

## ENTRENCHED

### SYNOPSIS

Joe, a young student gripped by addiction, isolates himself in a desperate attempt to go cold turkey. Tormented by self-loathing and shame, he is visited by the ghost of his great-great-grandfather, Elliot—a decorated World War I veteran revered as a hero. But Elliot hasn't returned to bask in glory; he has come to confront the myths of masculinity and strength that have haunted generations.

As the two men—separated by a century but bound by pain—talk, Elliot reveals his own hidden battles the trauma he carried home, the silence he kept, and the help he never dared to seek. Through their raw and honest exchange, Joe begins to see that true courage lies not in stoicism, but in vulnerability and connection.

This intimate one-act play explores addiction, inherited shame, and the quiet violence of masculine ideals.

**(Note – there are different ways I could take this play with the end scene (Scene 5) – so I don't mind rewriting it under your advice for what you feel might be a better drama. The different last scenes do change one of the central themes of the play. I never intended this play to be preachy in any way so I hope I have achieved that.)**

- **Idea one.** We never know for certain if Elliot is a ghost or if he is a figment of Joe's tortured mind and inner turmoil at his frustration and low esteem at his own inability to beat his addiction. This means removing anything physical left by him such as his medals
- **Idea two.** That Elliot is a ghost and he reveals himself to both Mia and Joe in the final scene when he returns to coax Joe to tell Mia.
- **Idea three.** This is the one that I went for. For Mia not to hear Elliot but the medals to be there as a reminder to Joe about the purpose of Elliot's visit.

### SETTINGS

There are five scenes, four of which take place in Joe's bedroom at the family home. Joe

is currently staying there on summer break from university, with his older sister Mia. His parents are on vacation. Joe can sit either on the bed or on a sofa.

The other scene (scene four) is a flashback to Elliot in the trenches in the First World War in Belgium.

#### **CHARACTERS:**

- **JOE (M)** – Around 20 years old. Pale, jittery, trying to quit his addiction alone.
- **MIA (F)** – Joe's older sister, practical, caring, unaware of the full truth. Can be 23 – 29 years.
- **ELLIOT (M)** – Joe's Great Great Grandfather. Appears in WWI regalia. May or may not be real. Can be late 30s – early 50s. To keep it correct, Elliot would have died before the Second World War.
- **Optional** – A younger SARGENT ELLIOT CRANMORE (M) in Scene Three 27 – 35 years or actor playing Elliot's ghost to double up.
- **PRIVATE FROST (M)** – Elliot's young comrade in the trenches.

**ENTRENCHED****ACT ONE, SCENE ONE – THE LIE**

*Lights up on a bedroom. Morning light filters through closed curtains. On the bed, JOE sits hunched, pale and sweating, with a blanket draped around him. He picks up the clock, squints at it and shakes it.*

JOE: Time is going so slowly. Why doesn't it go faster? Step by step, they always say. Just got to get through today.

*JOE'S phone buzzes. He answers it.*

JOE: Toby... sorry it's not a good moment. Yeah I am laid up with a bug.... No, I haven't told them about Oxford yet...

*A knock on the bedroom door. MIA calls to JOE.*

MIA: Joe can I come in?

JOE: Look, have to go, my sister needs me. I'll phone you later.

*Joe puts his phone away.*

JOE: Sure, Mia, you can come in.

*MIA comes in, wearing her coat, carrying a tray of refreshments.*

MIA: I thought I heard talking.

JOE: Toby phoned but I didn't feel like talking much. It's just this fever has knocked me out. Just need a bit more time here.

MIA: You look awful

JOE: That's the look I was trying for.

MIA: Seriously, if you are still like this when I get back, I am going to call the doctor.

JOE (in a panic): No... don't do that...

MIA: It's just the doctor.

JOE: No... there's no need. I'll be okay. I can sweat it out.

MIA: I've brought you something.

*MIA puts the tray with refreshments on the cabinet. Then places her hand on JOE's forehead.*

MIA: Sweat is the right word. You're burning up.

*JOE reaches for the cup. His hand shakes. He withdraws it.*

MIA: You're not well. You've not eaten much for days.

*JOE picks up a sandwich. He is still shaking. He forces it into his mouth.*

JOE: Look, I've eaten the sandwich. I am getting better. Don't fret.

MIA: I got that chicken especially for you. There's enough for another. Do you want me to make it before I go to my meeting?

JOE: No. You can do it when you get back. If I feel well enough, I'll get up and make it.

MIA: Mum and Dad are still away for another week.

JOE: Don't bother them please. It's just a bug.

MIA: If there's any problem call me. Work said I could work at home for the rest of the week. I just have to go in for meetings this afternoon.

JOE : Just go. When you're back, I'll give you a shout.

*MIA hovers hesitantly.*

MIA: Joe, to be honest... I errr.... Is everything okay?

JOE: I am not well that's all.

MIA: It's not just today. I just felt that for some time you've been different. Oxford must have changed you.

JOE: Well of course it has! First time away from home. You know what the pressure is like – you went there remember!

MIA: It's not that... I..

JOE: Just go Mia, you'll be late.

*MIA leaves. JOE slumps back on the bed, head in his hand.*

BLACKOUT.

## **ACT ONE, SCENE TWO – THE VISITOR**

*JOE is in bed. He stirs, moving around uncomfortably. He sits up, and puts the lamp on.*

JOE: I've only been here six days. God, that's less than a week – feels like forever.

Don't think I am going to make it.

*JOE tentatively gets off the bed, and carefully opens a cupboard. He rummages in it and brings out a small foil package.*

JOE: Just this little one and I'll be okay. I mean I made it six days so I can start again tomorrow.

*Unsteadily JOE makes his way back onto bed. He holds the package in the palm of his hand.*

JOE: I am fighting well.

*There is a knock at the door. JOE hides the package under his pillow.*

JOE: Mia, is that you?

VOICE: Permission to enter?

JOE: What was that?

VOICE: It's not a what it's a who.

JOE: I must be hearing things. The cold turkey is playing tricks on me.

*JOE huddles together. He touches his forehead to check his temperature.*

*The door opens, and standing in the doorway, is GREAT GREAT GRANDFATHER ELLIOT, dressed in full WW1 regale.*

JOE: Who are you?

ELLIOT: Don't you recognise me? I'm Elliot, your great great grandfather.

JOE: What the hell.... Holy crap.

ELLIOT: Language lad. That's no way to talk.

JOE: Gran was always talking about you when I was little. And Mum showed me pictures of you. You were in uniform.

*ELLIOT shows JOE a picture of himself.*

ELLIOT: Like this the one?

*JOE nods, with a shocked look on his face.*

ELLIOT: That's right, I fought in the trenches. The First World War. A different time. A different world. Millions killed both on and off the battlefield.

JOE: You were hero. Even now, the family talks about it. In the attic, we've a box stuffed full of photos.

ELLIOT: Maybe I was as Sargent Elliot Cranmore but plain Elliot Cranmore is perhaps a different story.

JOE: Hey, that is cryptic!

ELLIOT: There nothing cryptic about war. This was real life. So many lives were sacrificed and not for you to be throwing yours away.

JOE: But you died years ago.

ELLIOT: What mentally or physically? They weren't at the same time.

JOE: This isn't happening.

ELLIOT: Maybe. But you are going cold turkey. Brave. Foolish.

JOE: How do you....?

ELLIOT: I've been watching, Joe.

JOE: I got pressures. Jody cheated on me and I am in debt from college. I know people who left last year and they still can't get a decent job.

ELLIOT: Stuffing fifty quid up your nose probably doesn't help. A hundred years ago, you could buy a car for that.

JOE: I got problems.

ELLIOT: Everyone has problems. Look Joe, I am not here to chastise or blame you. Believe me. I am just worried about you. I know it's not just a matter of you seeing sense. I get that - if only, it was that easy.

JOE: I've tried twice before.

*JOE pulls the blanket around his shoulders tighter.*

ELLIOT: What this month?

JOE: I'm fine.

ELLIOT: You're clutching poison like it's a lifeline. That's not fine lad, its surrender. Why don't you tell Mia? She cares about you. She thinks you are ill.

JOE: It's easier this way. Less complicated. Once other people know it becomes too emotional.

ELLIOT: Mia's not stupid. You can see that for yourself. So are you going to fight this silent war by yourself. What about your mate Toby?

JOE: He does drugs himself. In fact, it was someone he knew that sold me my first smoke. Loads of people at college do it.

*ELLIOT shrugs his shoulders.*

ELLIOT: Well, what's that got to do with you?

JOE: When you are in-group, and everyone is doing the same thing, you just go along. You want to fit in.

*ELLIOT picks up a photo of Joe at college with his friends, virtually shoving it under his nose.*

ELLIOT: Find some new friends.

JOE: But I like Toby and the others. They make or should I say made uni more bearable. All in the same boat.

ELLIOT: Joe, friends should accept you for the way you are. You should never be forced to do something just to fit in.

*JOE shrugs with a resigned look on his face.*

ELLIOT: So why is "made uni more bearable" in the past tense?

JOE: I have to redo my second year because I've failed my exams twice. Or else leave. I haven't told Mum and Dad yet. They will go ballistic. So you can imagine if I throw in about the drugs too at the same time.

ELLIOT: Why don't you tell Mia. You can get through this. You are twenty years old. Start again.

JOE: She'll be angry.

ELLIOT: She cares about you.

JOE: She'll be disgusted. She think I am weak. But I am not. I am going to beat this. I nearly did before.

ELLIOT: Who are you trying to convince - yourself or me? Joe, you aren't weak. Your family won't judge you. They love you.

JOE: But there is a difference between love and respect. Who respects a druggie?

ELLIOT: Don't call yourself that. Addiction is an illness. It can happen to even the best people – pressure, unhappiness. A way of blocking things out. Things we don't want to deal with. Things to numb the pain.

JOE : A way that weak people respond to life.

ELLIOT: No

JOE: Failures

ELLIOT: No. Joe, you are bit young to be talking about failures. Provided you get off that stuff, you have about another sixty years to succeed.

JOE: I've lost Jody. She broke up with me. It wasn't just her, I was struggling before. I never wanted to go to Oxford in the first place. Or study medicine. Yes, even I can see the irony!

ELLIOT: Start again. Go somewhere else. Do something else. You'll meet someone else. You deserve better.

JOE: But Dad met Mum at Cambridge. And Mia went to Oxford too.

ELLIOT: You are not your parents or your sister. You are Joe. And what is right for them isn't right for you.

*ELLIOT picks up the clock.*

ELLIOT: What was it you said about time? Step by step?

JOE: Yes, that's right. I need to get clean first.

ELLIOT: But Joe can't you see? It's trying to live up to other people's expectations of your life that is causing this. Maybe you need to break it down into pieces. You could stay at Oxford but do a different course.

JOE: I wanted to do music. I got my grade eight in piano. It just feels too much at the moment.

ELLIOT: Tell Mia then. You don't have to beat this on your own.

JOE: But why have you shown up now?

ELLIOT: I couldn't bear watching you torture yourself with blame any more. Torn apart with shame. Waiting for you to lose your mind entirely.

JOE: I have lost it. You're not real. Cold turkey hallucination is probably what they will say.

ELLIOT: I'm not here for you to know if I am real or not.

JOE: But I messed up.

ELLIOT: You messed up, sure. Don't we all. But you only messed yourself up. There are far worse things.

Joe, you are a bright lad, with a good future, if you try.

So tell Mia? She needs to know. As you said she went to the same university, – she’s educated. She’ll understand. It is 2026; these things are out in the open these days. Not hidden away,

JOE (bitter laugh): She doesn’t. She got a first class degree – and all I have to show is a failed two years with a mountain of debt.

ELLIOT: All the times, you tried to go it alone. T

JOE: I know. But this time will be different.

ELLIOT: There’s nothing weak in admitting you need help.

*Elliot leans in towards Joe.*

ELLIOT: Think about this time next year. Will you still be trying?

JOE: What would you know? I got nothing. I know about the medals you were awarded for bravery. I know your story.

ELLIOT: I am not here to boast about my medals. I’m here to help you. I hoped you find the answer somehow.

JOE: I will - I mean I am.

ELLIOT: Then what is that packet under your pillow.

JOE: I forgot I had it.

*JOE takes the packet from under the pillow and places it on the bedside cabinet.*

ELLIOT: Is your battle like the one I fought in the trenches. Seeing how far you can go before you dig another trench.

JOE: I suppose you can put it like that. I thought the longer I went without the further the gaps would get until one day I would win.

ELLIOT: We are talking about drugs, Joe. One day you might not rise again out of the trench. That stuff is poison. It will only take you to overdose and that will be it. Don’t go the same way as me.

JOE: What do you mean?

*ELLIOT ignores Joe's question. Instead, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box.*

ELLIOT: Do you see this box?

JOE: Yeah.

*ELLIOT opens it, and shows it to JOE.*

ELLIOT It holds my medals. Do you ever recall anyone in the family showing them to you?

JOE: No. I err... never thought about it. Probably just thought they were lost.

ELLIOT: I gave them away. I didn't sell them because I did not want blood money. Every time I looked at them, I would remember. So, I put them in this box, so I didn't have to look at them. So, I didn't have to remember, how I watched my mates fall, and all that time wondering if I'd be next.

*ELLIOT places the box on top of the packet of coke on the cabinet. He stands next to JOE's bed.*

BLACKOUT

### **ACT ONE, SCENE THREE – The trenches**

*A muddy trench, dusk. The distant rumble of artillery.*

*Scene opens with the younger Elliot crouched beside the trench wall, cleaning his rifle. His face is partially hidden by a scarf to keep out the cold. Private Frost stumbles in, shivering.*

FROST: Sargent Cranmore, they said we hold this line. But the shelling—it's getting worse.

ELLIOT (without looking up): It always gets worse before it gets quiet.

FROST: Oh – look a rat. Over there. And another one. At first, I was afraid of them, never seen rats so big but now they seem the least of our worries.

ELLIOT (pauses, and then looks at Frost): Yes. I felt the same. Until I saw worse.

FROST: I saw a man lose his leg. Just—gone. Like it was never there.

ELLIOT: He was one of the lucky ones. He just lost a limb. We all lose something. All I know is that none of us that make it will return home the same as we came out.

FROST: But you don't even flinch, Sir. Yesterday when Wellings, Brown and Smith were shot down before they'd even got over the top, you carried on.

ELLIOT: No choice, Frost.

*A sudden whistle — incoming shell. Both duck.*

FROST (panicked): Why do we stay? I want to run. Why not fall back?

ELLIOT (calmly): Because someone has to. And because if we don't, Jerry will be in your mother's kitchen by next week.

*Gunfire erupts nearby. In panic Frost jumps up as if running to escape. There's a sharp crack. He falls back, clutching his chest.*

FROST (gasping): I—I didn't think it'd be me.

ELLIOT (kneels beside him, voice low): None of us do. That's the trick.

*Elliot presses a hand to Frost's wound, eyes scanning the horizon.*

Elliot (softly): Hold on, lad. You're not done yet.

*Lights fade as ELLIOT calls for a medic, the trench echoing with distant cries and the relentless rhythm of war*

#### **ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR**

*Lights up. JOE is sitting in bed. ELLIOT sits in an armchair.*

JOE: I never met you before but your heroism on the battlefield has made this family proud for decades.

ELLIOT: Do you think it was easy? Do you know the cost that took to win these? Don't you think I would have rather not fought and just lived a normal life? I can't tell you how much pain each medal has etched in it. If I could have traded each medal for one of my mates that were killed, I would.

Nothing in the world would stop it.

JOE: Stop what.

ELLIOT: Stop the night torments that haunted me for years. Every time I shut my eyes, I could see them. Memories that just would not fade. Their screams still ringing in my ears. Some of them only 16 years of age. It was the only way to drown it out.

JOE: Drown it out?

ELLIOT: To help me sleep so I could forget until the next day.

JOE: But Gran always said how brave you were. The military obviously thought that. But, you were taken before your time, and died of a short illness.

ELLIOT: Your gran, my granddaughter didn't know. A hundred years ago, we didn't have much in the way of therapy to help us or your 12 steps to recover. And we certainly didn't discuss it.

JOE: You drank?

ELLIOT: Literally, like a trooper. To the excess. My liver was shot to pieces. I survived Jerry's bombs but I couldn't survive the whiskey. It was a short illness that took me but only because my insides were weakened by the drink.

JOE: What happened?

ELLIOT: When the war finished, I came home and that was when the fears started. All that time on the battlefield and I kept going. Like I repressed them but once I came, back that was it. I started with a couple of drams to help me sleep but it was a slippery slope and before I knew it, I needed a drink to function.

JOE: But your family?

ELLIOT: I hid it well or rather they did. If they knew, they never let on even though my father found me on many occasions lying in the garden.

JOE: Did he say anything?

ELLIOT: Probably too ashamed that their war hero was not all that he was cracked up to be. I was a quiet drunk you see. I was not one to get violent or shout abuse. I would just drink myself quietly into a stupor. It helped me to pretend to everyone that I was the man I had been on the battlefield. I even manage to marry

JOE: But by all accounts, your family was a good family

ELLIOT: Aye, lad they were. They didn't find out the extent of my problem until I died.

They blamed themselves that I needed to hide my alcoholism from them. That I couldn't trust them to let them in to help me.

JOE: But if I go to rehab, I will be locked up.

*ELLIOT points to his heart.*

ELLIOT: Better locked up, than locked in.

JOE: Is that why you are here?

ELLIOT: Your sister is at work but she will be worrying about you. How do you think she would feel if she came back and you were dead? You owe it to her to tell her.

JOE: But...

ELLIOT: I think you are seriously underestimating Mia, and the rest of your family. I will leave you to think about it. But, if you can be brave, enough to take the first step then believe me that things will get easier.

*ELLIOT walks towards the door, and then turns back.*

JOE: But Elliot. What about your medals?

*ELLIOT steps through the door. It closes.*

**ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE – THE CONFESSION**

*Late evening. A lamp lights JOE's room, outside is dark. JOE is asleep, curled up in bed. MIA knocks at the door.*

MIA: Joe are you awake yet? Can I come in?

*MIA comes in. JOE stirs groggy.*

JOE: What time is it?

*JOE fumbles for the clock and squints.*

MIA: I got back a few hours ago but I didn't want to wake you. How are you feeling?  
Hungry?

*MIA picks up the tray.*

*The room darkens slightly. A subtle shift in the lighting tone. Distant but clear, the echo of a voice is heard from off stage.*

ELLIOT (off stage): Tell her Joe, tell her.

*JOE freezes. His breathe catches.*

ELLIOT (off stage): It's the first trench, Joe. Tell her.

MIA: Joe? Are you okay?

*MIA touches his forehead. JOE rouses himself.*

JOE: I'm fine.

ELLIOT (off stage): So you continue to fight this silent war.

JOE: I can't

MIA: You can't what.

ELLIOT (off stage): Remember, I beat Jerry in the trenches but I lost to the silence when I came home.

JOE: I'm sorry but I not brave like you. Because you were, brave in spite of what you say.

MIA; Joe who are you talking to?

MIA follows JOE's gaze, confused.

MIA: What is it? What are you looking at?

JOE: He's here. It's Elliot, our great great grandfather. Can't you see him?

MIA: Where? There's nothing there.

ELLIOT (off stage): She can't see me, Joe. Remember don't walk my path.

*Pause. For a moment, MIA and JOE are silent.*

MIA: Joe, what's wrong? You're scaring me. I'm calling the doctor.

JOE: Mia, I am not sick, well not with a bug. I lied. I didn't want you to know.

MIA: Know what?

JOE: I am going cold turkey to get off drugs. I've been taking coke for months now. It started when I went to Oxford. Pressure, stress. A puff of weed. A taste of speed. I thought I could stop it. But it got bigger. Too big for me to stop.

MIA: Drugs? I knew something wasn't right.

JOE: I struggle at Oxford. Never really wanted to do medicine anyway. Just got swept along with what others expected me to do. I can't keep up with the work. Then I found out

that Jody was cheating on me. At first, I thought it was normal. Everyone was doing a bit but I kept going.

MIA: But why didn't you tell me?

JOE: Because sometimes you just hope that things will sort themselves out. Silence is easier than causing a fuss. Even Toby doesn't know how bad I have got.

MIA: But why did you mention Elliot? What has he got to do with this?

*JOE doesn't answer. The voice returns softer.*

ELLIOT (voice off stage): I couldn't bear your suffering when you needed help. You need your family. Alone and locked in a tomb of shame, just like me. When I came back from the war, I couldn't speak about what I had seen. So I died with my mouth shut. Taken by one bottle at a time.

JOE: I didn't want you to worry.

MIA: Joe, I'm here for you. Just as I always have been. Your big sister. Remember when you got in fights in the playground, I helped you then. Or when you played a trick on Auntie Zoe – I covered for you.

JOE: I know Mia.

ELLIOT (voice off stage): That's why I couldn't bear it. That help was so close if only you'd let it in.

Just as all those years ago, I wished I had the courage.

JOE: I messed up uni. I thought you'd all be angry that I'd failed. That I was weak.

MIA: No, Joe,

*A pause. The lightening brightens. ELLIOT's ghostly presence fading.*

ELLIOT (off stage, fading): Don't let silence be your legacy. Let it be your ghost.

*The room returns to normal. Elliot has gone.*

JOE            Are you going to tell Mum and Dad?

MIA            That's not up to me. Let's talk but first I'll get you a drink and some food.  
But no more ghosts.

*MIA exits.*

JOE:            She's right, it was the cold turkey talking. First, step to get rid of this.

*JOE reaches for the foil package. Without a start, he remembers the box of medals resting on the top. He intends to move it but his hand stops. He stares. Slowly, he lifts the lid. Inside — Elliot's medals.*

JOE:            Wait Elliot's medals. He WAS here.

*He puts the box down, and picks up the coke packet and empties it out of the window.*

*He then sits back on the bed, and dials in a number...*

JOE:            Mum... it's me ...Can we talk?

*Lights fade out.*

THE END