CLASSROOM GHOST

My name is Tim Griffin. I am thirty-three years old, happily married (going on four years, so far), with a two-year old son and another baby on the way. After much thought, I felt I needed to share with you one of the most unusual and remarkable events that ever happened to me. Here, then, is my story...

I have been a fourth grade teacher for the past eleven years at Antelope Creek Elementary School ("Home of the Falcons") in Rocklin, California. We are located about twenty-three miles northeast of the state capitol in Sacramento. My K-6 school has two fourth grades, and a 3/4 split class. It is a great place to work, with nice students from supportive families, and our town in general is a good place to live.

Part of our fourth grade Social Studies curriculum is an introductory study of the history of California, including the state's Native American tribes. As a result, I take my class every year to Indian Grinding Rock State Park, located about sixty miles away in the Sierra Nevada foothills, eight miles past Jackson on State Route 88, in Pine Grove. The 135-acre park's elevation sits at 2400'.

Situated in an open meadow, IGRSP is surrounded by large valley oak trees, a colorful variety of bird species, over 130 species of native plants, and active animal life -- including deer, foxes, bobcats, coyotes, and black-tailed jackrabbits. These natural resources played an important role in the lives of the Native American tribes, especially the Miwok, that lived here for thousands of years. Nearby streams and creeks yielded both fish and a reliable water source too.

The park's most unique feature, however, is a great outcropping of marbleized limestone with 1,185 mortar holes -- the largest collection of bedrock mortars in North America. The Miwok called these holes *"Chaw'se."* In the autumn, acorns -- a dietary mainstay -- which had fallen from the valley oak trees were collected by the Miwok women and ground into meal in the stone holes using stone pestles. The meal was then soaked in, and rinsed with, water to remove the bitter natural tannin in the acorns before being dried and stored. Acorn mush and soup was later cooked year-round in large, watertight cooking baskets into which hot rocks were added, the mixture stirred with wooden paddles until cooked.

IGRSP also features a reconstructed Miwok village of cedar bark houses ("*U'macha")*, and a semi-subterranean Roundhouse, the *"Hun'ge"*, which was used for social gatherings and ceremonial events. Sixty feet in diameter, it is one of the largest in California, and is still used today for Miwok and other Native American tribal festivals for traditional dancing, games, singing, and storytelling. Lastly, IGRSP also has 363 carved petroglyphs on its huge grinding limestone outcrop -- with circles, animal and human tracks, and wavy lines -- dating back an estimated one to two thousand years ago.

It was mid-October when I took my class on our exciting field trip to IGRSP. The weather was splendid. Like many people in Northern California, this was my favorite time of year: the changing colors and falling leaves, the different angle of sunlight, the crisp mornings and sunny afternoons, and the heady smells of autumn. The heat of summer was finally over, and the promise of coats, scarves, and rain was just over the horizon.

I had three parent volunteer chaperones with me -- two mothers and a father -- to help divide my class of twenty-eight students aged 8-9 into four groups. After getting off the bus at 10 a.m. and checking my group in with a park ranger who greeted us (and who explained the basic park rules and showed everyone where the bathrooms were), I always started the day by taking my seven kids on the one-mile North Trail hiking loop, to get them oriented and immediately into nature. There, I would begin my local commentary, as they would soon write down and sketch in their school notebooks. The other three groups would likewise split up and cover the park area -- hike the South Nature Trail, visit the Miwok village, explore inside the Roundhouse, view the Grinding Rock and ancient petroglyphs, etc. -- either by themselves or with a helpful ranger guide -- until 12:30. Then we would meet as a whole class for lunch by picnic benches near a shaded field before hitting the museum (with its gift shop) and the restrooms, and heading back to school in time for dismissal.

On my group's hike -- using my laminated bird identification chart and some binoculars -- we spied (and heard) Steller's jays, California quail, and woodpeckers. I explained that in summer, you could also spot many hummingbirds, orioles, tanagers, northern flickers, and hermit thrushes.

"In the spring, after a wet winter, you would see many species of colorful wildflowers blooming here too," I added. "Lilies, irises, buttercups, lupine, and more." I then spotted and gently unearthed a plant called soap root. "This was used a lot by the Miwok. They mashed it up to use as soap, but it was also used to stun and catch fish. Isn't that clever? The natives would eat the leaves right off this plant, then take the bulb at the bottom here to be baked and eaten." I carefully replanted the soap root where we found it.

The autumn smells of the foothills air and the peaceful quiet of this area always gladdened me. Next, I explained how deer were very important to the Miwok.

"It was their main source of meat, and their hides were made into clothing. Antlers, bone and hooves were used for tools. Nothing was wasted. And even deer brains were mashed and used to tan the deerskin hides."

"Yuck! That's really gross, Mr. G!" one of my girls, Dara, exclaimed. The other laughed as I nodded and agreed, "Yep...I hope that fact won't spoil your lunch!"

As we continued our hike, one of my boys asked if we would ever see a mountain lion. "My Dad says they live up here in the foothills," he explained.

"Well, he's right, Amir. I've been coming up here with fourth graders for eleven years now, but I never saw one. They are around for sure, but they tend to stay clear of humans, like any wild cat. However, if we do see one, we need to freeze and avoid eye contact, then slowly walk backwards away. If you turn and run, that triggers the mountain lion's hunter instinct, and it could choose to chase you down and attack. I've read stories about lone early morning joggers near here being surprised by a mountain lion, and then foolishly trying to outrun it -- only to be caught and killed. So let's not have that happen today, O.K?"

With our nature trail hike complete, we visited the other important park sites -- with my explanations and answering everyone's questions -- then met up with the others for lunch. The large group was having a good time. Soon, it was time to check out the *Chaw'se* Regional Indian Museum and gift shop for the last half-hour.

The students enjoyed the museum's small diorama animal scenes, and the hands-on Miwok baskets, feather regalia, arrow points, jewelry, and other tools on display. The boys especially liked handling the snake skins, and trying to start a fire using an upright wooden friction lathe. The girls, meanwhile, liked petting the various animal fur samples. All the students then wanted to spend their money on souvenirs at the gift shop -- pencils, collector pins, key chains, postcards, books, posters, coloring books, maps, and small carved model animals.

While the kids and parents were busy shopping, I approached another sales clerk to look at some of the much higher priced items -- mostly modern Miwok jewelry and carved stone animal figurines --which were kept in a locked glass case. One carved piece in particular caught my eye. It was a resting fawn or petite female deer, its legs tucked under its body, about 4"x 1.5", with its head rising up about 1.5" from its base. It appeared to be made of the same marbleized limestone as the huge historic grinding rock area outside. It also seemed very old, seeing as it was so crudely rendered.

"What can you tell me about that piece?" I asked the older female sales clerk, Myra, pointing to the fawn.

She unlocked the cabinet and took it out. "It costs $59, plus tax," Myra announced. She handed it to me for a closer look. The light gray stone was smooth and felt cool to the touch.

"It looks like a genuine Miwok artifact," I declared. "I really like it."

Myra leaned forward over the glass case, lowered her voice and confessed, "My guess is that it was made to look old and worn by some trinket sweatshop in China. Most of our stuff comes from there nowadays, so I wouldn't be surprised. But I am part Miwok Indian -- my tribal name is *Huata* -- and I must admit that it looks pretty real."

"Well, regardless, I'll take it," I announced, handing her my credit card. She wrapped it in tissue paper and taped it shut, then placed my purchase in a little bag. "Have a nice day," she smiled. "And thanks for bringing us such a well-behaved group today. Some of the school groups we get nowadays act like wild animals," she admitted, shaking her head in pity. "I mean, seriously out of control...Those poor teachers, trying to somehow teach those kids...everything is so different from when I was a girl..."

I rounded up the group and gave them a last chance for the rest rooms. After we boarded the bus, our mellow veteran driver, Gus -- his white hair pulled back in a short ponytail -- boomed, "Everybody ready? Next stop, Antelope Creek! Now listen up. All you Falcons gotta stay in your seats. No jumping around. You can talk and sing all you want, but best mind your adults. O.K...Let's go!" The yellow-orange bus door closed with a loud squeak as the engine rumbled to life.

Our class safely back at school on time and dismissed with the bell, I relaxed after thanking my chaperones. Alone again in my room, I removed my carved fawn from its wrapping. I put it on my desk -- next to my ceramic mug filled with pens, my small piece of petrified rock from Arizona, and my split blue crystalline geode -- and studied it for a moment. It would be a pleasant reminder of yet another successful field trip to IGRSP, I thought. When I went home later that Wednesday afternoon, I told my wife, Lani, about my day, and what had I purchased and kept at school. She, in turn, detailed her busy day minding our son, Mitch, and shared how she was coping with her pregnancy, now in its seventh month. We didn't want to know if Mitch would soon have a new baby brother or sister, so we bounced around potential names for either a boy or a girl.

Halloween, meanwhile, was coming up fast. It was a busy time of year for parents and teachers alike -- with picking out pumpkins and carving them, putting up spooky classroom decorations, weekend family visits to nearby corn mazes, apple-picking at area orchards, enjoying soups and warm spiced cider again, and getting ready with Trick or Treat candy and costumes.

When the big day arrived, we had our annual morning costume parade around the campus, and the room mothers provided the usual cupcakes and fruit punch for the kids. No serious school work was possible on such a day, so we enjoyed an extra-long recess, with fun puzzles and coloring pages in our classroom for the remainder of the morning.

After lunch, I had blacked out my windows with dark plastic sheeting, so as to set the mood for our afternoon party of scary tales. First, we watched the classic Disney animated video of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow -- one of my holiday traditions. Then I lit a single scented candle and sat down at my desk after turning off all the lights. It was pitch dark and rather spooky! I proceeded to tell a brief history of Halloween, then went into some age-appropriate ghost stories -- designed to thrill and scare a little, but not to terrify or cause nightmares. When asked, I confessed to my students that I had never seen an actual ghost, but that I had read of other people who claimed they did over the years around the world. I was just in the middle of telling the old tale of the Phantom Hitchhiker when I thought a saw a pale purple cloth like a child's bed sheet swirling in the back corner of the room. I assumed it was simply an optical illusion of some sort -- perhaps a spectral image from the candle's flame bouncing off my eyeglasses -- so I ignored it. It went away after about twenty seconds.

Soon, after several more spooky tales, it was time for school dismissal. I blew out my candle so everyone could scream for a moment, then turned the lights back on. Fortunately, it was a Friday, so there would be no school tomorrow -- no futilely trying to teach sleepy and/or 'sugared-up' kids the day after Trick or Treating!

"Have fun tonight, class! Be safe, and don't eat all your candy over the weekend!" I cautioned. "See you on Monday."

Two days later, I saw what I assumed to be an actual ghost for the first time. It came as an unsettling shock.

I was in the middle of a math lesson, explaining 1-digit long division into three numbers, on that bright Monday morning when I noticed another person in the room beside myself and my twenty-eight students. It was the wispy outline of a young girl, standing silently in the same corner of the back of the room where I had noticed the strange pale purple swirl on Halloween. I stopped and stared at the apparition, which was eerie, seeing as I could see right through her body at the bookshelves behind her -- both being about twenty feet away as I stood writing at my whiteboard. The girl was wearing an Indian deerskin outfit with beadwork, and a necklace of some sort. She looked to be about six or seven years old. Her black hair was parted down the middle, and fixed into two short braids that ended on her shoulders.

"Umm, Mr. G? Are you all right? one of my boys, Tyler, timidly called out, when I had stopped speaking in mid-sentence about numbers and was seemingly staring into space.

Catching myself -- somewhat embarrassed -- I replied, "Yes, thank you, Tyler. I was just thinking about something else for a second. Now, umm...back to our lesson..."

When I discreetly glanced back a few moments later to the spot where I had seen the apparition, I discovered that it had vanished. What the hell? I thought. I was forced to put it out of my mind for the time being.

The following afternoon, Tuesday, I was demonstrating the difference between magnetism, static electricity and current electricity in my science lesson when the Indian girl appeared again. This time she was closer to me, about ten feet away -- standing noiselessly between rows of my seated students -- but the strange, diminutive phantom seemed careful not to touch anyone or anything. I knew that no one else could see her, for there was no visible reaction from any of my boys and girls. The little ghost, however, looked to be trying to speak to me. I saw her mouth and lips move, but heard nothing. After a few moments, she departed by walking to the back corner of the room where she had appeared yesterday -- only this time *she walked right through the wall* of my portable classroom and disappeared! I had to stifle an alarmed gasp when viewing such an startling move, but was forced to act casual as I returned to my science lesson, even though my heart was pounding and my head was reeling.

That evening, at home, I urgently had to tell my wife, Lani, what I had witnessed two days in a row at school.

"I know you aren't superstitious or given to believing in the supernatural, Tim, so these events are probably just hallucinations, or some kind of 'memory projection' from your recent field trip to Indian Grinding Rock," she offered. I agreed that her theories were certainly possible. But still...

Wednesday morning came, and I was apprehensive even before leaving for work. What if I saw the ghost again? What exactly was happening to me? I wondered. Was I losing my mind? I kissed Lani and Mitch goodbye, then drove off to school.

Near the last half-hour of the day before dismissal, I used my overhead projector and pull-down classroom screen by my whiteboard to highlight what would be required for my student's upcoming California Mission construction projects and research reports for Parent Night. My back was to the class as I wrote on the transparent acetate roller with my colored markers and the kids were all facing forward, taking notes.

I was deeply startled when the little Indian girl appeared no more than six feet away from me, to my right. She seemed to be silently crying! She mouthed some more words I could neither hear or understand, thenabruptly *ran through my blue metal classroom door a few feet away* and again vanished.

Fortunately, I was able to firmly keep my self-control in front of my students and act as if nothing had happened. School would soon be out anyway, thank God...what exactly had just happened to me?

I sat alone at my desk after my classroom emptied out and again wondered: am I going crazy? Am I losing my mind?

Lani heard the whole story that evening over our dinner of lasagna with salad and garlic bread. "It's too soon to think about checking in with a mental health expert, honey. The apparition doesn't seem to want to harm you in any way. It is a mystery, though, that is starting to concern me, seeing as it is affecting you more and more," she added, reaching out for my hand. I shared that I had been having some dreams lately about the little ghost girl too. "I would keep all these occurrences secret from your colleagues at work as well, dear. No sense involving others until we know exactly what you are dealing with," Lani smiled, then rose and lovingly hugged and kissed me.

Thursday, however, brought no ghost sightings at all. It had been a normal day. Maybe this bizarre series of incidents was finally over? I secretly hoped it was...

But as I sat at my desk afterschool correcting my weekly spelling tests, I looked up to my left and saw the girl no more than two feet away! I was stunned to see her up close, and in so much detail -- her mournful, dark eyes; the colorful beadwork woven into her deerskin tunic; her necklace made of thin, hollowed-out bird bones; the braided horsehair cord around her waist; and the tiny leather moccasins on her feet. I faintly smelled the inexplicable odor of musty dirt which she seemed to have on her skin. She was so fragile and lonely-looking! She slowly mouthed the same silent words she had done before, then realized that I didn't understand her, so she switched to some kind of gestured sign language. I shook my head no and shrugged my shoulders upward, while placing the palms of my hands up, in the universal motion indicating 'I'm sorry, but I don't understand you.'

Realizing our helpless communication impass, the little ghost girl started to cry. Instinctively, I reached out to touch her shoulder in a comforting gesture, but my hand passed instead *right through her body*! I was stunned to feel -- for just that brief second or two -- an odd, freezing, icy sensation in my hand. But fortunately, the eerie sensation quickly went away when I pulled my arm back in alarm.

The classroom ghost then pointed to the carved stone fawn on my desk. She reached toward it, with pleading eyes, but couldn't touch or lift it. But now I finally understood what she wanted and needed...I nodded my head up and down in acknowledgement. She seemed to light up with a smile!

Just then, the other fourth grade teacher, Kelly Tarkins, barged into my room to ask me a quick question about our monthly staff planning meeting. She had opened my door in a hurry without knocking. The little ghost girl instantly disappeared.

Naturally, I told Lani all about my latest amazing encounter once I got home. I announced that I needed to research and memorize some basic Indian sign language words and phrases, in an attempt to communicate two-ways with my special little phantom -- a specter more endearing now than one who originally was troubling. I spent hours that evening doing that homework. I only wished that the little ghost would come back again -- at least until we further solved the riddle of her multiple appearances.

"Tim, why not take some photos or videos with your cell phone of the girl the next time she comes? Then you will have firm proof of an actual paranormal encounter," my wife suggested. I agreed that it was a terrific idea, and would do just that.

Friday crawled by as I waited for the end of the school week, hoping that my ghost would come again after class. After wishing my students a nice weekend, I locked my door from the inside so as to be alone and undisturbed.

3:30...3:45...4:00...4:30 p.m. came and went, but nothing. The janitor would come knocking soon, I realized, to clean up. Damn! Please little ghost, come back! I pleaded in my mind. I put my face in my hands, then put head down on my desk in despair.

But when I rose, my gaze saw her standing nearby. I smiled and immediately went into slow and careful sign language, asking: *What is your name? What do you want from me? How can I help you?*

The ghost child grew excited in her understanding. She mouthed her name three times, slowly. It appeared to be something like "cool-yah." I said my name aloud to her -- "Tim" -- while pointing to myself. She smiled and nodded, then did it again when I said "Cool-Yah" and pointed to her. It was a good start! I suddenly remembered and took my phone out and clicked three fast photos of her, but made no video of the apparition. I felt it was not the time to interrupt what was happening for too long, plus I didn't want to frighten my spectral visitor away.

When I repeated my other questions to her using sign language, she answered, pointing to the carved fawn on my desk like she did yesterday. In sign language, she said: *Mine. Bring back to me. Take home. Put it in earth near my People.*

She repeated this a few more times. I understood, I signed back, and nodded. The Indian ghost child smiled and nodded too, then made the sign of thanks, and concluded with the sign for love by crossing both closed hands over her heart. The encounter suddenly ended when the little ghost girl simply vanished, like a mirage...

I sat for a while, thinking of the remarkable event that I had just experienced. Moments later, the janitor, Conrad, knocked and it was time for me to head home. On the drive through the streets of Rocklin, I pondered my next move. In my jacket pocket was the precious stone fawn figurine.

After sharing the breakthrough event with Lani, she asked right away to see my phone photos. "I am really curious about what your little ghost actually looks like!" she exclaimed.

But we were both shocked and disappointed when the three rapid photos I took showed absolutely nothing that was paranormal. At least I was able to show my wife the mysterious carved animal, around which the whole story revolved. I took some pictures of that special object, however, because I realized it would not be mine to keep much longer.

Indian Grinding Rock State Park offers on site camping all year, with twenty-two campsites @ $30 per vehicle per night. I explained to Lani that I would make reservations and camp there by myself tomorrow (Saturday) night, using our pop-up camper. When the park rangers were gone and everyone else was asleep, I revealed, I planned on reburying the fawn statue near the Miwok cedar bark village -- seeing as the site had no officially-designated Indian burial ground. My theory was that Cool-Yah was a Miwok girl who died hundreds of years ago, and was buried with her favorite carved toy -- the fawn figurine. Some grave robbers long ago had probably dug up several Miwok graves and had stolen several artifacts, including the fawn, assuming that they had significant value when sold. How it found its way into the IGRSP museum many years later -- for its recent, coincidental purchase by me -- would forever remain a mystery.

My scheme that night worked as planned and was successful. I used a small trowel to carefully dig, then rebury the statuette, under a sliver of a crescent moon, with the sound a lone coyote yipping in the distance. I returned home early Sunday morning.

Still curious after devouring Lani's scrambled eggs (with fresh fruit and warm cinnamon rolls) for breakfast, I researched female Miwok names on the internet -- looking for "Cool-Yah" or something close to it. I found the name *Kulya*, which meant "sugar pine nuts, burnt black." This name was given to a baby Miwok girl who was destined to be "always determined and resilient." This was based on nature's tough sugar pinecone, which could withstand being completely burnt on the outside during fierce forest fires, yet have its precious seeds always survive inside their charred petal husks for future propagation.

So perhaps it was no surprise when I arrived early Monday morning at school and unlocked my classroom door -- only to find a single, perfect sugar pinecone, resting on my desk, exactly in the spot where the carved stone fawn had once been placed.

A gentle token of thanks, perhaps, from my spectral friend -- my little classroom ghost -- the persistent Miwok child whom I never saw again...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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