



Clare Law

Clean Jumper Day

A ghost story

By Clare Law

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“Oh,” I found myself saying, “I do have a story.” And all the eyes in the half circle of firelight were now on me.

“It’s not a very good one, compared to a phantom hitch hiker and a drowned bride,” I went on. I could feel my face flushing but it was too late to stop. “However, it actually happened, I mean, I saw it.”

“My story is true,” said the woman with lots of auburn hair. “The bride was my great great aunt.”

Oh dear, I hadn’t meant to insult her, even though she had occupying Daniel, the only other person I knew at the house party. I tried to pull my audience back. “It’s about a haunted jumper.”

Some people laughed. I hadn’t meant to be funny.

“It’s about my school.” I was determined to get them back. I tried another joke. “So, er, good listening ears, everyone.”

No-one laughed.

“In my class,” I hesitated: must remember pupil confidentiality. “It happened about ten years back, actually,” I said quickly, hoping to fudge the details. “In my class, there was a boy called... called Liam who never had a clean jumper day. One of my TAs – teaching assistants, I mean, pointed it out to me. She said: ‘Liam never has a clean jumper day. Do you think mum is having problems?’

“She was right, it turned out, that TA. But we didn’t get to the bottom of it until later. That year we had a junkie’s child in the class, a pupil with a brain tumour and a couple of others who needed extra support. I’m ashamed to say that since Liam, despite his dirty jumper, was a placid, eager-to-please little boy, he slipped to the bottom of our list. Though his water bottle was never washed up and his contact book and reading diary were rarely filled in, he quickly took his spot on the carpet and sat solidly, listening with his whole self. He had this flossy blonde hair that stuck up like a dandelion clock and I sometimes thought it was with the effort of listening...” I’m boring them with details. Daniel gets up and puts another log on the fire. Someone shifts in the dark and their wicker chair creaks.

“Now,” I said, rather loudly – I didn’t mean to startle people, but it does work with the children so I thought it might do for adults, too. I felt their attention coming back to me. “The local paper always comes and takes photos of the reception class in the first weeks of the year. And when we got the message that they were coming we tried to make the children presentable. I thought about having them take their jumpers off – but the idea of spending 20 minutes getting the entire class to put them back on again was too much to bear. ‘What about Liam?’ I asked my TA at lunchtime. ‘We could use his jumper as a combined school lunch menu and messy play activities planner.’”

Daniel – I think – laughed at this.

“‘Don’t worry,’ said my TA. ‘Have a look in my lost property box: I think there’s a clean jumper.’

“There was. It had a nametape sewn in – it belonged to the boy had left in the third week of term because mum and dad got him a place at one of the private schools – I don’t know which one, the parents wouldn’t tell us. The jumper was clean and nearly new, but the boy who left – er... Oscar – had already chewed the cuff until it was frayed. He had some sensory needs, among other things, but his parents refused to take any handover information from us. I wished a silent ‘Good luck with that’ to the reception teacher at the new school.

"I took Liam aside after lunch. 'It's your clean jumper day,' I told him brightly, as if this was the most normal thing in the world. Bless him, he took it so calmly. As his head emerged Liam remarked in his placid way, 'It smells yucky. Like shoes and dog food.' And then he said something about it not belonging to him.

"I told him he wouldn't have to bear it for long, it was just a borrowed jumper. 'It's just for the photo– don't chew the sleeves, please.' I gave his face a quick going-over with a baby wipe. 'There, now you're good enough for the front row.'

"The photographer was a woman this time: the man who came last year was impatient and made some of the children cry – and everyone lined up nicely, except one boy who refused to be in the picture at all; and we remembered just in time to pull out the girl whose parents wouldn't sign the photo release form."

The auburn-haired woman piped up: "You said it happened ten years ago."

"About ten years ago, yes."

"But you said about the photographer who came this year–"

One of the other women shushed her. "Don't interrupt the teacher! You're spoiling it."

I was alarmed – so unprofessional of me to slip up.

"She's re-living the story, aren't you, Maudie," said Daniel, sounding quite fond.

This gave me courage, and I told myself that these people all lived so far from the school that I needn't worry about confidentiality.

"Afterwards I told the children 'You made good choices. The photographer said you were one of the calmest, most sensible classes she has met this year– what are you doing, Liam?'

"He was jumping up and down making a frustrated sort of barking noise – fairly normal on the general scale of four-year-old boy behaviour; though not at all like Liam's usual manner. I took his hand and led the class back inside. I dropped his hand to open the door – and he bolted, across the reception play area towards the picket fence and gate that separate us from the big bad world of Year One. 'LIAM!' I don't think I'd ever had to raise my voice to him before.

"My TA was bringing up the rear so she caught him by the arm. He screeched with rage and wrenched himself free. 'Let me GO! I don't belong here. This is the WRONG SCHOOL!'"

"The other children looked on with wide open eyes. I hustled them into the classroom, thinking that the TA would help Liam. 'It's all right, class. Liam's just a bit upset. Let's sit on the carpet and get our good listening ears and silent lips ready for a story.'

"Even above the noise of the children taking their places I heard the gate slam and the TA's cry of 'LIAM!'

"I reacted immediately. Now, as a teacher I can't leave the children on their own – that would be a disciplinary offence. I picked the two most sensible girls and handed them my Red Cardboard Triangle. 'Take this to the office.' The office knows that my Red Cardboard Triangle means an adult must come to the reception classroom immediately.

“Out of the window I saw Liam haring across the grass in the Year One playground. My TA hadn’t even bothered to give chase: she is – and I don’t want to be rude, but there’s no other way of saying it – overweight and not built for running.

“By now, Liam was at the school’s boundary hedge. He came to the corner, turned, and ran back along the hedge. His movements reminded me of the time we trapped a rat in the sports shed. The poor creature ran frantically back and forth along the metal walls, searching for any exit that wasn’t between our feet.

“‘What’s happened?’ One of the secretaries burst in, followed by my two reliable girls. I explained quickly and thrust a storybook into her hands.

“Unlike my TA, I am built for speed – thanks to me, we have cross-country club. I caught up with Liam. His shouts and rage had died away into a whiny howl. ‘This isn’t my *school*. I shouldn’t be here! I don’t belong.’

“I stopped him gently, knelt down trying not to mind that damp from the ground was soaking my tights. He sank into my arms as if he were much relieved. ‘What is it, sweetheart? What’s the matter?’ He was burning hot and green snot was snuffling in and out of his nose. It occurred to me that he might be going down with something, which would explain away his behaviour. The jumper was a mess of tear tracks and shiny nose wipe trails. I couldn’t get anything out of him, except that I wasn’t his teacher and this wasn’t his school.

“In the end, I picked him up and carried him back to the classroom – don’t tut, people forget how close Reception Year children are to toddlers. He was exhausted, but still pushed at me, whimpering that I was not his teacher.

“‘Come on Liam, let’s get that jumper off and see if we can’t make you a bit more cool and comfy,’ said the TA in her serene way. Liam’s head came out first, his dandelion hair flattened and sweaty, and then he drew his pale hands out of the sleeves. He managed a rather watery version of his normal smile and said ‘Here I am!’

“I looked him right in the face and thought – but I didn’t say – ‘Yes, there you are, back again.’

“And that’s it. I told you it wasn’t very good. But it did really happen. Ten years ago.”

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Clare Law has previously had short stories published in Index Magazine and the much-missed Flash Shot. She blogged for ten years at www.threebeautifulthings.co.uk. For information about her editorial services email clare@clarelaweditorial.co.uk