

Robert's Revenge

by
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I had no intention of following in his footsteps.

He was a brilliant writer, and I'm certain I could do worse than to emulate him, but I had no intention of ripping him off.

Unfortunately, it just worked out that way.

You see, last year I wrote a little story called, "A Visit from Cousin Charles," which was very well received. So well, in fact, that my wife asked me to write another one for this year.

The problem was that I didn't make that story up. It happened. My cousin Charles came to visit me last year and gave me a warning that, well, scared the Dickens out of me.

My wife did not believe a word of it. She thought it was a very cute story and wanted another one. So, I decided to do some research and, after digging through the best set of Christmas stories (aside from Dickens) I could find, set about to write one.

The I had an awful time. The last story only came to about five pages long. It shouldn't have been so hard to write another five pages. I started and stopped half a dozen times. I tore up four stories. I tried typing only to delete two others from my computer. I was on story seven when someone started making suggestions.

"The lead character is two-dimensional," he said, "and the story is ridiculous."

"It's a first draft," I said back, ready to defend my ridiculous story with its two dimensional lead against this unknown critic.

It then occurred to me that this unknown critic was standing in my apartment at midnight and I had no idea who he was.

I spun in my chair, ready to demand, "Who the Hell are you?" when my first glimpse of him rendered the question entirely unnecessary.

He was tall, with a great mane of hair and a long white beard. His eyes were piercing blue and looked out from under a pair of thick bushy eyebrows. If he had

seemed a little less sure of himself I would have guessed him to be God. As it was, he could only be Robertson Davies.

My first question having been rendered ridiculous by the blazingly obvious, I did the only thing I could think of. I sat there, mouth open, and stared.

“I see your wits are as sharp as your dialogue,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” I managed at last. “It’s just that you’ve been dead for the last several years.”

“Charles has been dead for much longer.”

“Charles is family. Family always drops in unexpectedly.”

“And apparently only they rate the offer of a drink.”

“My apologies. Whiskey?”

“American?”

“God, no.”

“Yes, then.”

I forced myself out of my chair and across the apartment to the kitchen for a pair of glasses, then back out to the sideboard for the Jamieson’s. I poured two generous portions and handed his over. I would have offered him a chair but he had already taken mine. I took a spot on the edge of the coffee table and had a sip of my whiskey while he drained his own. His look, when his eyes returned from the inside of his glass, was not at all friendly.

“Now,” he said, “just what in Hell did you think you were doing here?”

If this was the tone with which he used to speak to undergrads, no wonder they were terrified.

“What do you mean?”

“This!” he gestured at the computer screen. “This... travesty.”

“It’s a ghost story.”

“It’s a mess! And worse, it is a blatant slap in the face!”

“To who?” I asked, though I had pretty much guessed the answer.

For a reply, he raised a hand. My copy of *High Spirits* floated off the top shelf, across the room, and landed in his palm.

I took a very large sip of the whiskey.

“You *have* read this, haven’t you?”

“Of course.”

“And did you not pay attention to what it was saying?”

“Of course I did. I helped to inspire me.”

He looked at the words on the computer screen and shuddered. “Please, don’t ever say that again.”

“It’s a first draft,” I reminded him.

“It’s an abomination!” He rose to his feet and thrust the book in my face. “This is not meant to be inspirational, it is meant to be instructional!” He looked down his long nose at me. “Or perhaps you thought it was fiction.”

Realization came over me like a bad simile. “you mean, they’re all true?”

“Of course they’re true!”

I was floored. “But, but... you released it as fiction.”

“And when your wife read about your conversation with Charles, did she believe you?”

“No.”

“And do you think anyone else would?”

“Uh...”

“And did you think, in all your arrogance that you are the only writer *ever* to really be visited by a ghost?”

“Well...”

“Well, you were wrong!” He was in a state of high dudgeon now. “You have no idea what it’s like, year after year, waiting to see which spirit will come to visit, whose dead relative you’ll run into, or worse, which of the celestial powers will come down for a chit-chat!”

“I’m beginning to,” I ventured.

“Not yet, you’re not,” he said. “But you will.”

He straightened up, raised an arm dramatically. “I curse you.”

“What?”

“For thinking only you would be visited by ghosts, for believing *this*—” he waved *High Spirits* in my direction— “to be fiction, and for writing *that*—”

“It’s a first draft!”

“I curse you to be visited every year by the spirits of those who have gone before!”

He held the pose for a moment longer, then dropped the arm. “Well, I must be off.”

He put his glass down on the desk, and the copy of *High Spirits*.

“Wait a minute,” I spluttered. “How long will the curse last?”

“Oh, no more than twenty or thirty years, I should think.” He stopped a moment, then smiled. “Think of it as a present.”

“A present? To be haunted?”

There was a definite twinkle in his eye as he said, “Of course. You need something to write for your wife, after all.”

And with that, he vanished.

I wrote the words down as fast as I could, and in doing so realized that he was right. It was a present. No more struggling to find an idea, no more tearing up drafts. From now on, all I have to do is wait, and the stories will appear by themselves!

I hope nobody mean comes.

The End