

Don't sit in my seat

Jack sat in his old rocking chair, slowly rocking back and forth as he lectured me on English. His old-fashioned glasses edged their way down his nose, getting to the very end before he pushed them back up. I sat cross legged on the ground in front of him, listening to him talk. It was quiet and calm but boring. Ever since I had died, I had been bored and that was months ago maybe even years. Jack got a newspaper every morning, but I hardly ever read the date and before I knew it another day had gone. It was boring being dead.

The museum had closed up for the day with only the night watchman walking the lonely corridors. The main doors were shut but the lights were still on which lit up the exhibits. I ran to a glass cabinet which had a black and white class photo as the background. My class photo. There I was with all my friends, smiling and alive. I wondered how many days it had been since that photo had been taken. Months? Years? Were any of them even alive anymore? I put a palm on the glass.

'Ernie!' The night watchman shouted.

I quickly withdrew my hand leaving a handprint on the glass. The night watchman marched over and wiped my handprint off, before walking away. With a small smile, I pressed my palm onto the glass again and left another handprint. I was dead, he couldn't stop me if he tried. I left I went back to the room where Jack was sitting. It was a small room where the old, broken or irrelevant exhibits got stored. It was hardly used.

'Don't annoy him, Ernie,' Jack muttered.

I didn't see the point in not annoying him. There was nothing else to do. The night watchman was no fun either. He took the prospect of haunting and ghosts in his stride. I didn't scare him one little bit, and that annoyed me. I preoccupied myself with an out-of-date globe. It had countries on it that didn't exist anymore, according to Jack.

The night slowly moved to daytime and footsteps and talking echoed in the corridors. I got up and passed through the door and out of the room. The normal staff chatted to each other as the guests stood at exhibits. A group of teenagers stood around my class photo, looking at a brown-haired woman. I guessed she was their teacher. I wanted to know what they were teaching. Would she even mention me? I stood behind the crowd of children and listened. I caught her coming to the end of the talk.

‘Because of the structure failure, this was the last class to ever be taught in that classroom.’

A boy raised his hand. ‘But miss, why does it matter? Schools close all the time.’

‘This one ended in fatality.’ She turned to the photo and pointed at me. ‘Ernie McDownen, my great-great uncle.’

I stared at her, open mouthed. Great-great uncle? How long had I been dead? Surely it had only been a few months, maybe a year at most? Turning, I raced back to the storeroom. Jack had moved from his chair and was now inspecting an old exhibit. I picked up the newspaper closest to the chair and read the date. 1903.

‘See, I knew I hadn’t been dead that long. It’s only been two years!’

Jack glanced over at me and pushed up his glasses. ‘That’s not a recent newspaper, boy.’

‘What year is it then?’

‘Two thousand and twenty-four.’

My heart plummeted. I steadied myself on a table. I had been dead for more than a century. How hadn’t I realised that? A rock of emotion formed in my stomach, twisting and tightening its hold on me. My former classmates were dead, they had probably had families, and I had only just found out, through sheer luck that my own sister had gone around making a family without a care in the world for me.

The loud bickering of teenagers came past the storeroom door. I poked my head out. It was that class with their teacher again and they were heading for the classroom. The museum had recreated my classroom to preserve it in the years to come. It looked exactly the same, with the old mahogany cabinets lined against the wall and the desks facing the blackboard. It had posters up on the walls, explaining the tragedy of that fateful day. On one of the desks there was a small metal sign warning guests not to sit there. Apparently, it was haunted...or something.

My great-great niece filed her class in, and I stood at the front to make sure everyone obeyed the sign. A thin boy with black hair stood behind the bench and my desk. He narrowed his brown eyes at it, then looked around him.

‘Miles, sit down please,’ the teacher called.

‘There’s, like a sign. It says don’t sit here.’

‘Oh, it’s probably nothing.’

Miles slowly sat down on the bench. I watched him, then turned to his teacher as she started to talk. None of them seemed to care about my seat, or the sign, or the well-known rule that no-one sat in my seat. It was the only thing I had left that was mine. Everything else was long gone.

One of the security guards, Oliver, walked in. His white shirt was tucked into his black trousers like usual. I couldn’t remember him without his grey hair. ‘Excuse me,’ he addressed Miles. ‘You can’t sit there.’

The teacher stopped talking and turned to him. ‘Oh, and why not?’

‘It’s dangerous. Bad things happen to people who sit on that seat.’

Miles bolted up and jumped over the bench, breathing heavily. ‘I don’t want to sit there anymore.’

The teacher frowned, first at Miles, then at Oliver. 'I didn't realise it was your job to scare my children.'

'He'd be a damned sight more scared if he'd died.'

Miles gasped, then ran to the front of the classroom. 'It's old and poisonous or something, isn't it? That's why it's blocked off.' He put his hands to his head. 'I've already sat on it, I'm already infected!'

Oliver smirked at the boy's antics. 'No, he'll probably leave you alone now that you've left his seat.'

'He?' the teacher asked.

Oliver nodded. 'Ernie. He don't like people sitting in his seat.'

'Ernie? Who's Ernie?' the teacher asked.

'Ernie McDownen. There's an exhibit about him. He died in this very room.'

'But he's dead,' Miles said.

'Yet, there are random handprints on his exhibit every night and disembodied footsteps. Things move and we haven't seen a famous painting for weeks now.' He turned and left.

I couldn't help but grin. It was an ugly painting anyway.

My great-great niece sighed. 'Miles, sit back down please.'

Miles shook his head in defiance and pressed himself against the wall.

'Will anyone swap places with Miles?' the teacher asked the class.

A brown-haired boy stood up. His hair was longer at the front than it was at the back, and it was swept to one side. His uniform was a mess, with his shirt untucked and his tie drooping loosely around his neck. 'I'm not scared of ghosts, miss. What they gonna do?'

The teacher breathed a sigh of relief. 'Thank you, Freddie. Miles, you can take Freddie's place.'

The two boys walked to their different places and sat down. It may've been a different boy, but he was still sat in my seat. If they didn't want to take Oliver's warning, then that was their own problem. I walked to my seat, where Freddie was sat, and swiped my nails on the back of his neck. He winced and put a hand to the wound. It wasn't bleeding but had formed raised scratches.

'You okay, Freddie?' a girl behind asked. 'You have scratches.'

He turned and gave a weak smile. 'Probably where my guinea pig got me last night. She's always going up there.'

I could tell by his uneasy expression that he didn't believe his own excuse. Sheets of paper were passed from student to student. It had a list of questions on it, a quiz of some kind. As he picked up his pen, I got level with his ear and blew at it. He shot up and touched his ear, looking around, bewildered.

'What's up?' the teacher asked from the front.

'Uh...' He shook his head. 'Nothing...I just thought I heard something.' Freddie looked behind him, then bent over his work, writing. I blew in his ear again. He stood up and looked around the classroom. 'Right, I'm serious now. Whoever is blowing at me, stop!'

As everyone else looked at him in shock, like he'd gone completely mad, I took his pen and wrote 'Get off my seat' on his quiz sheet.

The teacher came over to him as he sat back down. 'Are you struggling?' she asked, resting her hands on the table.

'No. I swear someone keeps blowing at me. This isn't an attention seeking thing, Miss.'

She looked at the upside-down paper, then turned it the opposite way to face her. Then she glanced up. 'Is this a joke?' She pointed to my writing.

Freddie stared wide eyed at it. 'I swear I never wrote that.'

'Whatever this is, just stop, yes?' The teacher took the sheet away and addressed the class. 'Right, I'm off to get some more copies. I'm trusting you to behave while I'm gone.' She left the room.

I wrapped my arms around Freddie, as he huddled down into his blazer. 'It's freezing in here.'

'What you talking about? It's summer,' the girl behind said.

I let go, then whispered, 'Get out of my seat.'

Freddie jumped up. 'What the hell?' He stared in my direction, while pulling his blazer tighter around him. Slowly, and after a minute or two of me not doing anything, he sat back down, not daring to take his eyes off my direction.

'Freddie, are you okay?' the girl behind asked.

After a moment or two, he forced himself to look at her. 'Yeah...yeah. It's probably just a virus or something, messing with my head, you know.'

He was still in my seat. Nothing I did made a difference to where he sat. Anger boiled inside me and I clenched my fists before storming away. Standing before my exhibit, tears soaked my face. Why did I have to be the one to die? The beam fell on me and only me. I sank to the floor and rested against the glass, thinking.

Freddie stumbled into the main exhibition room, dragging his feet and banging them down clumsily in an effort to not fall over. His face was deathly pale, with black shadows around his eyes and crimson lips that stood out a mile. Surely me hugging him didn't make him that cold? As he turned into the main reception, my great-great niece rushed after him. Most of the class crowded in

the corridor and chatted amongst themselves, with Miles commenting, 'They said bad things happen to people who sit there.'

'But you sat there first. Surely if the disease was that infectious, you'd be dead,' the girl who sat behind Freddie said.

Oliver took a slow stroll over to them and crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall. 'I told you, didn't I? I told you something bad would happen.'

'But am I safe?' Miles asked, desperately.

'Well, you're looking much better than your friend, aren't you? I think you'll be fine.' He left and went upstairs where the future exhibits were built.

The rest of the class slowly made their way back to the classroom. I followed to make sure no-one sat in my seat. As they all sat down again, my seat was empty. Miles took the metal sign that told people not to sit there and put it back on my desk. 'Sorry, Ernie. We should've believed in you from the start.'

Another boy piped up, 'Yeah, we're sorry, Ernie.'

Before I knew it, I had apologies from the whole class for something almost all of them hadn't done. I went back to the storeroom, happy and appreciated.

The next day, Jack had a recent newspaper, which he read while rocking back and forth. The front headline stated: Teenager, 17, dies of mysterious disease. I snatched the paper from Jack and examined it closer. Freddie had died. No-one knew what had killed him. Had my hug made him that cold that he had died? No...surely not.

'That seat is cursed, boy,' Jack said, taking the paper back.

'It is?'

‘Seems so. Before a beam fell on you, a sinkhole opened up below poor Edgar. Before him, Henrietta died from typhoid. And now this Freddie has been struck by a disease that no-one knows about. Poor kid.’

‘How can a seat be cursed?’

Jack went back to reading. ‘Something in the wood, boy. Either cursed or diseased.’ He got up and got a thick book from the back. ‘Now, I think it’s time we got back to that English lesson, don’t you?’

Commentary

This story was originally called ‘Why should we talk back?’ The idea came from a YouTube series called ‘Daz’s Ghost Hunt.’ In the videos, he is always trying to get ghosts to talk to him, and I always thought that maybe they just didn’t want to. The story was going to include ghost hunters trying to get footage and sound snippets of the ghosts talking, and the idea was that Jack and Ernie were not going to comply. However, when I thought about the word count and the amount of scenes that were going to be needed, I decided to change the plot, otherwise everything was going to be too rushed to be a decent story. The original ending was going to be a beam falling on Freddie, like it did with Ernie, but the word count didn’t allow space for the sort of fallout there had to be from that much of a tragedy happening.

The new plot is still based around ghosts, but it also makes the reader question whether they believe in curses and possessed items. I decided to make the class a bunch of teenagers, as they tend to have more sense of self and speak their minds more than younger children. Teenagers also have egos, which came in handy when I needed a character to not be scared by what Oliver had said. Therefore, Freddie became the stereotypical egotistical teenager who is not afraid of anything. I also needed a character to believe in the curse to counter Freddie, and that became Miles.

'The girl behind Freddie' was originally given a name, but it didn't matter to the story who she was or what she looked like, so I decided to leave her name out. It also gives a sense of mystery and leaves the reader questioning who this girl is. This idea came from a musical called 'Ride the Cyclone.' In the musical, there is a character called Jane Doe, who no-one knows, and it adds an air of mystery to the musical because the audience and the characters do not know who she is. The teacher also isn't given a name, as Ernie is a Victorian school boy, and they respected their teachers, only ever calling them by their titles and not their names. It shows how he was taught to respect teachers by not using their first name.

I have left it to the reader to decide whether Jack is Ernie's old teacher, or just another ghost that happens to be in the museum. The setting was inspired by my local museum, who have a room set up like a Victorian classroom.

I decided to use a first person point of view so the reader can get inside Ernie's head and understand his emotions and feelings, and I also feel like my best writing is in that point of view. I used my tutor's feedback from last TMA and used quotation marks around the speech instead of speech marks.

Description is limited as the story needed to progress and lots of description would have stunted the plot.