Story 2 A Christmas Carol
by Charles Dickens

Ebenezer Scrooge, Dicken's protagonist, is a miserly and mean-spirited business-man, a "covetous old sinner", who leads a solitary life, obsessed with money. He begrudges his employee any sort of comfort and has no sympathy to the struggles of others — even poverty-stricken children, living a tough and deprived lifestyle.

Scrooge's philosophy of life is summed up at Christmas time: "I wish to be left alone." "I don't make merry myself at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry." *He resents Christmas as a wasted day - a day when "I pay a day's wages for no work". It is a time of "picking a man's pocket". 35*

"The door of Scrooge's counting house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was coyping letters. Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal-box in his own room; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel, the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part. Wherefore the clerk put on his white comforter and tried to warm himself at the candle; in which effort, not being a man of strong imagination, he failed.

"A Merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you!" cried a cheerful voice. It was the voice of Scrooge's nephew, who came upon him so quickly that this was the first intimation he had of his approach.

"Bah!" said Scrooge, "Humbug!"

He had so heated himself with rapid walking in the fog and frost, this nephew of Scrooge's that he was all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkled, and his breath smoked again.

"Christmas a humbug, uncle!" said Scrooge's nephew. "You don't mean that, I am sure?"

"I do," said Scrooge. "Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough."

"Come, then," returned the nephew gaily. "What right have you to be dismal?" What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough."

Scrooge having no better answer ready on the spur of the moment, said "Bah!" again, and followed it up with "Humbug" ...

"What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will," said Scrooge indignantly, "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!"

"Uncle!" pleaded the nephew.

"Nephew!" returned the uncle, sternly, "keep Christmas in your own way, but let me keep it in mine."

"Keep it!" repeated Scrooge's nephew. "But you don't keep it." ...

"Much good has it ever done you!" (said Scrooge)

Dickens takes Scrooge on a mystical journey into the barren wasteland of his soul. Firstly, Jacob Marley, his former deceased business partner, haunts him. He is wearing a "heavy chain" — the chain I coiled in life. Marley's chains are a reminder of his ruthless business practices. Dickens critiques Marley's attitude that places greater priority on profit and greed than on care and good-will. (47-48) Marley's greatest regret is that he is ensnared and cannot help those who appear to suffer. He warns Scrooge to be careful of such hostility towards others.

Again the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain and wrung its shadowy hands.

"You are fettered," said Scrooge, trembling. "Tell me why?"

"I wear the chain I forged in life,'" replied the Ghost. "I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wrote it. Is its pattern strange to you?"

Scrooge trembled more and more.

"Or would you know," pursued the Ghost, '"the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!'" (to gird; to invest with strength; power; ponderous: of great weight; heavy; massive.)

Scrooge goes on a journey with the Three Christmas Ghosts - the Ghost of Christmas Past who takes him back to unpleasant memories of his school-life, to the joys of his former fiance, Belle, and to a joyous Christmas party prepared by another employer, Fezziwig. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes him to the sparse Christmas table of his employer, Bob Cratchit and his family. His son, Tiny Tim suffers from malnutrution. He witnesses first-hand the suffering of children, symbolised as Ignorance and Want.

They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out ... a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat entrhoned, devils lurked; and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread.

Scrooge started back, appalled. Having them shown to him in this way, he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude.

"Spirit! Are they yours?" Scrooge could say no more.

"They are Man's," said the Spirit, looking down upon them. "And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. Deny it!" cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. "Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse. And bide the end!" (94)

Scrooge's reckoning at the end (115)

"Why bless my soul," cried Fred, "who's that?"

"It's I. Your Uncle Scrooge. I have come to dinner. Will you let me in, Fred?"

Let him in! It is a mercy he didn't shake his arm off. He was at home in five minutes. Nothing could be heartier. His niece looked just the same. So did Topper when he came. So did the plump sister, when she came. So did every one when they came. Wonderful party, wonderful games, wonderful unanimity, wonderful happiness!

But he was early at the office next morning. Oh he was early there. If he could only be there first, and catch Bob Cratchit coming late! That was the thing he had set his heart up.

And he did it; yes, he did. The clock struck nine. No Bob .. He was full eighteen minutes and a half, behind his time.

"Hallo!" growled Scrooge, in his accustomed voice as near as he could feign it. "What do you mean by coming here at this time of day?"

"I am very sorry, sir," said Bob. "I am behind my time."

"You are?" repeated Scrooge. "Yes. I think you are. Step this way, if you please." ....

"Now I'll tell you what, my friend," said Scrooge, "I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. And therefore," he continued leaping from his stool and giving Bob such a dig in the waistcoat that he staggered back into the Tank again: "and therefore I am about to raise your salary!" ... I'll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob! Make up the fires, and buy another coal-scuttle before you dot another i, Bob Cratchit!" (116)

Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. (116)

STORY 6: "Chinese Dancing, Bendigo Style" Joo-Inn Chew

Joo-Inn Chew's father is Chinese and her mother is Australian. As "half Chinese" children, with "middle-class urban-hippie parents", she grows up in Bendigo, surrounded by "fifth generation Australian farmers".

The hall was silent. Two hundred blond and brunette heads angled attentively, ready to hear us play. Four hundred round eyes blinked expectantly. My little sister and I sat on the unfamiliar piano stool, our feet not quite touching the ground. I adjusted the sheet music that had been chosen for us. We raised our sweaty hands and launched into our duet, "The Asian Waif". Plaintive notes filled the room, along with some clumsy plonking from my sisterís left hand. The audience seemed rapt, gazing at our bent black heads, our small brown hands. They applauded warmly at the end, smiling and nodding at each other. How cute! The smiles seemed to say, as they took in our dark eyes and straight cut fringes. A faint wave of humiliation broke over me. We had played badly but they loved us. I didnít know exactly what an Asian waif was, but I realised it was something to do with a Chinese kid everyone felt sorry for. And that that was why it fell to us, the only Asians in the competition. We shuffled off stage. In the hallway mirror AI caught a glimpse of my poo-brown eyes and flat yellow nose; then I just looked down at my feet as they slunk away.

We were half-Chinese, growing up in a paddock in central Victoria, surrounded by fifth-generation Australian farmers.

"We didn't seem to belong anywhere. The kids in my country primary school had sandy hair, pale freckly skin and blue eyes that could read the board from the back of the room without corrective lenses. They drank red cordial and ate white-bread sandwiches. The girls played Barbies and netball and had names like Debbie and Michelle. The boys rode BMXs and kicked footballs and were called Craig and Derrick. All of them knew the difference between the Hawks and the Magpies (...) My siblings and I had dull black home-cut hair and glasses that got broken when we failed to catch balls that were thrown at us. We ate wholegrain bread (...) We lurked at the edge of the playground and ate our lunch in the library where we read the Guinness Book of Records for the tenth time. We sometimes forgot to wear shoes or undies. We drooled over everyone else's lollies, and were perplexed by TV references, given we only watched the ABC or SBS. We dreaded school sports day, when we knocked over multiple hurdles in a row and were the only kids not sunburned at the end of the day. At the school fete we tried to bargain with the other kids, like Dad encouraged us to.. " (247)

Not only was it disorienting in the wider world, it was also confusing inside our family. Differences between my parents were often put down to cultural factors. Dad valued education, had business sense, was calm and hard-working – because he was Chinese. Mum was sociable and creative, an idealist, easy with money – because she was Anglo-Australian. Dad was the only Chinese person I knew for a long time, so I thought everything he did must be Chinese. His bargain-hunting, his work ethic and his expectations that we should top the class. His shyness, his bad jokes, his Labor politics, his love of peanut butter and his morning ablutions. It wasn't until I grew up and met lots of other Chinese people that I realised a lot of "Chinese" things were just Dad things. And that actually Dad was not stereotypically Chinese at all, that in moving from his origins, he had evolved into his own peculiar species. But at the time, these racial characteristics seemed absolute. I applied them to myself as well: when I was being thrifty and studious I was being Chinese; when I played games and left food on my plate I was being Australian.

We were half-half and for a long time we didn't belong anywhere.

By their third year in the country "we found somewhere that felt a bit like home. A place that was as half-half, as kooky and contradictory, as we were." It was the Bendigo Chinese Association. It was like climbing onto a "made-in Australia dragon-shaped life-raft in a sea of cultural contradictions."

The Chinese Association was left over from the gold-rush days, when migrants flocked to central Victoria to seek their fortune. Most of them went home to China after the gold rush, leaving faded silk costumes and joss houses. A few stayed and married locals, and their descendants still lived in Bendigo. No one had spoken Mandarin for generations, but there was still a proud affiliation with the Chinese Association and its hall of relics. Anyone with Chinese ancestry, however, distant, could join. Every year the association marched in the Bendigo Easter procession, following bagpipe bands and monster trucks with lion dancers, lantern-bearers, costumed chldren on ponies and finally the star of the procession: Sun Loong, the longest dragon in the southern hemisphere.

"We joined the association (the Bendigo Chinese Association), and my sister and I put our names down to learn 'Chinese dancing' (249)

We were soon practising steps choreographed by a local ballet teacher, who wasn't even remotely Chinese, but had lots of ideas about what oriental dancing was. We twirled ribbons and fluttered fans and sashayed back and forth with parasols and lanterns to Asian-sounding music. When we performed at Easter we were dressed in fake silk costumes and had slanted oriental eyes drawn boldly onto our faces with black eyeliner. We were a hit. We performed in RSL clubs in nearby drought-stricken towns; prawn crackers were served before the performance to set the atmosphere. We danced in windy car parks, in school halls, and even in front of Prime Minister Bob Hawke. We instinctively affected a mysterious Eastern reserve during the performance, which fell away the moment we stepped backstage and could run off and find a pie before getting back on the bus.

We weren't all friends, but when we stepped out together to the music we were a tribe! (...) Everyone in the group knew what it was like to suffer under a Chinky surname, to look a little different and perhaps to have a Chinese parent who would stay too long at parent-teacher night discussing our marks. And we knew how good it felt to have these differences go from being liabilities to being assets, reasons to go on stage, to dress up and dance and be applauded (...) On year I rode a horse and wore the gold silk Chinese princess costume with its embroidered flags and heavy crown. I smiled magnanimously and mypopically at the crowd (having left my glasses with Mum in an effort to look beautiful), not able to see anyone's face but sure all the pink blurs were cheering me on."

We marched each year in the procession, surrounded by drums and dancing lins, fire crackers and silk banners covered in characters none of us could read. My little brother, dressed in his pyjamas from Malaysia, rode in the children's float, waving at the crowd. One year I rode a horse and wore the gold silk Chinese princess costume with its embroidered flags and heavy crown. I smiled magnanimously and myopically at the crowd (having left my glasses with Mum in an effort to look beautiful), not able to see anyone's face but sure all the pink blurs were cheering me on.

We did Chinese dancing and walked in the procession for years. It was glorious to march before the cheering city, to smile and wave like royalty, to dance and be applauded by classmates — all for being Chinese. Most importantly, for being the kind of Chinese that we really were — not Asian waifs, but Australian Chinese, half-halfs, part-Chinese but mostly Australian, same and different, just a little bit special." (249-50)