

# **Proof is in the Rocking**

**by**

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**1802 words**

He turned and could not believe his eyes. “Not you again!” he snapped.

For a night-watchman, I thought he was out of line, but I turned away from his impatient glare without responding and retreated to the meeting room. The click and whirr of the projector and the speaker’s animated voice allowed me to return to my back-row seat unnoticed. The audience’s faces reflected the flashing light as black and white slides were flung onto the screen, their enthusiasm for pictures of historic Brownesville obvious from their indulgent expressions.

After three attempts at getting past shirty Sarel who was taking his overnight security job in the foyer of the museum very seriously, I had to brazen-up and try once more. I hadn’t come to this meeting of the Museum Society to learn about the old town and to look at pictures from the past. I had a story to write, and my deadline was in two days. Besides that, I was jittery in anticipation of what I might find upstairs in the out-of-bounds dark corridors and halls of the historic building that was once a magistrate’s mansion and subsequently a hotel with a spooky past. This building stored happenings. I had to investigate, and Sarel was in the way.

The tea break found our security star balancing a plate of sandwiches and a cup of sweet coffee on an antique printing machine. As luck would have it, his attention was on a fussing tea-lady who was offering him a fresh plate of treats and I was able to sweep past him as if invisible.

Almost on tip-toe across the foyer, I held my breath until I reached the grand mahogany staircase that took a wide right-hand turn to the first floor. My heart was on the brink of stopping as I started up the history-smoothed stairs towards the black hole that was the dark upper floor. Only a soft security light in the distance offered any comfort. This was surely for Sarel’s convenience as he did his rounds through the night, using his torch to peer into corners and behind museum exhibits for anything that might move or have a heartbeat.

The light was too dim to cast shadows, almost too dim to find my way, but this was the light that ghosts best responded to. That was what the ladies of the Brownesville Ladies Club told our editor when they asked The Weekly Herald to investigate rumours of hauntings in the museum for a project they were undertaking. I was voted the best reporter for the job by my colleagues, so here I was, having evaded sandwich-loving Sarel, with my legs like jelly, hoping to goodness that the

rocking chair in the first room on the right at the top of the stairs was empty of any presence that night. Please don't let the chair be moving I thought to myself. Please don't let me yell if I see the old man. Please ... let this be over. Soon.

But my ordeal had barely started. Because of the light emitted by phantoms – or so I presumed – I thought there would be no need to have a torch. I regretted that decision as I felt the need for some kind of self-defense weapon as I drew closer to possible encounter. My body parts prickled from my scalp to my arms to my thighs as I inched closer to the first room on the right at the top of the stairs. I had been warned that the nocturnal silence in a museum is deafening and I found that to be no exaggeration. All I could hear was my heart-beat throbbing in my ears. Until: Shoo Shoo. Shoo Shoo. Shoo Shoo. The sound of a chair rocking on bare floorboards. I couldn't faint, I couldn't shout. I had a job to do.

I switched my tape recorder on hoping to catch the shoo-ing as proof to any sceptics who might disbelieve me if there was in fact a story to tell, and plucking up courage from a source I had never been aware of I walked into the first room to the right at the top of the stairs. As a museum exhibit this was a massive bedroom furnished with wardrobes, beds, cots, chamber pots, historical family pictures and a rocking chair, each piece retaining the essence of past owners. I had viewed this room on many occasions on visits to the museum, fascinated by the history portrayed in every piece and captivated by rumours of the apparition of an old man sitting in the rocking chair.

The room was dark with a soft glow from the corridor light. I could make out shapes of the massive carved blackwood wardrobes and the iron bedstead with its coverlet made of small patchwork hexagons that I had admired so often. The rocking chair moved. My head and arms prickled and suddenly the old man came into focus, rocking back and forth, looking straight ahead as if he hadn't seen me. There was no sound other than the Shoo Shoo as he rocked, but I could hear him speaking as if in my head.

“It has been a long time since I spoke to anyone in the physical world. Thank you for coming.” I nodded and whispered “Thank you too”, wondering if he could hear me or if he only heard thoughts. “My wife is very poorly,” he went on, still in my head, “and I am watching over her. I cannot leave until she is well. I watch over everyone in this place.” Shoo Shoo. Shoo Shoo. I was transfixed, waiting for his next move. Please don't let him stand up, I thought. Keep rocking, old man. At least he appeared to be peaceful.

“Look in the cot,” he pointed to the cot beside the bed with the eiderdown of patchwork hexagons. “My grandchild had a favourite doll and it is in the cot waiting for her to come home.” The doll's porcelain face was aglow in the dark room. Dressed in white satin and lace, her bonneted head resting on an embroidered pillow made from the finest cotton, her pretty mouth in a perpetual smile. I had coveted her on other visits to the museum, but I had never seen her looking

as radiant. As I peered at her from where I was standing close to the door, I hoped she didn't take me for the little girl she was waiting for. I didn't want to be the one to disappoint her.

"You must leave now. We must not disturb my wife," he said, waving me away with a spindly, bluish hand. For the first time I dared to look at his face and saw that his eyes were mere sockets, his cheeks sunken and his mouth a thin line splitting the bottom half of his face. "Thank you," I gurgled from deep in my throat. I didn't expect him to know that I was thanking him for not getting up from his chair, for not touching me and for letting me leave without question.

I left the room walking backward, too scared to turn around. As I returned to the corridor, I noticed what seemed like an unearthly light reflected on the floor of the room next door. There had been no light earlier. I had to investigate. This was my job. The ladies of the Brownesville Ladies Club wanted proof – or not – of the museum's rumoured phantoms, and my editor trusted me to fulfil my brief.

I was drawn to the light as if by a strange feeling of curiosity and fear. My heartbeat had normalized after the shock of seeing the ghostly face of the old man and I moved silently to the second door to the right at the top of the stairs, standing awe-struck as I observed the scene before me in the hall housing artwork of beloved local artist Ruby Reeves. The walls were lined with her paintings of fairies at work and play. And there was Ruby, dressed in a pink and mauve chiffon robe, sitting at her favourite painted desk with fairy friends all around her. She smiled joyfully, and the cavernous room felt warm and welcoming. "Thank you for visiting Hector," she said in my thoughts. "He is so lonely." The glow dimmed, and the room was suddenly empty except for the paintings on the walls and the eccentric desk and chair on a shabby Persian carpet in the centre of the space.

It had been only about fifteen minutes, but I felt as if I had been on the first floor of the museum for much longer. There was one other room that I wanted to look at before I left, or before Sarel came on one of his inspection rounds. This was the room that housed antique toys where on previous visits I had always felt a prickly pleasure when admiring a certain baby doll wearing a christening robe that must have belonged to her owner in the olden days. She had a porcelain face, arms and legs and a soft linen body. Dolly had been the love of Nancy White, six years old. Maybe I would get a message in my head from little Nancy on a night that spirits were free-willing in the Brownesville Museum.

And there she was, beautiful Nancy White, six years old, holding her baby tightly in her arms, humming softly in my head. I didn't disturb them. Their story had been told in more than words. Rest in peace, little darling.

My work was done. My editor would be pleased. That was if I could get out of the museum without Sarel putting me in handcuffs! Just when I was wondering how to get down the staircase and through the foyer without being detected, I saw the flash of torchlight in the old man's room. Sarel was doing his job as efficiently as any first-class security man would do. "Good night, Uncle Hector," I heard him say. "We had a good party downstairs. I hope we didn't disturb you." As the torchlight scanned the room I skidded past the door and down the stairs before our man on the job moved back into the corridor.

The projector was still whirring, clicking and flashing as I walked past the meeting room out into the fresh night air. My article would make the Herald's deadline, but I knew that it would take more than words to convince skeptical readers that the museum was indeed haunted. I decided to organise a ghost-buster evening for members of the Brownesville Women's Club, but first I would have to convince Sarel to be our dead-of-the-night museum guide. I guessed the promise of a monster supply of sandwiches would do the trick.

The author has a skillful way with words. The reader's imagination is held captive and subjected to the anticipation of otherworldly phenomena. The fragile connection between the living and the dead is convincing; the author is believable in the implication that spirits are ever watchful, radiating vibrations to receptive souls. The story is well written and entertaining; the author concludes the tale with a thought-provoking open-ended close that raises a succession of theories for the reader.