

Christmas Story 2023

The Ghost of Probabilities

By Robert Ford

December 23, 2023 – 6 PM

The guy who said he was a ghost told me that you didn't have to be *actually* dead for the job. *Nearly* dead would do.

It's not only that I was skeptical, but I also knew I was on hydromorphone and other drugs whose names ended in the syllable 'doan'.

"You have the ability," I said, "to let me become a ghost so I can haunt people on Christmas."

"Yes, well, no, well, kind of," he said. "'Haunt' has a really negative connotation to it."

"Then," I continued, "after I haunt them, I come back to this hospital bed and die."

"Pretty much."

I felt pretty clear-headed for a guy in my condition. Therefore, I thought I should lean into the details. I had that feeling – when you are all drugged up from illness – where people are present, but you aren't really looking at them. This fellow ...

"Hey, what's your name?"

"Matthew," he said.

This fellow, Matthew, looked like he should have a winter coat. He was in dress shirt, no tie, jeans, and the shoes were lace up walking shoes. I looked around and could not see a coat. Last I checked it was winter.

"Can I call you Matt?" I asked.

"No," he said. Seriously straight-forward white guy. For a ghost.

"Let me see if I've got this right. You're going to pull me out of my body, set me up with a fresh one, give me the ability to travel in time, and then point me at someone you think needs a spiritual kick-in-the-pants."

"That's about right."

"How does the time travel stuff work?"

"You can wind back probability to the point you want, and observe it move forward."

"If this is the way *Scrooge* worked ..."

Matthew interrupted: "You mean Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*?"

"Yes, of course. Anyway, I always thought there was the ghost that went into the past, but really the present and future ghosts were **both** looking forward."

"They were the same ghost."

"What?"

"They were the same ghost. Dickens took liberties. Marley would have been distinct, but one entity represented the ghosts of the past, present and future. Or, for fussy-pants like you, past, near-future, future."

"I don't want to be all suspicious, but how do I know you're a ghost? You could be a hallucination brought on by alcohol ... or in my case a lot of opiates."

"You just paraphrased Frank Cross from *Scrooged*."

"Yes, I did."

"OK," said Matthew, "When you are a ghost doing this kind of work, you have access to the mind and history of those around you. Especially if you touch them."

"Really."

"Yes. For example, every time you move in your hospital bed, and your IV lines move, you hear Thomas Dolby's lyrics:

*I don't believe it, there she goes again
She's tidied up and I can't find anything
All my tubes and wires and careful notes
And antiquated notions*

"Wow. That's good."

"I also can change appearance."

Suddenly Matthew had a skull for a face.

"Whoa," I said.

Then he was a woman, who looked like a South Asian Angelina Jolie. Then he was back to his original appearance.

"I'm on death's door. What motivation do I have to do this job? I assume there's no pay."

"Correct," said Matthew, "The rewards of virtual are largely spiritual."

That sounded familiar. I paused.

"Hey," I said, "you just quoted something from *Blackadder's Christmas Carol*."

"Yes," he said. "I most certainly did."

Any more drôle and this guy would be as funny as a French-English dictionary.

"Let's assume I'm interested in the gig. I'm curious; aren't there a lot of actual dead guys who could help you?"

"Well, most dead people are pretty serene. They see such a big picture of the universe that they lose their interest in engaging. Nearly dead people – like you – have much more vigour. Relatively speaking."

"So, who's the target?" I asked. "You're the Marley of this scenario, you must have a specific person in mind."

"His name is Dennis. He's a Financial Advisor."

"You mean the guy who tells you to buy low and sell high and then charges a fee?"

"Pretty much. He's stuck. And the poison in his mind is going to kill him before long if he doesn't change. He's also the most stubborn mule of a human being I've ever known."

This was the first hint that I had that Matthew had feelings in the game. He really cared about this Dennis guy.

"I have one last question. Why choose me from among the many, many nearly dead people at your disposal?"

"For the same reason you noticed I care about Dennis. I'll see you tomorrow around 8 PM."

And with that casual "see-ya-at-work-eh" remark he was gone.

I was still betting on this being a drug induced hallucination.

December 24, 2023 – 8:30 PM

I sent the family off to church and asked them to record the hymns. The choir at St. Bart's did an awesome job of the classic hymns and I loved the descants.

My eldest – at 17 – told me not to die on Christmas Eve because that would be too depressing. Teenaged bluntness incarnate. As usual, his Mom and younger sisters were appalled with him. I said I'd try to wait until Boxing Day.

Not long after they had headed out, Matthew reappeared, looking more dour than usual.

"Is it time?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "I've seen Dennis. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you taking this on."

"Did you do the whole you're-gonna-get-visited-by-three-ghosts thing?"

I started humming the Ghostbusters theme.

Matthew allowed himself a smile. "I only told him one. At this point he's beginning to wish he had some sort of addiction or other ailment to explain me scaring him."

"Obviously," I said, "I'm not getting out of this bed on my own. How does this work?"

"Yeah, about that. As soon as I touch you, you will rise from your bed and be able to manipulate the probabilities that control time and space. Your access to information about what's happened, and what *might* happen, will be overwhelming. I suggest orienting yourself for a half hour or so before going to Dennis's place. You'll have about six hours real time to try to help him."

"How far back in time can I go?"

"Best to keep it to 90-100 years. Things become weird when you are much further back than your parents' age."

"Where does Dennis live?"

"You'll know as soon as I touch you."

And he did.

And my mind exploded.

And it coalesced back to something like me.

Matthew was gone.

I stood. And when I looked at the hospital bed, I was still in bed. Asleep, it seemed. Jesus, I looked terrible. I walked to a mirror and I saw a reflection of me that was a normal pre cancer appearance. I guess that's where I'd rather be. Then I started to roll myself backward. I stopped when I reached about age 20. Then I rolled forward. Huh. When I stopped at about 58, pre cancer, I realized I looked like some of my older relatives. All of whom were gone.

I knew where Dennis lived. Did I have to take a taxi or ride share? Hopefully not! I took a chance and let myself float down to the main floor of the hospital.

It seemed that the bending of probability allowed me to be highly maneuverable.

On the street, no one saw me. The cold air and the dusting of snow had no effect on me. It was as if I were in a room set to a perfect temperature. I walked away from Vancouver General Hospital in the direction of where Dennis lived in the West End.

It was wonderful to feel able-bodied, even though I suspected I wasn't really in a body. Could I materialize and affect things? I reached a red light and stopped. There was a couple holding hands. I focused on them and touched them each on a shoulder. They jumped. Then I suddenly knew everything about them. Where they met. First date. The fact his dad was a real piece of work. Even how much cash they had in their wallets. Matthew was right – overwhelming. I decided to fade out.

"Did you see that?" he said.

"Did you feel that?" she said.

At least they'd have a shared Christmas ghost story.

Because I'm a nerd, I simulated the transporter appearance (classic Trek of course) and I shimmered into existence in Dennis's apartment.

Dennis stared at me. "Serious-fucking-ly?"

"Dennis! How are you?"

I figured he probably wasn't a hugger, so I gave him a big hug and everything about him flooded into me.

He was tall, skinny and had a cheap hair cut. That was what I could see. It was going to take a couple of minutes to decide what to do with all the other information that I had in my head.

"I'd say this was a nice apartment, but when did you last spend a dime on furniture or paint?"

"You're the ghost."

"I'm not the pizza man."

"You got a name?"

"Yes. It's Ghost."

"This is pointless, right? You know that."

"Maybe, but – gosh – why don't we have some fun with the time we have? And honour your friend Matthew. His soul needs some rest."

Now that I had Dennis's history sorted out in my head, I knew why Matthew needed rest.

"I've seen this movie," said Dennis. "Can we skip it?"

"Nope." I grabbed his wrist and we beamed to 1984.

December 23, 1984 – 12:45 AM

It was dark in the house. I gestured for Dennis to shhh even though it was unnecessary. We walked up stairs in the dim light and into a bedroom.

"Is this ... " Dennis started.

"Careful. You'll wake the baby."

A baby started crying.

A man wearily rose from the bed beside the crib and carefully took the baby boy out and rocked him for a few minutes. Dennis looked at the man in disbelief. I reckon Dennis assumed this would all be some kind of mind game and not actual time travel. It didn't take long for Dennis to realize this was his father and that the baby was Baby Dennis.

The baby settled and Dad put Baby Dennis back in the crib. Not ten seconds later the baby cried out once more. Dad clenched his fists and pressed them hard against his temples. His frustration evident, he smacked Baby Dennis while he lay in his crib. Predictably, the crying intensified. Dennis's father picked the baby up and muttered, "I'm so sorry" over and over with tears running down his face. He took the baby with him to bed and let the child settle beside him.

"Where is my mother?" whispered Dennis.

"No need to whisper," I said, "they can't hear us. However, to answer your question, we don't have to go far."

I manipulated our location slightly so that we landed in the bar of the local Holiday Inn. Dennis's Mom was sitting at a table with three men. She was laughing uproariously at the jokes

of the younger, better looking of the three guys. Under the table she had gently placed her foot top of his.

"Jesus," said Dennis. "Are we at the same time as a second ago?"

"Oh yeah."

"I can't tell how much of her is alcohol as opposed to insanity."

"Well, in 2023, I think we say that substance abuse disorders and mental illnesses frequently co-exist."

I let us linger a little longer so that Dennis knew for sure that his Mom was ardently hitting on her favoured man at the table.

"How're you feeling?" I asked.

"How the fuck did I not know about this?"

"Dude, you were a baby. Now, unless you *really* want to watch your Mom – she's pretty hot I must say – get it on with this guy, I'd like to take you to a doctor's office."

"Yes, thank you, anywhere," said Dennis.

I manipulated our location again to land in Dennis's family doctor's office. I was keen to see if this was going to work. I figured that since the probability was literally zero that anyone would catch us, I hoped the filing drawers would be accessible to us.

Dennis looked around. "Is this ... "

"Yes, it's where you had your checkups as a kid."

"The doctor was always really nice to me."

"Maybe because he knew what you were up against." I handed him his mother's rather thick medical file. We leafed through it together.

"Jeez," I said, "this doctor was old even for the 80s. He was still calling it 'baby blues' months after you were born."

"And," said Dennis, "he's written 'manic depressive' several times. Isn't that bipolar disorder?"

"Yes," I said, "it is ... and your Mom had a doozy of a case of it."

"Jesus fucking Christ look at the drugs they were giving her."

"Hmmm," I said. "I'm surprised she could stand upright and form a sentence."

"And I knew jack shit about this," Dennis said.

"And, with your father, there's more jack shit later that you knew nothing about."

We put away the files. I wound us forward about 15 years to another middle-of-the-night raid of the doctor's office. His mother's file had expanded into three large files and his father's file went from a slim one to one much thicker. We flipped open the file and the words "hypertrophic cardiomyopathy" appeared.

"What is that?" Dennis asked.

I felt like a Jeopardy champ or a walking search engine. "It's an inherited form of heart disease. The good news (for you) is that it's treatable. The bad news (for your Dad) is the one drug for it isn't available until 2022. It's about 1998 right now."

We put away the files.

"To complete the survey of your childhood horrors, we've got one more location."

December 20, 1999 – 2 AM

We were sitting in the back of a car. Dennis's Dad was driving and his Mom was in the passenger seat.

Dennis started to panic. "No. Not here."

He was trying to undo his seatbelt, but I made sure it would not undo.

"Shut up and listen. This isn't about you experiencing what you think you know, but rather learning something new."

Dad held Mom's hand tightly and said, "This damn heart thing is getting worse. I won't be able to take care of you."

"I know," she said. "I feel so bad for you. So unfair. Both having to look out for me and having a heart condition."

"Fucking genetics."

They were both silently crying – tears streamed down their faces.

"And," she continued, "I **hate** what I am. It just gets worse."

The car was on rural Westside Road along Lake Okanagan. The twinkling lights across the lake beckoned to them, but they weren't looking.

"It's OK we go together, right?" he said.

"Yes. What about Dennis?"

"He's a strong, smart kid. And your sister loves him."

She nodded.

Dennis's Dad checked his mirrors. There was no one around. He gunned it, made a hard right. The limited barriers on the shoulder did little to slow down the car as it went down toward the edge, over the cliff and into the lake.

Dennis screamed. "Make this stop!"

"We are here for the whole ride, pal," I said.

The car hit the water and sank quickly. As the interior flooded, Dennis struggled. Once the water got up to our noses, I made my next move.

December 24, 2023 – 9:30 PM

We were back at Dennis's apartment in real time. I figured he'd need a break. He seemed surprised that he wasn't soaking wet, but that didn't stop him from throwing up in the bathroom.

I poured him a glass of water.

"Are we done?" he asked.

"Hell no, buddy," I said. "There are more gaps in your knowledge to plug."

"They told me they died in an accident."

"Accidently-on-purpose, sure. Come on, do you think they were going to tell you – a teenager – something else? Not without proof. They left no note. Insurance back then wasn't so forgiving."

The look on Dennis's face told me he'd rather suck rotten eggs before seeing more. Stubborn for sure.

"Let's go for a coffee." I grabbed him by the arm.

December 18, 2006 – 8:45 AM

There were still two Starbucks at Robson and Thurlow at this time and it was important we went to the one on the northeast corner.

Dennis was looking suspiciously at me.

"What? I'm dying for a Christmas Blend."

It was busy as there were a lot of office workers around. Instinctively we crossed when the light changed and avoided people, but one guy managed to bump into my shoulder. I was quite surprised, as was he. I didn't know him. He looked my way, not seeing me. But, it seemed, for a moment, I interacted with this point in time, 17 years earlier.

We entered the Starbucks. Maybe I could get a coffee. But that's not why we were here. In line was Dennis 2006. Who looked a lot like Dennis 2023. We watched as younger Dennis deliberately manipulated the line by letting people in, and timing it so that he would be served by one particular lady. Her name was Soo-jin, which she often shortened to Sue for the convenience of thick white people.

"Remember her?" I asked. I knew he did. She was objectively beautiful and seemed like a nice person.

Dennis glared at me. We were in line right behind Dennis 2006 and he chatted with her. This was probably the 90th time he'd spoken to her. Then I focused as hard as possible and ordered a coffee. I had to conjure a toonie but it worked. Sue did not see Dennis 2023.

We stepped back outside, and I sipped the coffee. It was glorious. But, I relaxed, and the cup fell from my hand and landed on the ground.

"I thought we shouldn't be able to interact with the past," said Dennis.

"Me too. Most curious. Anyway, tell me about Sue. Why did you not try to connect properly with her? Even as a friend."

"I thought you knew everything."

"I know facts, places, events, but how you feel is a fact known only to you."

"I wasn't good enough for her."

"Huh. If you say so. Time to go to the office."

December 21, 2009 – 8:15 PM

I changed our location to the office that Dennis had shared with Matthew. They were partners in a Wealth Management company that had done OK during the 2008 crash. This was due to Dennis's technical expertise coupled with Matthew's winning way with clients, a skillset I had not observed at my hospital bedside.

We watched Dennis 2009 pack up and leave the office.

A couple of minutes passed. Dennis said, "Why are we in my old empty office?"

"Patience you must have my young Padawan. Besides, I'm feeling like I could physically manipulate things here. It's an odd sensation. Anyway, let's say you were going to change some of your clients' assets around to have a long term look on say, industrial safety, site remediation, contamination control ... that kind of thing ... what would you change in their holdings?"

"Are you asking me to manipulate the stock market?"

"Kind of. The trick would be to use your discretionary latitude to move around assets so that the clients – in a dozen years or so – would be just as fabulously wealthy, but none the wiser that they contributed to environmental safety."

"When did you become an investing guru?"

"The second after I hugged you."

"What's in this for you? Is this altruistic or enlightened self-interest?" Dennis looked at me with a most serious expression. He took his fiduciary duties quite seriously.

"Both or none of the above," I said. "The only way I seem to be able to be physically coherent in the past is if my actions are well below some threshold of probable, immediate deviation from what happened."

"OK," Dennis said, "let's manipulate some accounts. There are a couple of clients I know for sure – despite my discretionary trading privileges – would definitely notice." He proceeded to tell me how to log into the systems and set up trades for the next trading date.

We finished setting up the trades and then heard the door to the office open.

Dennis looked at the clock. It was late. No one should be in the office.

Matthew 2009 stepped into the office. He called out for Dennis and made sure there was no one (but us spectres) in the office.

Matthew powered up his computer.

Dennis peered over his business partner's shoulder. Matthew was logging into a completely different set of trading platforms through an offshore VPN and Tor browser. He conducted foreign currency exchanges and was following instructions through an anonymous online chat account.

"No, no, no," said Dennis.

"What's Matthew doing?" I asked. (I knew what he was doing but I wanted to see how Dennis would react.)

"He's doing off the books foreign currency trading for someone ... unknown."

"So?"

"This is likely to be money laundering."

The online chat ended with a couple of numeric codes. Matthew wrote them down and then powered off his computer. We followed him out of the office and he took public transit to Waterfront Station where there was a 24-hour locker and convenience store.

Matthew punched the codes into a locker. Inside was a 6x9 envelope. He took it and then continued home. Inside, Matthew said hi to his wife.

"Come watch Christmas movies with me and the baby!" she said. Matthew replied he would in a minute.

Upstairs, built into the wall, was a hidden safe. He took cash from the envelope, kept \$100 for himself and locked the rest away.

"Fuck," said Dennis. "What the fuck?"

"You want to find out what Matthew got himself into?"

"No," Dennis said. "Fuck. Yes."

March 30, 2020 – 11:20 PM

We were back in the office, but 11 years ahead. Matthew was there alone. A long online chat was visible. The discussion was going in circles. Matthew's mysterious client was demanding money. Matthew kept repeating that the COVID crash had blown up the markets. Currency or otherwise.

We know where you and your family live.

"You haven't given me enough information," Dennis said. "Who the hell are these guys?"

"Matthew didn't realize it at first," I said, "but he's been laundering money for intermediaries that provide financing for terrorists."

"Why? Why would do he this? Why didn't he tell me?"

"He figured it was at first harmless, then got accustomed to the money – most of which is still in that safe – and that he felt he could be as clever as you."

"So, this is my fault?"

"No, it's not your fault. But I bet that doesn't make you feel any better."

Matthew logged off the system. He spent a few minutes deleting files from his computer and then set up the chair and rope to hang himself. It was evident that he'd been planning this for a while.

"I don't want to see this."

"No one does. But he was your friend. Your only friend. A friend whose suicidal state of mind was invisible to you.

Dennis leapt at Matthew to try to tackle him to the ground. No effect, of course. The probability of us being here was zero.

It felt like forever, but Matthew was gone in 15 seconds.

I took us back to Dennis's apartment in real time.

December 24, 2023 – 10:30 PM

Dennis, understandably, was a mess. He sobbed, letting out years of stress and regret.

"Why are you still here?" he said. "Haven't you done enough?"

"No, not yet," I said. "Your apartment still looks like shit. You need a nap."

"What?"

I tapped Dennis on the forehead, and he then mechanically walked over to his living room couch, lied down, and passed out. In my view, he needed the break. Plus, I really had to do something with this apartment. It was bumming me out.

December 25, 2023 – 12:02 AM

I kicked Dennis's leg to wake him up. "Merry Christmas."

Dennis glared at me. "My nightmare continues," he said.

But then he looked around the apartment. I had managed to manipulate probability, matter, time and space sufficiently to decorate a little. His walls still needed paint. But he had some lights in the apartment window and a few decorations hanging. I managed to conjure a small tree that was sitting on his kitchen counter.

"You kept busy," Dennis said.

"I couldn't get someone to paint the walls. Much to my annoyance," I replied. "We are going to take a quick journey through Christmas Day based on what will happen if things remain the same. Or, in your case, do the same whole lot of nothing that you normally do."

I beamed us a few hours ahead to when Matthew's family were preparing for Christmas. Matthew had two kids who were now 12 and 10. Their Aunt (Mom's sister) had presents and, despite the two children's clear signs of depression, they persevered.

"These kids were younger than you when their father died. They know he died by suicide, unlike you."

Dennis said nothing.

"You know what they're missing, apart from their dad?"

Dennis shook his head.

"You."

"What?"

"Yeah. You. The last time you saw them was the funeral. You could have sent presents at Christmas or visited or played Mario Kart or something."

"I assumed they blamed me or associated me with his death."

"Maybe, but Matthew was your friend. You should have been the good family friend who played the role of the cool Uncle. Anyway, we have another person to visit."

I beamed us into an apartment in Burnaby that Dennis did not recognize.

We could hear a couple arguing. It was around noon on Christmas Day. As we entered the kitchen, we saw a man yelling at and hitting Soo-jin. Dennis recoiled.

The argument was about how she didn't respect him.

"According to Statistics Canada," I said "in 2021, the police reported 114,132 victims of intimate partner violence. I wonder how many more there are like this one ... that won't be reported."

Soo-jin left the kitchen holding her face. Her partner opened another beer.

Dennis's expression was inscrutable.

"Are you blaming the victim?" I asked.

"What?"

"You know that most men think that the woman must have done something bad to set the guy off."

"That's insane."

"Of course it is. Speaking of insane," I asked, "do you still think you weren't good enough for her?"

Dennis looked like he was going to spit acid at me strong enough to burn through the ship's hull.

"Let's take your mind off this situation and wind forward a few years."

December 21, 2028 – 1 PM

We were outside Matthew's home again. But it had a real estate sign with a SOLD on it.

"What happened?"

"It's 2028, they had to sell. Matthew's wife couldn't pay the taxes and upkeep. She moved to the Interior to be closer to her sister."

I zoomed us inside to the master bedroom. In the wall, the safe was still hidden. I did a bit of magic and made the wall translucent. In the wall you could see the hidden stacks of cash.

"The new owner is planning renos," I said, "and will be in for a happy surprise."

"Jesus. Why didn't Matthew tell anyone about the safe? Leave a note?"

"A paper trail like that would have led the bad guys to his family. He was hoping your wife would stumble onto it in due course."

"She wouldn't know how to deal with the money without setting off alarms with the regulators. They call it 'unusual financial transaction alerts'."

"True. But you could help her."

"That's going to be interesting. 'Hey Maureen. Your dumb ass husband kept cash in a safe that he earned helping money launderers. Let me help you, uh ... *launder it.*'"

"I'm sure you'll come up with a better way of expressing it. Let's move on."

December 28, 2028 – 2:15 AM

I took us back to Soo-jin's apartment. It was now a crime scene. The police had not been there long. We walked in and came across Soo-jin's common law spouse. It was truly unpleasant. He had shot himself in the head while sitting at the kitchen table.

In the bedroom the police were taking crime scene photos of Soo-jin's body, which had been stabbed multiple times. The bed was awash with blood.

Dennis was very, very pale and silent.

"Don't you hate it when the murderer in the murder-suicide scenario doesn't do the suicide part first?"

Dennis did not appreciate my dark humour.

"Don't worry buddy, only one more stop."

December 28, 2028 – 3 PM

We were in a palliative care hospice.

In a bed was Dennis 2028 version.

"What's my deal here?" asked Dennis.

"By 2026, you developed an immune disorder called vasculitis. Normally it's manageable but, in your case, it's severe. And fatal. There are studies that say it's triggered and made worse by stress."

"I don't have a stressful life."

"Dude. You don't have a life. Your business partner offed himself and you have no one. Look around. There's no one here. Stress exists when there is no joy. You kept working *by yourself* after Matthew died."

"I want to go home. To my apartment. My time. I need to think."

I beamed him to his apartment to be alone.

December 25, 2023 – 2:20 AM

As far as I was concerned, my mission was done. Dennis was going to do what he was going to do. I had given him knowledge for Christmas. (Although I think he'd have preferred socks.) I couldn't know if this gift would morph into insight.

I found myself on the streets of the West End. Remarkably, for Vancouver, a little bit of snow was sticking to the edges of the sidewalks and grassy areas. I started walking back to VGH. I was going to end up in that hospital bed eventually.

I preferred the view over the Burrard Bridge compared to the Granville Bridge, which was still in the midst of being upgraded. I wondered if I'd remember this later. It would be a good tale to tell the family. Even if they didn't believe a word of it.

There wasn't much traffic. I was so used to being invisible that I wasn't even paying attention to the cars. I stepped across Burrard Street at about 11th Ave, and I heard the car horns.

December 25, 2023 – 11 AM

I awoke with a start. I was back in hospital and my 17-year-old son was sitting in a chair beside me doing something with his phone.

"Hey. You're awake," he said.

"What day is it?" I asked.

"Why, it's Christmas Day," he replied with his best faux Victorian English accent.

I moved suddenly and it really hurt. This made me notice that my arm was in a cast.

Along with my legs.

"What happened?"

"Um, Dad, you walked in front of a bus."

"When?"

"Two days ago."

"What about the cancer?"

My son looked at me as if I had totally lost my mind. "What cancer? You broke a lot of bones being inattentive. They *said* you hadn't hit your head."

"I was convinced that I was dying of cancer caused by contaminants including, but not limited to, trichloroethylene and asbestos."

"If you're going to talk like this, you're going to scare the crap out of Mom and The Sisters."

I felt very different, but my son was following his usual habit of referring to his two younger sisters as if they were the Three Sisters from *Macbeth*. The dilemma I faced was that if I talked to anyone about what I think happened to me, they'd send me to more psychologists than there are flakes in a box of corn flakes. I was going to have to do my own research – a horrifying phrase these days. First on the list was to figure out how badly banged up I was.

Epilogue

June 24, 2024 – 11 AM

I was using only one cane that day. I had just walked a full 2 km and reached my destination: the local Starbucks. I bought my coffee and took a well-earned seat. The physical therapy from my accident continued to be intense. I preferred the endless physio over the cancer I had been battling. The cancer that had either been a hallucination or erased due to me messing with time.

I heard a familiar voice behind me. "Happy halfway to Christmas."

"Dennis?"

"In the flesh. As are you, *Ghost*."

He still wasn't great with hugs, but I hugged him. Parent thing.

"I thought I was insane," I said. "I woke up to this" – I raised my cane – "instead of imminent death."

"I'm not offended," Dennis asked, "but, why didn't you come looking for me?"

"The combination of unending physical therapy and fear. You could have been real or not ... both with potentially mentally distressing outcomes. Plus, I put you through the wringer."

"That you did. And I deserved it. Needed it, in fact."

"How did you find me?"

"Matthew told me who you were when he haunted me."

"Sneaky bastard. May I ask what you did last Christmas Day, really?"

"Well, I went over to Matthew's place and surprised his family with power tools that allowed me to extract his damn safe."

"Can I ask?"

"Roughly 2 million Canadian in four different currencies."

"That's a pretty good Christmas present."

"It came with a lot of tears. It's also taking a long time to, er, tidy up."

"What about Soo-jin?"

"That was much more difficult. I had to let Christmas Day happen. I could hardly burst in. However, I was able to arrange an anonymous domestic violence police report and bring in some experts to help her. Without having to admit my involvement. Oh, and the ex-partner has some serious legal problems. Funny, that."

"How is she doing now?"

"She's meeting us here. You can find out for yourself."

"Now **that** is a present worthy of 3-Days-After-Summer-Solstice. I almost want to throw down my cane and dance."