

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, special Holiday Edition. I'm Eric Molinsky.

When I began this podcast years ago, I always knew that I wanted to do episodes where I didn't just cover Imaginary Worlds. I wanted to create them as well.

Like in my 2015 episode about Peter Pan when somebody playing Captain Hook called me halfway through the episode. In another episode, I interviewed two vampires. I did an audio drama where I interviewed H.P. Lovecraft's brain in a jar. I did a round table discussion with actors playing colonists on the moon in the future. I also wrote audio dramas for The Truth podcast, which included another story about a talking brain in a jar. Apparently, that was a thing I was into.

It's been a while since I've done an audio drama. And I thought it's the holiday season, let's shake things up a bit, and bring Imaginary Worlds into an imaginary world. This week's special Christmas episode will unfold in three chapters.

Chapter One: A Familiar Face.

So it all started when I got a text. I was working in my home office, where I record my show, and the text said, "We need to talk." I figured this was spam. There was no number. I tried blocking the sender, but it didn't work. I even shut down my phone. But another text popped up on the screen while the phone was off.

And that one was very specific. It said, "Heard your episode on Dickens. Not accurate. We need to talk." Now, I assume they're referring to an episode we did about 5 years ago on A Christmas Carol.

Now I was getting curious. It's clearly not spam, but the whole situation was very weird. So with some trepidation, I texted this person back and I wrote, "What did we get wrong?"

Believe it or not, things got a lot weirder after this. All of the sudden, a person appeared in my office -- like this entity just magically appeared in my office. I was so freaked out, I yelled, I don't know if the neighbors heard me. But then I stopped.

He wasn't a stranger. He was someone I knew. It was my high school history teacher, Mr. Brooks. But he looked like Mr. Brooks from like 30 something years ago. I was so tongue tied. But he very calmly told me to start recording. So I took out some mics and this is what happened.

PAST: First question, why Mr. Brooks? That's what you're wondering.

You mean why ...?

PAST: Why is Tim Brooks here? Well, you loved his class. He gave you an A. He wrote your college recommendation. So, I figured, this was a good way to get you to trust me. But I am not Mr. Brooks – I mean, obviously. I am the entity that you know as The Ghost of Christmas Past.

I'm so confused right now.

PAST: And you're not dreaming either by the way. I know you're thinking that too.

Are you reading my mind?!

PAST: Well, yeah. But that's not important. You want to know why I'm here. A few minutes ago in your time, I was doing the thing with this guy. You know the thing: "You've been a bad person. You'll be visited by three ghosts."

Like in A Christmas Carol?

PAST: Exactly. I was trying to figure out who I'm supposed to be in this guy's life. So I decided to go through his phone because I wanted to appear in the guise of someone he worked with.

Oh, like Jacob Marley

PAST: Hmm mm. So, while I was looking through his texts, I checked out his podcast queue. And I was like, Imaginary Worlds, what's that? So, I binged the show at 1.5 speed, which for us is 1.5 millionth of a second. I came across your Dickens episode, and I was like, no, no, no. I've got to talk to this guy.

Wait, I'm still confused. You're actually the Ghost of Christmas Past?

PAST: In a nutshell -- yeah. I mean that's what Dickens called me in the story. You can call me Past.

But you were literally made up by Charles Dickens.

PAST: I was not made up by Charles Dickens. I did the thing with Dickens. I'm the original.

The thing with three ghosts?

PAST: Exactly, or spirits or whatever you want to call us. Long story short, he was in a bad place. He was being mean to a couple of people. We did the thing. It was a big success. Dickens loved it so much he wrote A Christmas Carol.

Wow, so that's your job, so you three ghosts or spirits or whatever, you turn the Scrooges of the world into good people?

PAST: I'm glad you asked that. You see, when people find out who I am, they think about the history of the world since A Christmas Carol and they're like, wow, you suck at your job because that's not exactly a nice 180 years. And when I tell them I'm a lot older than 180 years, they're even more discouraged.

Yeah, I got to admit, I was thinking that too.

PAST: Here's the thing: we pick our cases very carefully, it's intentional. We can't turn every bad person into a good person. That's impossible. Have you seen people?

Yeah.

PAST: We find people who have lost their way. We call them redeemables because we think they still have a chance. And our track record was pretty good for a long time.

Until when?

PAST: 15, 20 years ago, we started having less success with turnovers. That's why I wanted to come on your show. I want to tell people we're real. You can trust us.

Oh, am I going to be visited by three spirits?

PAST: No, You're not on our list. We get assigned a redeemable. We each do our thing and then afterward, I check to see what the turnover rate was. And we're losing people.

Do you know why?

PAST: Well, I have a theory.

I assume you're going to tell me what it is.

PAST: Social media.

Really?

PAST: Yep.

Wait. You're this ancient, omnipotent being and you're being undone by Facebook or X or whatever?

PAST: I'm not omnipotent, but it's up to the redeemables to go through the process. We never got 100% success rates, even in our best years. Some people were too bitter.

Well when it was good, what was your redemption rate?

PAST: Average 93.6% per year. That's good right?

Yeah, I guess.

PAST: Now we're down to 65.2%.

Wow, that actually is a big drop.

PAST: You're telling me! Everyone is in their own reality bubbles. It's easier to write us off and say we're lying, or someone drugged their food, it was all a bad dream, or they had too much LSD. And the ones that believe us, they get really defensive. They dig in. They double down. This one guy threatened to sue me. I was like, you can't sue me. That's not possible. He got really mad. Actually, this is funny. We did the thing with his lawyer. We showed him the error of his ways. The lawyer wasn't even on our list. I mean he was a lawyer, so he's no angel, and I've known angels, but he wasn't terrible. He saw the light, totally repented. He told the guy, "These spirits are real. I've changed, you should change too." He fired his lawyer and got a new one.

I can believe that. The things is, I'm actually feeling a little skeptical myself.

PAST: That's because you're part of this mindset too.

No, but what you're doing is kind of manipulative. I'm still weirded out by the fact that you show up in my apartment in the guise of someone I knew and trusted. You sound like Mr. Brooks. Your clothes are vintage '80s, actually he used to dress like it was the '70s.

PAST: Well, he hated buying new clothes.

And I didn't realize Mr. Brooks was younger than I am now.

PAST: isn't that funny? Perception and time.

No! I feel like I'm talking to a deep fake.

PAST: There you go. You called me a deep fake. You're steeped in this mindset. I mean it's very common. You can't go an hour without checking social media. I know that for a fact I've been watching.

It's true. It's a problem. I'm addicted. What do the other spirits say?

PAST: Present is frustrated, just like me. I can't get a word out of Future. He just points to the chart with his boney hand. I'm like, I see the chart, Future. Why was it a failure? And he just points to the chart, and I'm like, I see the chart. What went wrong? He just kind of shrugs. I think that's what he's doing. He's a big skeleton.

Do you have a manager? Maybe I could talk to them.

PAST: That's not an option.

Why?

PAST: My manager doesn't appreciate what we're doing.

I hate to admit this but that actually makes me want to talk to them more.

PAST: You know what? I'm going to send you to The Ghost of Christmas Present.

Ooh! So I am going to be visited by three ghosts?!

PAST: No, no, no, we're not doing the thing. Don't get excited. That's the other problem! People are way too flattered. They think we're doing a trip down memory lane. This is Your Life!

Or when Facebook does a slideshow to commemorate your ten year anniversary on the site that kind of thing?

PAST: Oh, you are addicted. Eric Molinsky, please prepare to be visited by another spirit.

Oh my God, I think I just got goosebumps.

PAST: Ugh.

After Mr. Brooks or the Ghost of Christmas Past disappeared, I listened back to the tape because I figured I must have been hallucinating. I thought it might be like The Sixth Sense where it seems like I'm talking to someone but no one's there. But no. His voice was recorded on my computer.

AD BREAK

Let's get back to my Christmas audio drama. Chapter Two: Spirit Pose.

The next day, as it got closer to midnight. I was feeling nervous. The Ghost of Christmas Past said that I'd be visited by another spirit. And I remember The Ghost of Christmas Present was this jolly kind of figure. So, I shouldn't be worried.

But if Past could show up in the guise of my high school teacher, did that mean The Ghost of Christmas Present would also choose to appear as someone in my life? And so I kept trying to think, who is going to appear in my office tonight? A family member? A friend? A neighbor? And then somebody did appear two minutes before midnight. And it was the last person I expected.

Oh my God! This is hilarious. You're Dana!

PRESENT: I know, right?

Okay, so for people who don't know, Dana was my yoga instructor.

PRESENT: Yes, yes.

But that was years ago. I lived in a different part of the neighborhood.

PRESENT: You still see her around.

I do, yeah, but I keep avoiding her because I feel guilty about quitting yoga.

PRESENT: If it makes you feel better, she doesn't remember you.

Oh.

PRESENT: But that's okay. You were really bad at yoga. You just stayed in the class because you thought her class was like nap time.

Yeah, we used to say it felt like a really athletic version of nap time.

PRESENT: I know! I scanned your mind.

Yeah, Past did it too. It's kind of freaky. But why did you pick Dana?

PRESENT: I want to add to what my friend Past said yesterday. He was really sad you didn't believe him.

Well, it was kind of hard to accept everything he was saying.

PRESENT: I get it! You're smart, and you wonder, "Is this guy telling the truth? I need another source. What's going on here? I don't get it." That shows you're a good reporter.

Thank you, I guess.

PRESENT: Do you remember what I did in A Christmas Carol?

Yeah, you brought Scrooge around to see all the fun things he was missing out on.

PRESENT: Uh uh! Exactly!

Okay. I think I know why you picked Dana. You know that I love positive affirmation even if I'm being rewarded for things....

PRESENT: You're smart!

See! There you go! You just said I'm smart. You know I kind of get off on that even though I know it's really easy.

PRESENT: I'm very good at my job. But here's the thing, Eric. It's not working anymore. When I take people around and show them everything they're missing out on, they just get mad at me. They already know what they're missing out on.

Because of social media?

PRESENT: Of course! This is the age of FOMO. At one point, I stopped transporting people to see their friends. We would sit on their couch, pick up their phones and go through Instagram. But my manager told me I was being lazy -- which is unfair. I thought I was being efficient with my time, and we could get more people, you know?

Yeah.

PRESENT: So, I went back to bringing people to other places. Guess what? They thought it was a dream because they spend all their time thinking about what they're missing out on anyway. What a waste of a human life! Then I realized something. I'm just making people feel bad about themselves.

I thought that was your job, the three spirits, you make bad people feel bad about themselves, so they become better people.

PRESENT: No, no, no, no. Look! They're not bad people. They have negative thoughts. Their behavior is bad. And they end up making bad decisions. We help them see the consequences of those decisions. Then maybe they'll make a different decision, and they might change.

It's a nice thought, but these days....

PRESENT: You just said it. "These days." So! I have a new approach. I'm supposed to be the ghost of the present, right? Think about it -- what does it mean to be the ghost of the present?

I don't know. I don't know if that even makes sense.

PRESENT: But it does! People are not in the present moment anymore. That's like the basics of yoga, we do yoga to breathe and to feel ourselves! So I'm the ghost of the moment they're missing out on!

Oh.

PRESENT: You're worried about the future. Yes?

In terms of next year? Definitely. The world is in a scary place. I don't know what's going to happen next year.

PRESENT: You can't. Even I don't know, and I don't want to know. I need you to just stay with me in this moment. All right. Right now, you're thinking about this interview, are people going to find me credible, are my recording levels off?

Please stop reading my mind, it's weirding me out.

PRESENT: Okay, I'll try my best. In the meantime, have some hot cocoa.

Oh wow! You just made a cup of hot cocoa appear on my desk! Can you make anything appear or disappear?

PRESENT: Just come back to the cocoa. Feel the warmth of the cocoa.

Okay it feels real.

PRESENT: Feel it good. Good. Now sip. Make that sound. Mmmmmm.

No, it's good. It's really good.

PRESENT: Mmmmmm.

Mmmmmm

PRESENT: Mmmmmm. Just like you like it, with tiny marshmallows. Now. Listen to the silence.

Okay.

PRESENT: Listen to the wind. Stop thinking about how you're going to edit this interview. Just be here in the present moment.

No, I mean I definitely appreciate....

PRESENT: Shhh!

It's just silence isn't great for a podcast. That's all I'm going to....

PRESENT: Eric.

It's fine, it's fine.

PRESENT: Shhhhh,

Okay.

(BEAT)

Sorry to interrupt, you mentioned you have a manager. Can I talk with them?

PRESENT: *(sighs)* This was a bad idea. You want to talk to my manager.

Yeah. Sorry, I didn't know that was a sore subject or anything.

PRESENT: Okay! Fine. You're going to get my manager. He's coming.

Did you just talk to him? I saw you look off to the left like you heard someone.

PRESENT: Eric Molinsky, be prepared to be visited by a third spirit.

Okay, now you're sounding kind of angry, and I'm -- oh, she's gone. And so is the cocoa.

AD BREAK

Let's get back to my Holiday story. Chapter Three: No Man Is A Failure Who Has Friends.

I spent the next day wondering who their manager was going to be. I knew it couldn't be The Ghost of Christmas Future. I mean, he's their co-worker and he doesn't even talk. But the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present seemed annoyed, even scared that I would want to talk to the manager. So whoever this figure was going to be, I was gearing up for a fight, imagining somebody who was a bully, someone who was imperious or condescending.

But that's not what happened. Just before midnight, a supernatural being appeared in my office. Again, it was not someone I was expecting. But in some ways, I should have been expecting him all along.

CLARENCE: Hello there, friend!

Oh my God. You're Clarence from It's a Wonderful Life.

CLARENCE: Well, that's what you see.

But that's a whole other Christmas movie.

CLARENCE: A whole other department, Eric.

Department?

CLARENCE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

But you didn't appear as someone from my life.

CLARENCE: Oh, I did. Maybe not your life, but your mind. Who played Clarence?

Henry Travers. He was in Shadow of a Doubt. He was a great character actor.

CLARENCE: That's one of your favorite Hitchcock movies.

Yeah.

CLARENCE: You love old movies.

I do. Oh my God, you're in black and white! I just noticed that.

CLARENCE: Here's the funny thing, Eric. I can appear as a fictional character. And guess what? No one doubts that I'm real. Isn't that peculiar?

Yeah. So, is this the same situation where you did the thing to Frank Capra, and he loved it so much he made It's a Wonderful Life in the same way that Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol?

CLARENCE: Bingo! See, Frank was feeling low, very down on himself, wasn't happy with the box office, that sort of thing. I decided to show him the world if he never existed. For the record, I didn't look like this when I appeared to Frank. I went with more of a leading man look, somewhere between Cary Grant and the other tall fellow, Gable, but he cast Henry Travers and this is what people expect.

Wow. You know, there's something I never understood about It's a Wonderful Life. What was wrong with Pottersville?

CLARENCE: You're not alone! If I had a nickel for every time I hear that. "Pottersville was neat! It had a pool hall, a jazz club, dancing girls!" I keep telling people, I didn't make It's a Wonderful Life! Frank Capra did. Blame him.

Right! But wait, how are you their manager? You're a different story.

CLARENCE: Different department.

Right, sorry, department.

CLARENCE: No, you're right, they show people who lost their way how far they've fallen, how much they're missing out on -- how much worse the world will be if they don't change their ways. Or to use your language, they make the bad people feel bad about themselves.

Right.

CLARENCE: My department on the other hand takes the good people who already felt bad about themselves, and we help them feel better.

Right. How's your job going?

CLARENCE: Terribly.

Because of social media?

CLARENCE: Oh, come now! Do you really think that a million years of human evolution was undone by Tik Tok? That's poppycock!

Yeah, although these apps are supposedly rewiring our brains...

CLARENCE: Eric. It's their fault.

Not the people who design social media?

CLARENCE: The so-called spirits who visited you the last two nights. They have not been doing their jobs properly.

But you're their manager.

CLARENCE: Only recently. I won't take the blame for this one. A long time ago, I got my wings.

I remember, I saw the movie -- many times.

CLARENCE: After I got my wings – a bit of history here -- I became a manager in my department. I had teams of angels or spirits or ghosts or whatever you want to call us working under me. Everything was going along swimmingly until about 10 to 15 years ago. My pupils were struggling to make their quotas. So, I went back to Earth to show them how it's done. I hadn't been in years, and I thought, what could possibly have changed? Ooh, how wrong I was. The petty tyrants, the media moguls, the greedy folks, the politicians that the spirits of the past, present and future were supposed to be reforming weren't getting reformed. These people were still going about their nasty business of making good people feel bad about themselves, turning them against each other, making them feel like the system was somehow rigged. The good people were losing faith in humanity. Now, of course, I complained to the higher ups but that's like talking to a wall. They didn't believe me at first. But with a little elbow grease, and a little bit of spirit know how! I managed to switch things up and get their department folded into mine.

It's still not working?

CLARENCE: Because they just won't take responsibility for their failures! They keep blaming social media. I can't believe they came here to your podcast to complain about me.

They weren't complaining about you. I mean a little bit, but they were just trying to get their message across.

CLARENCE: Oh no, they're asking people to stick their heads in the sand, and not engage in the modern world. That's utter foolishness!

PAST: You know that's so funny because I never said that

Oh, you're back!

CLARENCE: Aren't you supposed to be on a job tonight?

PAST: Surprise. I got done early. Success, by the way.

PRESENT: Hey. I'm here too. I don't want to startle you. I'm not mad at you anymore!

Thanks.

CLARENCE: Now there's two of...I did not get this memo!

PRESENT: Clarence, you've been saying some really mean stuff about us.

CLARENCE: Now, now, I wasn't being mean. I was being honest.

PAST: Oh, you're being honest? Yeah, you're real polite in here. But we know what you've been saying about us on the spirit boards.

Wait, what are spirit boards?

PAST: It's like Slack for spirits.

CLARENCE: It's doesn't matter! It doesn't matter!

You have Slack up there?

PAST: We use Ouija boards.

What?!

PAST: Did he tell you how he became our manager?

CLARENCE: No, need to go over this again!

Yeah, he greased the wheels or something.

PAST: Last year, three sets of teenage kids were having sleepovers on the same night in three different states. All three were using Ouija boards. That's pretty common -- sleepovers, Ouija boards. What was strange was that all three Ouija boards said the same thing: "The ghosts of past, present and future only have a 65.2% turnover rate."

No.

PRESENT: Yes! Suddenly the powers that be were like, "Wait? What's going on with past, present and future?" And Clarence chimed in and was like, "I don't know, but I've been hearing the same thing. Maybe I could help."

CLARENCE: Okay! Here's a fun fact! Did you know the Founding Fathers used to write scathing anonymous opinion pieces about each other in rival newspapers back in the 18th century?

PAST: I was there. I'm the ghost of the past.

CLARENCE: Okay since you were present at the matter, did you notice that no one was blaming newspapers for the state of the world back then?

PRESENT: Okay, Clarence, Clarence, did you ever think that maybe you're not doing your job well enough?

CLARENCE: I beg your pardon!

PAST: Trust hurts.

PRESENT: It's your job to assign redeemables. Maybe you're picking the wrong people.

CLARENCE: I have great faith in human beings to find the light themselves.

PAST: Including the guy who threatened to sue me?

Okay, I have to jump in here! You guys are no better than us! How are we supposed to get our act together if you can't get your act together? All of you!

PAST: He has a point.

CLARENCE: He does.

PRESENT: Clarence, when you first came onboard, remember? You gave us this inspirational speech about how we're reflections of them and what's inside of them.

PAST: I remember that.

PRESENT: Remember? Aren't we only as good as what they're capable of?

CLARENCE: Using my words against me, are you?

PRESENT: I would never do that.

PAST: They're good words.

See, this is good. You're talking face to face. You should find a conference room somewhere -- I don't know how this works. But you could figure out a new system or something.

CLARENCE: No, I am of the mind that the system works!

PAST: Actually, I just checked. The conference room on cloud nine is open.

PRESENT: Great!

PAST: Or we could keep hashing things out in public, on this podcast.

CLARENCE: No, no, this is inside business. So maybe you make that reservation and I get the coffee and donuts. In the meantime, Mr. Molinsky, it's been a pleasure.

Well, thank you, it's been -

CLARENCE: Happy Holidays or whatever you choose to celebrate!!

Oh, they're all gone now.

PRESENT: Wait! Hey, Eric.

Oh hey!

PRESENT: Oh good! You're still here! I just wanted to give you some real cocoa. Did you notice the other one was magic and disappeared when I did?

I did

PRESENT: Enjoy!

Thank you. (SIPS) Mmmm.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to -- in order of appearance -- Torian Brackett, Alexandra Reed and Bill Lobley.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman.

The best way to support Imaginary Worlds is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, and a t-shirt. You can also get access to an ad-free version of the show through Patreon, and you can buy an ad-free subscription on Apple Podcasts. My website is....wow, it actually got really cold in here.

(SFX: OMINOUS NOISE AND WIND)

Oh my God! Oh my God. Wow, you really are a big, tall scary skeleton with a cloak. Are you going to show me my future? No. He's pointing up. You want to go upstairs and show the people upstairs their future? Oh! You want to know where they went, Past, Present and Clarence. They went to Cloud 9. They booked a meeting room on Cloud 9. Oh! Thumbs up! And he's gone.