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Home, Sweet Homewood

BY LIBBYTUCKER

This has been an unusually long and harsh winter. Daylight savings time starts tomorrow, but our neighborhood still looks like Antarctica. Our driveway has a thick layer of ice, and our gutters have cracked under the pressure of enormous icicles. In weather this bad, squirrels don't want to leave their nests in the frozen trees. Both animals and humans want to stay in their warm, comfortable homes.

Early in February we had a welcome break from winter doldrums. Hugh Grant, a beloved British actor, paid a visit to Binghamton University with Marc Lawrence, a talented BU alumnus who directed his most recent film, *The Rewrite*. Both of them came to our campus that freezing February day because *The Rewrite*, a romantic comedy about a reluctant screenwriting professor, had been partially filmed here. Excitement spread rapidly. There would be a screening of the film, with commentary by Grant and Lawrence, and students and faculty could get free tickets! Many of us were ready to line up, no matter how cold and snowy the weather became.

The screening of *The Rewrite* was a huge success, but it wasn't easy to get tickets. Like many other people, I watched the movie later on my computer at home. It was a delight to discover that the movie included a ghost story—not just a story about a haunting by one deceased person, but a story about a whole ghostly town that had unexpectedly appeared. This town, Homewood, belonged to *The Twilight Zone*, created by Binghamton's favorite author Rod Serling.

The *Twilight Zone* episode, "Walking Distance" appeared on CBS in 1959. In the episode a middle-aged man named Martin Sloan stops at a gas station to get his car repaired and learns that the town of Homewood, where he grew up, is close enough for a short visit. Feeling nostalgic, Martin strolls over to a park where he spent many happy hours as a boy. With a sense of shock, he realizes that he is not only in the same town where he grew up but also in the era of his boyhood. On the park's carousel,

Martin meets his younger self and frightens the boy, causing him to fall off the moving carousel and injure his leg. Later, Martin talks with his father, who advises him to look forward, not back. As he returns to the gas station to pick up his car, Martin realizes that he now has a limp; his boyhood self's injury has become his own.

How does the encounter between Martin and his younger self and his father influence the plot of *The Rewrite*? Serling, a highly respected author who grew up near Recreation Park in Binghamton, has become part of the city's identity and spirit. Binghamton residents proudly point to the carousel in the park, which stands near a plaque honoring "Walking Distance," and a local legend claims that Serling's ghost haunts the carousel. In *The Rewrite* we hear nothing about Serling's ghost, but we see the plaque and learn about the episode that it honors. As Keith Michaels, the reluctant screenwriting professor, starts a relationship with an undergraduate female student, drinks too much liquor, provokes the anger of a senior faculty member, and dismisses his class for a month, he gets into so much trouble that he needs good, solid advice, which Serling's "Walking Distance" provides.

Just as Martin Sloan learns that he must leave Homewood and look forward, not back, Keith Michaels learns that he should stop breaking the university's rules and plan for a worthwhile future as a creative writing professor. He also gets in touch with his estranged son and buys a Jane Austen tote bag and other trinkets for a senior faculty member who deeply dislikes him, winning her appreciation and friendship. That part of the movie seems very hard to believe, but who expects romantic comedies to imitate reality? Quasi-magical transformation can be fun to watch, especially because it doesn't happen often in everyday life.

Characters in *The Rewrite*, "Walking Distance," and certain local ghost legends express yearning of people to communicate with each other. In ghost legends, communication necessitates breaking

through the border between the living and the dead; in novels, plays, and films, characters can move from the present to the past or the future. Neither form of travel is easy.

Some Binghamton legends describe ghosts who struggle to reach their lost loved ones. One famous example is the "White Lady," a hitchhiker who died on a highway and tries very hard to return to her parents. This is one of many stories from the "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend cycle. Another Binghamton legend concerns a husband who slowly walks upstairs, bringing wood to warm the room where his dear wife sleeps. He and his wife both belong to the past, but his love for his wife makes him carry wood into the present, disturbing the sleep of the house's current owners. In both of these stories, loving family bonds provide powerful motivation. Not all Binghamton ghost stories involve positive feelings, however. The ghost of Joshua Whitney at Christ Church, founded in 1810, supposedly haunts the church because he is furious that he never got a chance to build an oversized pew. He communicates with the living by hiding objects and playing outrageous tricks.

During the long, cold months of winter and early spring, we think about connections between the past and the present, and bonds between the living and the dead. Going back to "home, sweet home" might be tempting, but it would be an emotionally complicated trip. Let's move on to the future and welcome spring! ▼

Libby Tucker teaches folklore at Binghamton University. Her book *Haunted Halls: Ghostlore of American College Campuses* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007) investigates college ghost stories. She also authored *Children's Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport: Greenwood, 2008). She co-edited, with Ellen McHale, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013).



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