

THE OLD GRAY CHAIR

By Douglas Evans

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ZACHARY sat in his gray wooden chair in the classroom at the end of the hall. But not for long. The moment the tall teacher turned toward the blackboard, Zack sprang up and walked over to watch a daddy longlegs climb up the window.

“Zachary!” called the tall teacher. He wrote *Zack* in the blackboard doghouse, “Keep your seat in your seat!”

Zack slunk back to his chair and sat down. But not for long.

Up front, the teacher was writing *to*, *too*, and *two* on the blackboard. “There are three ways to spell this word,” he explained.

“That’s two too many *to*’s for me,” said Zack, and he shot from his chair to feed and a lettuce leaf to Miss Nosewiggle, the guinea pig.

“Zachary, stop popping up!” said the tall teacher, adding a check mark next to Zack’s name in the doghouse. “Take your seat!”

Zack trudged back to his chair. “I’d like to take this seat for a long walk,” he grumbled. “I’ve been sitting all morning. I sat during breakfast. I sat on the bus for the ride to school. I sat during reading and writing. I even had to sit in the computer lab. Kids spend more time at school on their bottoms than on their legs.”

“Way to go, Sharkey,” Alex whispered as Zachary sat down.

“Ol’ Zack-in-the-Box Sharkey,” said Kimberly.

Zachary didn’t mind the nickname Sharkey. Sharks have to keep moving in the water or they die, and that’s how Zack felt in his classroom.

Almost at once the squirming started up again. Zachary wiggled and bounced. He swung his legs while rocking back and forth,

“When I grow up I’ll get a job without any sitting,” he muttered. “I’ll be a stand-up comedian or a traffic cop or one of those flag people at highway construction sites who hold stop signs.”

Meanwhile, the tall teacher continued with his spelling lesson. “*T-W-O* is the number. *T-O-O* means ‘also.’” At this point he caught sight of Zack wandering toward the reading corner. His ears turned tomato red.

“Zachary, do I have to glue you to that chair? Go stand in the hall!”

Zachary headed out the door.

“So long, Sharkey,” Kimberly called to him.

For the next fifteen minutes Zack wandered up and down the hallway. When the recess bell rang, he watched his class file from the room.

The tall teacher stood in the doorway. “Park yourself in your chair, Zachary,” he said. “You owe us an entire recess for breaking rule number three, ‘Stay in your seat.’”

Zachary entered the empty classroom and sat down in his gray chair. Although his punishment was for not staying seated, he didn’t blame the seat. He liked this old chair. It was the only wooden one in the classroom. He liked its sturdy back and its shiny, freshly painted seat. The other classroom chairs, all plastic, bent too easily and had sharp edges. Worst of all, they squeaked at the worst moments.

“I wouldn’t trade my chair for any other one in the entire school,” Zack said. “I just find it hard to sit still, that’s all. Like a shark.”

The next thing that happened, happened so fast that Zachary wasn’t sure what had happened until after it happened. One moment he was slumped in his gray chair staring at his desktop and the next he was sitting on the tile floor staring at the desk’s bottom. His chair had lurched and sent him flying.

“An earthquake, maybe?” he asked himself. “But I didn’t hear the earthquake alarm.”

Dusting off his jeans, Zack stood. He inspected his chair, running his hand over the seatback, carved with initials still visible under the coat of gray paint. Cautiously, he sat down again.

“Chairs can’t move,” he said. “Can they?”

No sooner had he spoken than the chair’s front legs rose off the floor. The back legs buckled and kicked outward. Zack went airborne again and found himself back on the tiles.

“Incredible!” he exclaimed. “My chair’s become an ejection seat!”

At that moment Mr. Leeks came in with his broom. “Happens to the best of them, Sharkey,” he said to Zack when he spotted him on the floor.

Zack stood, rubbing his rear. “Best of who?”

“Every rootin’ tootin’ third-grader who has had that wooden chair in past school years,” the custodian explained. “Sooner or later they all end up on the floor. And some of those youngsters, don’t you know, were the best chair riders in the West.”

Zack looked from Mr. Leeks to his gray chair. “Chair riders?”

“That’s right. Why, Leadbottom Billy Keester himself once had that chair, and even *he* couldn’t handle her. I’d find Billy sprawled on the floor almost every recess he was kept inside. And now, don’t you know, Leadbottom Billy Keester is the number one chair-riding champion in the entire country.”

“Wow, a chair-riding champion!” Zack exclaimed.

“I heard that Billy Keester now rides the wildest chairs in all the major chair rodeos,” Mr. Leeks went on. “Rocking chairs, barber chairs, beanbag chairs, high chairs, and his specialty, time-out chairs. But back in third grade, this old wooden chair of yours gave Leadbottom Billy a workout. I bet his initials can still be seen on the seatback.”

Zack checked his chair again. “Yeah, carved right here. BK.”

“Yep, that old gray chair just ain’t what she used to be,” said Mr. Leeks. “I suppose you got off on the wrong side of your chair once too often and that’s what got her riled up.”

“Wrong side?” asked Zack, puzzled. “You mean there’s a certain side you should get on and off your classroom chair?”

“You’re darn tootin’! All youngsters should know that, Sharkey. Always mount a chair from the left side. Never the right.”

“Well, I sure didn’t mean to make my chair sore,” said Zack. “I like this old gray chair.”

“Yep, me too,” said the janitor. “I thought of retiring her down in the school basement with the other wooden chairs, but I just couldn’t do it. Last summer I gave her a fresh coat of gray paint and put new sliders on her four feet. Old Gray, I call her. Old Gray’s the last wooden chair seeing action in this school. They don’t make chairs like Old Gray anymore. Those plastic ones break.”

“And they squeak,” said Zack. “My chair never squeaks. I like my chair ... but my chair doesn’t seem to like *me*.”

Mr. Leeks pulled on his chin. “Well, Sharkey, the reason for that is clear. I’ve seen you wandering around the classroom. I’ve seen you standing in the hall. Old Gray sees the other students sitting in their chairs and she gets ideas. She thinks she’s the boss at this desk.”

“You mean my chair thinks she’s in charge?” said Zack. “No way. No chair has ever been the boss of me!”

Mr. Leeks looked toward the floor where Zack had fallen. “Well now, that’s not how the situation appears.”

“Why, I can sit in that old gray chair whenever I want!” Zack insisted.

The janitor rubbed his chin some more. “Then prove it, Sharkey. Come on, show Old Gray who’s really the boss around this desk.”

Zack placed his hand on the seatback. “No problem,” he said, and he sat down from the left side.

Almost at once the chair started to move. It spun a quick three-sixty and tossed Zack to the floor.

Mr. Leeks slapped the knee of his overalls. “Yahoo! You all right, Sharkey? Looks like Old Gray has some kick left in her yet.”

Zack crawled away from his chair. “Old Gray is harder to ride than I thought,” he sputtered. “But I won’t let my chair get the best of me.”

“That’s the ticket, Sharkey,” said Mr. Leeks. “The best thing to do after getting thrown by a chair is to get right back on. But let’s do things properly. Yahoo! This classroom hasn’t had a chair rodeo in years.”

The janitor pushed the classroom desks and chairs into a circle around Zack’s desk and the old gray chair.

Zack, hands on hips, stepped around his chair, studying it closely. A cafeteria straw dangled from the side of his mouth.

Mr. Leeks held the chair’s seat with one hand and gently rubbed the seatback with the other. “Easy now, girl,” he said. “OK, Sharkey, if you’re ready to take Old Gray for a real ride, sit down. Careful now. I can tell Old Gray’s a bit skittish today.”

Zack eased into the wooden seat.

“Stay loose and wrap your feet around the front legs,” said Mr. Leeks. “But not too tightly. When she bucks, you want to go with her.”

Zack grabbed the front edge of the seat and hooked his ankles behind the front legs. He took a deep breath and gave Mr. Leeks a nod.

“Yahoooo!” the janitor hollered, stepping backward. “Do some chair busting, Sharkey!”

At once the chair’s back legs kicked outward and leaped into the air. A foot of space appeared between Zack and the chair seat. The chair slammed down on the tile floor, but Zack managed to hang on.

“Whoa! Wow! Wheel!” he called out. “Whoopee!”

Mr. Leeks sat on a desktop in the circle with his feet upon the leg rail. “Yahoo!” he shouted, slapping his knee some more. “That’s the way, Sharkey. What a buckaroo! Stay with her, boy. Yahoooo!”

The chair slid side to side, back and forth. White knuckled, Zack held on. The chair reared on its back legs and rocked forward. Zack saw the classroom walls go up and down. His feet lost their hold, and he went flying off the seat again. This time he landed on the floor belly-down.

Mr. Leeks knelt beside him, slapping his back.

“Good ride, Sharkey. You nearly had her. Old Gray almost broke that time.”

Zack pounded the tiles with his fist and rose to his feet. He hadn’t gotten hurt, but one sneaker was missing.

Mr. Leeks, seeing that one of the chair’s sliders had come off, began hammering it back on like a blacksmith. “Remember to squeeze tight with the knees, Sharkey,” he said. “Watch out when Old Gray rears. You don’t want her hind legs slipping out from under you.”

“Our teacher hates it when we rock back,” Zack said.

Mr. Leeks nodded. “Teachers don’t understand chairs. Most of them sit in swivel chairs, which have no fight in them at all. Ready to get on again?”

“You bet,” Zack said. He grabbed the chair by the back rods as if going to an assembly and shook it. “This time, Old Gray, you’re mine,” he said. “This time, I’m staying on you.”

He set the chair on the floor and quickly sat down.

Old Gray took off at once. She shot forward, halted, and slid backward. She twirled like a top. She rocked from her front legs to her back legs, right legs to left legs.

“Whoa! Wow! Whee!” Zack shouted, “But I—think—I’m going to be sick.”

“Yahoooooo!” cried Mr. Leeks. “Stay with her, Sharkey! She’ll tucker out soon.”

Still Old Gray bucked. She orbited some more, bounced off the floor, and ricocheted forward. Zack went dizzy as his chair pounded the floor and swirled around. At last, after a final leap in the air, Old Gray slowed. She took Zack on a last ride around the desk corral before coming to a stop behind his desk.

Mr. Leeks slapped his knee. “You did it, Zack!” he cried. “By golly, you tamed Old Gray. That was the best chair ride I’ve seen in this classroom. Leadbottom Billy Keester never stayed on Old Gray that long.”

Zack sat proudly in the chair while the janitor arranged the desks back into rows. The third-graders filed in from recess just as Mr. Leeks left the room. When the tall teacher saw Zack, he grinned.

“Good to see you in your seat, Zachary,” he said.

Zack ran his hand along the edge of his chair. “Steady, Old Gray,” he said in a low voice. “Easy now, girl.”

In fact, Zack stayed seated throughout math and social studies.

“Old Gray, I’m going to stay on you until the afternoon bell rings,” he said during Writer’s Workshop. “You’re my chair, and I’ll be on you till the last bell rings at the end of the school year.”

Zack did get up once that after noon. When the class left for PE, Zack knelt by the old gray chair with his scissors in his hand. Under the seat, where it wouldn’t scratch the gray paint, he carved a word:

Sharkey