpful." he said, "And you should probably try sneaking out the back. If those snow goons catch you, you're toast."

"I thought I'd be a frozen popsicle. Toast is warm and crunchy." Bob corrected his inner self.

"Yeah, yeah. Get moving!" was his only comeback he could think of to tell himself.

Bob spent the rest of the day sneaking from one bush to another, hiding behind trees, avoiding the prowling snowmen, and waiting at the bus station for a bus until he remembered the town didn't have a bus.

"Why do have that thing anyway?" He wondered.

As he finally reached the gate outside of Dr. Mel's secret hideout, he paused to admire the nicely maintained wrought-iron fence encircling the snowy mountain. The snow and ice had been recently scraped off the stepping stones and a "not welcome" mat had been placed in front of

the gate. The gate was well lit and protected by a matching wrought iron arbor inset with decorative glass panes. On the gate were three signs. The first sign read "Welcome to Dr. Mel's Secret Hideout." The next read "Private. Keep Out." The last one troubled Bob a bit more. It read "Trespassers will be eaten."

Bob pushed the gate open. It apparently had been left unlocked. He stepped through and as he turned to close the gate a snowman came around the far edge of the mountain. Bob stopped, having seen the snowman. The snowman stopped, having seen Bob. Bob screamed and ran for entrance to Dr. Mel's hideout. And the snowman slid to intercept Bob. Bob made it to the base of the mountain only a few feet ahead of the snowman, but he couldn't figure out where to start climbing when the snowman caught up to him. It slid right up to Bob's side, rubbing up against him and started purring.

"Purring?" Bob self said to him.

"Yeah, Purring." Bob answered himself, "Aren't we using the same ears?"

Bob tried stepping to one side. The snowman moved with him; still purring and pinning him against the side of the mountain. Bob turned around, and the snowman slid around

to Bob's other side, still purring. Bob got irritated and whacked it with his tail. The snowman let out a loud "Meowr!" and backed off, hissing.

"That's just too weird." Bob thought to himself.

"I know. Huh. Anyway, we need to find the way in . . . before Fluffy's friends find us."

Bob zigged and zagged his way up the mountainside, up to a small cave near the overhang at the top. Once inside the cave, he found a staircase that zagged and zigged its way back down into the bowels of the mountain.

As Bob rounded the last twisty turn, he was greeted by a warm glow and Dr. Mel sitting behind a desk.

"Well, well. It's you. Once again we meet again! Did you enjoy my little friends?"

"Uh, not really. Especially that one outside your cave. Waaay to friendly. What with it anyway?" Bob never could follow a conversation.

"That's Igor. Something went wrong with that one." Dr. Mel mused, "You see, I used the lumps of coal Santa has been leaving me for Christmas all these years to harness the powers of the North Pole . . . and take over Christmas. For

you see, he too, is as frozen as the rest of your pitiful little pleo friends."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Bob wondered aloud.

"Standard evil villain monologue. I'm required to tell you everything just before I kill you. It's some stupid government requirement. I tried to talk to Sally about it, but she keeps wanting to put it off until the next meeting of parliament. Anyway . . ." Dr. Mel slid open the desk drawer, reached in, and pulled out . . . a snowball! "I've been saving this one for you!" he screamed as he stood up and drew his arm back to throw the snowball at Bob.

Just then the door burst open and three men, dressed all in black suits, wearing dark sunglasses, rushed in.

"You under arrest." one of the men stated to Dr. Mel as he grabbed the arm holding up the snowball, slapped a handcuff on the wrist and pulled it down behind Dr. Mel's back.

"What's the meaning of this? Who *ARE* you? And what's going on?" Dr. Mel demanded as he stiffened his back.

"Copyright violation. We're from the MPAA. And we received an anonymous tip from a cell phone in the area that you've been quoting lines from the Boris Karloff version of

*Frankenstein*. Is this not the laboratory of a mad scientist, and haven't you been using lightning to bring dead creatures to life as well? That's stealing from the plot of several *Frankenstein* movies."

"Well, yes." Dr. Mel shrugged his shoulders. "But I got all of it from Mary Shelly's Book *Frankenstein* . . . and it's in the public domain!" he insisted.

"Yeah, right. Like anyone reads books these days." the man in black replied.

"But what about fair use! Satire!" Dr. Mel struggled against the handcuffs and the other two men who were now holding him by the arms.

"We're lawyers. We're above the law. You're guilty unless you can pass the guilt on to someone else." the man sneered. "Fair use. Ha. That's only for high-priced lawyers and corporations with deep pockets." he chuckled. "Now take him away!"

"But what about the snowmen? The frozen town? My friends?" Bob spoke up.

"And who are you?" the man in black looked a bit confused by the small green thing on the floor.

"I'm the law 'round these here parts." Bob tried to look tough and sound like John Wayne.

"The law?!?" the man was really confused now.

"Yes. I'm the duly appointed Knight of the Realm in this town."

"Let me get this right . . ." the man in black tried to put it together. "You're the knight. It's just before Christmas. And all through the town, not a creature is stirring?"

"Yeah . . ." Now Bob was getting confused.

"Could be a copyright infringement." the man thought out loud, "But it's from poetry. We only do movies. Not our problem." And with that, Bob found himself alone in the laboratory.

Bob looked around at the empty lab and thought to himself "What do I do now?"

"C'mon! Get a grip! You're the Knight around these parts!" himself tried to encourage him. "Now go out there and *BE* the knight!"

"You're right!" Bob stamped his foot in a show of confidence. "But what does a knight do?" he wondered.

"I could take my knightly sword and hack the ice away." he thought. "Take too long." came the response from inside.

"What else do knight do . . ." Bob thought, and thought.

"They fight dragons." he came up with an idea.

"How's that gonna help?" the thought came back. "Besides, you're a knight of the order of Pizza . . ."

"That's it!" he realized.

Bob rushed out of the laboratory and across the frozen field heading straight for Fred's pizzeria. A snowman spotted him and slid to intercept. Bob saw the snowman, steeled his gaze, put his head down like a battering ram, and ran all the faster (which ain't easy for a pleo . . . ).

"What are you doing!" the voice came from inside, "'You know how easily a neck cable can snap!"

The snowman loomed directly ahead . . . and Bob just plowed straight into the front . . . and out the back side!

The snowman looked down at the gaping hole through his bottom ball and exclaimed "I have legs!" and ran off shouting in joy.

Bob dashed into the restaurant and dove behind the counter.

"Dough . . ." flour went everywhere, "Sauce . . ." cans fell to the ground with a loud crash, "Cheese . . . toppings . . ." Bob mumbled to himself as more stuff flew everywhere. Pots and pans went all over the place. Red and green and yellow splatters were on everything. A cloud of flour dust filled the air. And then with a slam, the oven door closed behind the catastrophic mess.

"Whew!" Bob sighed to himself. "I wonder if there are any quarters laying around for the video games . . ."

"Video Games?!? Playing at a time like this?!?" the thoughts came from somewhere in the back of his head, "You've got a town to save!!!"

"Relax." he told himself, "It takes about 15 minutes for the pizza to cook."

Fifteen minutes and 83 quarters later Bob got up from the Pac-Man machine and toddled back to the kitchen.

"I'm not very good at Pac-Man, am I?" Bob's inner voice said.

"Nope." Bob answered himself.

Bob grabbed the big spatula, opened the oven door, and pulled out a hot, steaming mound that was supposed to be a pizza . . . And in a few bites the pile was gone.

"Don't I ever bother to chew?" his inner voice nagged.

"Nope." Bob answered with a big burp.

And with that burp, the kitchen counters and half the dining room instantly thawed. A few wisps of steam were left wafting from the tables that a moment ago had been perfect for ice hockey, and all that inner voice could say was "Wha?!?"

"Pepperoni, Italian sausage, onion, garlic, and extra, extra, extra, extra jalapenos, with a sprinkling of cumin." Bob smiled.

He walked around the counter, puckered his lips, and blew gently into the other half of the dining room -- which melted just as quickly.

"See. It isn't just dragons that can breathe fire!" Bob told himself.

Bob stepped out of the restaurant and started breathing on all the buildings, trees, and other pleos. Soon the whole town was melted (and smelled somewhat oddly of Mexican food). Lastly Bob went up and breathed on James and Sally.

Sally coughed and grimaced, "Get a breath mint, Bob!" she exclaimed.

"Huh?!?" Bob exclaimed.

"You're right." Sally nodded, and then walked over to where Grumpy stood still frozen in his trash can. She chipped the ice around his head to free the hat and brought it back to where Bob stood confused watching her. She gently placed the frozen top hat on Bob's head and pointed up:

"Mistletoe."

Bob looked up at the brim of the hat and Sally planted a big kiss right on his nose camera.

"Thanks for saving us." She said. "But seriously, get some mints, or mouthwash, or something!"

As Bob stood there dazed and confused, that inner voice just had to interrupt: "It's Christmas eve. Did you forget about Santa?"

"Ooops!" Bob thought and rushed off to the back of the toy shop where he blew a big breath on the snow covered Santa figurine.

"Lords a Leapin'! It's almost midnight!" Santa exclaimed as he shook off the last bits of ice. "I gotta get going! Thanks once again for saving Christmas, Bob!" And like the down of a thistle he was away like a flash. And they heard him

exclaim as he rode out of site "Merry Christmas to all, and Bob, get a breath mint!"

By now it was late, and it was Christmas eve, so everyone wished everyone else a Merry Christmas and everyone headed home and to bed. Bob went back to his castle and fixed himself a cup of hot cocoa and sat down in front of the fireplace.

He let his mind wander and wonder what it might be like to be a dragon and breathe real fire, or be a real knight in shining armor battling in sword fights and saving damsels in distress, which reminded him of Sally's kiss, which reminded him of his bad breath, and back to being a dragon and breathing real fire . . .

"Bob!" A stern voice broke the silence and woke Bob out of his dreaming. "How many times do I have to tell you NOT to leave the fire going on Christmas Eve? I had to come in through the balcony window!"

Bob turned around to see Santa standing there with his bag of toys slung over his shoulder.

"Here," Santa continued, "A little something for you." Santa stuck a ribbon on Bob's chest. It was a bright red crushed velvet ribbon holding a silver star that read *Clement Moore*.

"For bravery above and beyond the call of a pleo," Santa intoned in a serious voice, "I award you this Medal of Honor. You are now officially the Knight before Christmas."

Santa stood back and with a wink of his eye and a twist of his head, soon gave Bob to know he had nothing to dread. And laying his finger aside of his nose, and giving a nod, out the balcony he rose.

When out on the rooftop there arose such a clatter, Bob sprang to his feet to see what was the matter. Away to the balcony Bob flew like a flash, tore open the bay doors and threw up the sash. The moon on the breast of the un-thawed-out snow, gave the luster of mid-day to objects above; when, what to Bob's wondering eyes should appear, but Santa's sleigh caught on some Christmas light sets, and eight tiny reindeer having regrets, with a cranky old driver, so grouchy and mean, it had to be Grumpy trying to flee the scene.

"He's hijacked the sleigh!" Santa called down to Bob, "Quick! Stop him!"

Bob looked around quickly, but there was nothing around except the half-finished and now cold cup of cocoa.

One of the Christmas light sets of snapped and the sleigh lurched forward a few inches. Bob could see the remaining set wouldn't hold long . . . He had to do something, but what? There was nothing that around that could help . . .

Bob looked back at the cocoa. He grabbed it up quick and slammed it down his throat. The excess air and cold cocoa caused him to feel a bit queasy, so he let out a big burp . . . which he aimed right at the reindeer. The combination of sour milk, chocolate, and greasy jalapenos was all they could take. The reindeer fainted and collapsed on the roof.

"Curses, foiled again!" cried grumpy as the sleigh dropped to the roof as well.

"I'll take those." Santa grabbed the reins from Grumpy and shoved his trash can out of the sleigh.

"Drat, drat, and triple drat! Now I'll never get a gift for Christmas." Grumpy grumbled.

"I always leave you something." Santa pointed out.

"Yeah," Grumpy frowned, "Some of the best wrapped coal I've ever seen."

"Well, you *are* on my naughty list."

"What's a pleo got to do to get on the nice list?" Grumpy asked half-way as a question, and halfway as a snide remark.

"Try being *nice*." Santa suggested.

"Yeah, right. I mean really, what do you want from me?"

"O.K., I'll tell you what. You give one *nice* gift to Bob for Christmas this year, and I'll see you get something besides coal." Santa looked Grumpy in the eye. "Deal?"

"Oh, all right." Grumpy looked sick as he said the words.

"Uh . . . I have a package of Tic Tacs here with me . . ."

Comet raised his head up groggily. "That'll . . . work . . ." He said as he passed back out.

Early the next morning Bob woke to the sun shining brightly upon the town below. Everyone was out and about. Bob rushed down to the main street and stopped the first pleo passing by.

"What day is it?" Bob asked.

"Bob, it Christmas Day of course." The pleo replied.

"So . . . it happened . . . all in one night!" Bob smiled.

"No it didn't. It took two nights and a day."

"But the ghosts . . ." Bob blurted out.

"Ghosts?!?" The pleo exclaimed, "There were no ghosts in this story. Get it together."

"Uh . . ." Bob replied as the pleo hurriedly walked away.

Bob continued down the street to the town square. Grumpy and Sally were there chatting, so Bob walked over and gave a hearty "Merry Christmas to all!"

"Indeed!" replied Sally. "Mmmm, and minty fresh breath too!"

"Bob! Look!" Grumpy seemed truly happy for once. "Santa gave me a new top hat! And it's from the official Ebenezer line of Scrooge Wear!"

Bob smiled and looked over at Kringle's toy shop. Santa waved and gave him a big smile back.

Then Bob's gaze happened to drift over to the store next door . . . There was Fred standing in his doorway.

"BOB!!!" Fred yelled.

"Uh, I gotta go." Bob whispered to Sally and Grumpy as he took a step backwards.

"YOU GET OVER HERE RIGHT THIS MINUTE AND CLEAN UP THIS MESS!!!" Fred shouted at Bob as Bob ducked behind one pole then another as he ran back across the square towards the side street . . .

"COME BACK HERE YOU COWARD!!!"