

HALLOWEEN HORROR STORIES

Contents

He'll Come Knocking at Your Door	Robert R. McCammon
Tradition.....	Cathy and Neil Davies
Pumpkin Night.....	Gary McMahon
The Halloween Man.....	William F. Nolan
The Spirit of Things.....	John M. Skipp
Yesterday's Witch.....	Gahan Wilson
Boo.....	Richard Laymon
The Folding Man.....	Joe R. Lansdale

He'll Come Knocking at Your Door

Robert R. McCammon

In the Deep South, Halloween Day is usually shirtsleeve weather. But when the sun begins to sink, there's a foretaste of winter in the air. Pools of shadow deepen and lengthen, and the Alabama hills are transformed into moody tapestries of orange and black.

When Dan Burgess got home from the cement plant in Barrimore Crossing, he found Karen and Jaime working over a tray of homemade candies in the shape of pumpkins. Jaime, three years old and as curious as a chipmunk, was in a hurry to try out the candy. "Those are for the trick-or-treaters, hon," Karen explained patiently, for the third or fourth time. Both mother and daughter were blond, though Jaime had inherited Dan's dark brown eyes. Karen's eyes were as blue as an Alabama lake on a sunny day.

As Dan hugged his wife from behind and peered over her shoulder at the candies, he felt a sense of satisfaction that made life seem deliciously complete. He was a tall man, his face lean and rugged from a life of hard, outdoor labor. He had curly dark brown hair and a beard in need of trimming. "Looks pretty Halloweeny around here, folks!" he drawled, and lifted Jaime into his arms when she reached up for him.

"Punkins!" Jaime said gleefully.

“Hope we get some trick-or-treaters tonight,” Dan said. “Hard to tell if we will or not, this far from town.” Their home, a rented two-bedroom farmhouse set off the main highway on a couple of acres of rolling woodland, was part of a subdivision of Barrimore Crossing called Essex. The business district of Barrimore Crossing was four miles to the east, and the thirty-five or so inhabitants of the Essex community lived in houses similar to Dan’s, comfortable places surrounded by woods where deer, quail, possum, and fox were common sights. At night, Dan could sit on his front porch and see the distant porch lights of other Essex houses up in the hills. It was a quiet, peaceful place. And lucky too, Dan knew. All sorts of good things had happened to them since they’d moved here from Birmingham, after the steel mill shut down in February.

“Might have a few.” Karen began to make eyes in the pumpkins with little silver dots of candy. “Mrs. Crosley said they always have a group of kids from town. If we didn’t have treats for them, they’d probably egg our house!”

“Hallo'een!” Jaime pointed excitedly toward the pumpkins, wriggling to be set down.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Karen licked a silver dot from her finger and walked across the kitchen to the cork bulletin board next to the telephone. She took off one of the pieces of paper stuck there by a blue plastic pin. “Mr. Hathaway called at four.” She gave him the note, and he set Jaime down. “He wants you to go over to his place for some kind of meeting.”

“Meeting?” Dan looked at the note. It said *Roy Hathaway. His house, 6:30*. Hathaway was the real-estate agent who’d rented them this house. He lived across the highway, up where the valley curved into the hills. “On Halloween? Did he say what for?”

“Nope. He did say it was important, though. He said you were

expected, and it was something that couldn't be explained over the phone."

Dan grunted softly. He liked Roy Hathaway, who'd bent over backwards to find them this place. Dan glanced at his new Bulova wristwatch, which he'd won by being the thousandth person to buy a pickup truck from a dealership in Birmingham. It was almost five-thirty. Time enough for a shower and a ham sandwich, and then he'd go see what was so important. "Okay," he said. "I'll find out what he wants."

"Somebody'll be a clown by the time you get back," Karen said, glancing slyly at Jaime.

"Me! Me'll be a clown, Daddy!"

Dan grinned at her and, his heart full, went back to take his shower.

Darkness was falling fast as Dan drove his white pickup truck along the winding country road that led to Hathaway's place. His headlights picked out a deer as it bolted in front of the truck. Beyond the ridge of hills to the west, the setting sun tinted the sky a vivid orange.

Meeting, Dan thought uneasily. What was it that couldn't wait? He wondered if it might have something to do with the last rent check. No, no; his days of rubber checks and irate landlords were over. There was plenty of money in the bank. In August, Dan had received a letter that said they'd won five thousand dollars in a contest at the Food Giant store in Barrimore Crossing. Karen didn't even recall filling out an entry slip. Dan had been able to pay off the new truck and buy Karen a color television she'd been wanting. He was making more money than ever before, since his promotion in

April from gravel-shoveler to unit supervisor at the cement plant. So money wasn't the problem. What was, then?

He loved the Essex community. It was fresh air and bird songs and a low-lying morning mist that clung like lace in the autumn trees. After the smog and harshness of Birmingham, after the trauma of losing his job and being on unemployment, Essex was a gentle, soul-soothing blessing.

Dan believed in luck. In hindsight, it was even good luck that he'd lost that job at the mill, because if he hadn't he never would have found Essex. One day in May he'd walked into the hardware and sporting-goods store in Barrimore Crossing and admired a double-barreled Remington shotgun in a display case. The manager had come over, and they'd talked about guns and hunting for the better part of an hour. As Dan had started to leave, the manager unlocked that display case and said: Dan, I want you to try this baby out. Go ahead, take it! It's a new model, and the Remington people want to know how folks like it. You take it home with you. Bring me back a wild turkey or two, and if you like that gun, tell other folks where they can buy one, hear?

It was amazing, Dan thought. He and Karen were living some kind of fantastic dream. The promotion at the plant had come right out of the blue. People respected him. Karen and Jaime were happier than he'd ever seen them. Just last month, a woman Karen had met at the Baptist church gave them a rich harvest of garden vegetables that would last them through the autumn. The only remotely bad thing that had happened since they'd moved to Essex, Dan recalled, was when he'd made a fool of himself in Roy Hathaway's office. He'd sliced his finger on a sliver of plastic in the pen he was using to sign the lease and had bled all over the paper. It was a stupid thing to remember, he knew, but it had stuck in his mind because he'd hoped it wasn't a bad omen. Now he knew nothing could be further from the truth.

He rounded a corner and saw Roy's house ahead. The front-porch lights were on, and lights showed through most of the windows. The driveway was packed with cars, most of which Dan recognized as belonging to other Essex residents. What's going on? he wondered. A community meeting? On Halloween?

He parked his truck next to Tom Paulsen's new Cadillac and walked up the front-porch steps to the door. As he knocked, a long keening animal cry came from the woods behind Hathaway's house. Bobcat, he thought. The woods are full of 'em.

Laura Hathaway, an attractive gray-haired woman in her mid-fifties, answered the door with a cheerful, "Happy Halloween, Dan!"

"Hi! Happy Halloween." He stepped into the house, and could smell the aromatic cherry pipe tobacco Roy favored. The Hathaways had some nice oil paintings on their walls, and all their furniture looked new. "What's going on?"

"The men are down in the rumpus room," she explained. "They're having their little yearly get-together." She started to lead him to another door that would take him downstairs. She limped a bit when she walked. Several years ago, Dan understood, a lawn mower had sliced off a few of the toes on her right foot.

"Looks like everybody in Essex is here, with all those cars outside."

She smiled, her kindly face crinkling. "Everybody is here, now. Go on down and make yourself at home."

He descended the stairs. He heard Roy's husky voice down there: "... Jenny's gold earrings, the ones with the little pearls. Carl, this year it's one of Tiger's new kittens—the one with the black

markings on its legs, and that ax you got at the hardware store last week. Phil, he wants one of your piglets and the pickled okra Marcy put in the cupboard... ”

When Dan reached the bottom of the stairs, Roy stopped talking. The rumpus room, carpeted in bright red because Roy was a Crimson Tide fan, was filled with men from the Essex community. Roy, a hefty man with white hair and friendly, deep-set blue eyes, was sitting in a chair in the midst of them, reading from some kind of list. The others sat around him, listening intently. Roy looked up at Dan, as did the other men, and puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. “Howdy, Dan. Grab yourself a cup of coffee and sit a spell.”

“I got your message. What kind of meeting is this?” He glanced around, saw faces he knew: Steve Mallory, Phil Kane, Carl Lansing, Andy McCutcheon, and more. A pot of coffee, cups, and a platter of sandwiches were placed on a table on one side of the room.

“Be with you in a minute,” Roy said. While Dan, puzzled at what was so important on Halloween, poured himself a cup of coffee, he listened to Roy reading from the list he held. “Okay, where were we? Phil, that’s it for you, I reckon. Next is Tom. This year it’s that ship model you put together, a pair of Ann’s shoes—the gray ones she bought in Birmingham—and Tom Junior’s G.I. Joe doll. Andy, he wants...”

Huh? Dan thought as he sipped at the hot black coffee. He looked at Tom, who seemed to have released a breath he’d been holding for a long time. Tom’s model of *Old Ironsides* had taken him months to put together, Dan knew. Dan’s gaze snagged other eyes that quickly looked away. He noted that Mitch Brantley, whose wife had just had their first child in July, looked ill; Mitch’s face was the color of wet cotton. A haze of smoke hung in the air from Roy’s pipe and several other smokers’ cigarettes. Cups rattled against saucers. Dan looked at Aaron Greene, who stared back at him through strange,

glassy eyes. Aaron's wife, Dan had heard, had died of a heart attack last year about this time. Aaron had shown him pictures of her, a robust-looking brunette in her late thirties.

"... your golf clubs, your silver cufflinks, and Tweetybird," Roy continued.

Andy McCutcheon laughed nervously. In his pallid, fleshy face his eyes were dark and troubled. "Roy, my little girl loves that canary. I mean... she's real attached to it."

Roy smiled. It was a tight, false smile, and something about it started a knot of tension growing in Dan's stomach. "You can buy her another one, Andy," he said. "Can't you?"

"Sure, but she loves—"

"One canary's just like another." He drew at his pipe, and when he lifted a hand to hold the bowl, the overhead light glinted off the large diamond ring he wore.

"Excuse me, gents." Dan stepped forward. "I sure would like for somebody to tell me what this is all about. My wife and little girl are getting ready for Halloween."

"So are we," Roy replied, and blew out a plume of smoke. "So are we." He traced his finger down the list. Dan saw that the paper was mottled and dirty; it looked as if it had been used to wipe out the inside of a garbage can. The writing on it was scrawled and spiky. "Dan," Roy said, and tapped the paper. "This year he wants two things from you. First is a set of fingernail clippings. Your own fingernails. The second is—"

"Hold on." Dan tried to smile, but couldn't find one. "I don't get this. How about starting from the beginning."

Roy stared at him for a long, silent moment. Dan felt other eyes on him, watching him carefully. On the opposite side of the room, Walter Ferguson suddenly began quietly sobbing. “Oh,” Roy said. “Sure. It’s your first Halloween in Essex, isn’t it?”

“Right. And?”

“Sit down, Dan.” Roy motioned toward an empty chair near him. “Come on, sit down and I’ll tell you.”

Dan didn’t like the feeling in this room; there was too much tension and fear in here. Walter’s sobbing was louder. “Tom,” Roy said, “take Walter out for a breath of air, won’t you?” Tom muttered an assent and helped the crying man out of his chair. When they had left the rumpus room, Roy struck a kitchen match to relight his pipe and looked calmly at Dan Burgess.

“So tell me,” Dan urged as he sat down. He did smile this time, but the smile would not stick.

“It’s Halloween,” Roy explained, as if speaking to a retarded child. “We’re going over the Halloween list.”

Dan laughed involuntarily. “Is this a joke, gents? What kind of Halloween list?”

Roy’s thick white brows came together as he gathered his thoughts. Dan realized the other man was wearing the same dark red sweater he’d worn the day Dan had signed that lease and cut his finger. “Call it... a trick-or-treat list, Dan. You know, we all like you. You’re a good man. We can’t think of a better neighbor to have in Essex.” He glanced around as some of the others nodded. “Essex is a very special place to live, Dan. You must know that by now.”

“Sure. It’s great. Karen and I love it here.”

“We all do. Some of us have lived here for a long time. We appreciate the good life we have here. And in Essex, Dan, Halloween is a very special night of the year.”

Dan frowned. “I’m not following you.”

Roy produced a gold pocket watch, popped it open to look at the time, then closed it again. When he lifted his gaze, his eyes seemed darker and more powerful than Dan had ever seen them. They made him shiver to his soul. “Do you believe in the Devil?” Roy asked.

Again Dan laughed. “What are we doing, telling spooky stories?” He looked around the room. No one else was laughing.

“When you came to Essex,” Roy said softly, “you were a loser. Down on your luck. No job. Your money was almost gone. Your credit rating was zero. You had an old car that was ready for the junkyard. Now I want you to think back on all the good things that have happened to you—all the things you might have taken as a run of good luck—since you’ve been part of our community. You’ve gotten everything you’ve wanted, haven’t you? Money’s come to you like never before. You got yourself a brand-new truck. A promotion at the plant. And there’ll be more good things to come in the years ahead—if you cooperate.”

“Cooperate?” He didn’t like the sound of that word. “Cooperate how?”

“With the list. Like we all do, every Halloween. Every October thirty-first I find a list just like this one under the welcome mat at the front door. Why I’ve been chosen to handle it, I don’t know. Maybe because I help bring new people in. These items on this list are to be left in front of your door on Halloween. In the morning, they’re gone.

He comes during the night, Dan, and he takes them away with him.”

“This is a Halloween joke, isn’t it!” Dan grinned. “Jesus Christ, you gents had me going! That’s a hell of an act to put on just to scare the crap out of *me!*”

But Roy’s face remained impassive. Smoke seeped from a corner of his wrinkled mouth. “The list,” Roy continued evenly, “has to be collected and left out before midnight, Dan. If you don’t collect the items and leave them for him, he’ll come knocking at your door. And you don’t want that, Dan. You really don’t.”

A chunk of ice seemed to have jammed itself in Dan’s throat, while the rest of his body felt feverish. The Devil in Essex? Collecting things like golf clubs and cufflinks, ship models and pet canaries? “You’re crazy!” he managed to say. “If this isn’t a damned joke, you’ve dropped both your oars into the water!”

“It’s no joke, and he ain’t crazy,” Phil Kane said, sitting behind Roy. Phil was a large, humorless man who raised pigs on a farm about a mile away. “It’s just once a year. Just on Halloween. Hell, last year alone I won one of them magazine sweepstakes. It was fifteen thousand dollars at one whack! The year before that, an uncle I didn’t even know had died and left me a hundred acres of land in California. We get free stuff in the mail all the time. It’s just once a year we have to give him what *he* wants.”

“Laura and I go to art auctions in Birmingham,” Roy said. “We always get what we want for the lowest bid. And the paintings are always worth five or ten times what we pay. Last Halloween he asked for a lock of Laura’s hair and one of my old shirts with blood on it where I cut myself shaving. You remember that trip to Bermuda the real-estate company gave us last summer? I’ve been given a huge expense account, and no matter what I charge, nobody asks any questions. He gives us everything we want.”

Trick-or-treat! Dan thought crazily. He envisioned some hulking, monstrous form lugging off a set of golf clubs, one of Phil's piglets, and Tom's *Old Ironsides*. God, it was insane! Did these men really believe they were making sacrifices to a satanic trick-or-treater?

Roy lifted his eyebrows. "You didn't return the shotgun, did you? Or the money. You didn't refuse the promotion."

"I *earned* that promotion!" Dan insisted, but his voice was strained and weak, and it shamed him.

"You signed the agreement in blood," Roy said, and Dan remembered the drops of blood falling from his cut finger onto the white paper of the lease, right underneath his name. "Whether you knew it or not, you agreed to something that's been going on in Essex for over a hundred years. You can have anything and everything you want, Dan, if you give him what *he* wants on one special night of the year."

"My God," Dan whispered. He felt dizzy and sick. If it *was* true... what had he stumbled into? "You said... he wants two things from me. The fingernail clippings and what else?"

Roy looked at the list and cleared his throat. "He wants the clippings, and... he wants the first joint of the little finger of your child's left hand."

Dan sat motionless. He stared straight ahead, and feared for an awful moment that he would start laughing and giggle himself all the way to an asylum.

"It's really not much," Roy said. "There won't be a lot of blood, will there, Carl?"

Carl Lansing, who worked as a butcher at the Food Giant in Barrimore Crossing, raised his left hand to show Dan Burgess. “Not much pain if you do it quick, with a cleaver. One sharp blow’ll snap the bone. She won’t feel a whole lot of pain if you do it fast.”

Dan swallowed. Carl’s slicked-back black hair gleamed with Vitalis under the light. Dan had always wondered exactly how Carl had lost the thumb of his left hand.

“If you don’t put what he wants in front of your door,” Andy McCutcheon said, “he’ll come in after them. And then he’ll take more than he asked for in the first place, Dan. God help you if he has to knock at your door.”

Dan’s eyes felt like frozen stones in his rigid face; he stared across the room at Mitch Brantley, who appeared to be either about to faint or throw up. Dan thought of Mitch’s new son, and he did not want to think about what might be on the list beside either Mitch’s or Walter Ferguson’s name. He rose unsteadily from his chair. It was not that he believed the Devil was coming to his house tonight for a bizarre trick-or-treat that frightened him so deeply; it was that he knew *they* believed, and he didn’t know how to deal with it.

“Dan,” Roy Hathaway said gently, “we’re all in this together. It’s not so bad. Really it isn’t. Usually all he wants are little things. Things that don’t matter very much.” Mitch made a soft, strangled groaning sound. Dan flinched, but Roy paid no attention. Dan had the sudden urge to leap at Roy and grab him by the front of that blood-red sweater and shake him until he split open. “Once in a while he... takes something of value,” Roy said, “but not very often. And he always gives us back so much more than he takes.”

“You’re crazy. All of you... are crazy.”

“Give him what he wants.” Steve Mallory spoke in the strong

bass voice that was so distinctive in the Baptist church choir on Sunday mornings. “Do it, Dan. Don’t make him knock at your door.”

“Do it,” Roy told him. “For your own sake, and for your family’s.”

Dan backed away from them. Then he turned and ran up the stairs, ran out of the house as Laura Hathaway was coming out of the kitchen with a big bowl of pretzels, ran down the front steps and across the lawn to his pickup. Near Steve Mallory’s new silver Chevy, Walter and Tom were standing together. Dan heard Walter sob, “... not her *ear*, Tom! Dear God, not her whole *ear*!”

Dan got into his truck and left twin streaks of rubber on the pavement as he drove away.

Dead leaves whirled through the turbulent, chilly air as Dan pulled up into his driveway, got out and ran up the front-porch steps. Karen had taped a cardboard skeleton to the door. His heart was pounding, and he’d decided to take no chances; if this was an elaborate joke, they could laugh their asses off at him, but he was getting Karen and Jaime out of here.

Halfway home, a thought had occurred to him that had almost made him pull off the road to puke: if the list had demanded a lock of Jaime’s hair, would he have given it without question? How about her fingernail clippings? A whole fingernail? An earlobe? And if he had given any of those things, what would be on the trick-or-treat list next year and the year after that?

Not much blood, if you do it quick.

“Karen!” he shouted as he unlocked the door and went in. The house was too quiet. “*Karen!*”

“Lord, Dan! What are you yelling about?” She came into the front room from the hallway, followed by Jaime in clown makeup, an oversize red blouse, patched little blue jeans, and sneakers covered with round yellow happy-face stickers. Dan knew he must look like walking death, because Karen stopped as if she’d run into a wall when she saw him. “What’s happened?” she asked fearfully.

“Listen to me. Don’t ask any questions.” He wiped the sheen of sweat off his forehead with a trembling hand. Jaime’s soft brown eyes reflected the terror he’d brought into the house with him. “We’re leaving right now. We’re going to drive to Birmingham and check into a motel.”

“It’s Halloween!” Karen said. “We might have some trick-or-treaters!”

“Please... don’t argue with me! We’ve got to get out of here right now!” Dan jerked his gaze away from his child’s left hand; he’d been looking at the little finger and thinking terrible thoughts. “Right now,” he repeated.

Jaime was stunned, about to cry. On a table beside her was a plate with the Halloween candies on it—grinning pumpkins with silver eyes and licorice mouths. “We have to go,” Dan said hoarsely. “I can’t tell you why, but we have to.” Before Karen could say anything else, Dan told her to gather whatever she wanted—toothpaste, a jacket, underwear—while he went out and started the truck. But *hurry!* he urged her. For God’s sake, hurry!

Outside, dead leaves snapped at his cheeks and sailed past his head. He slid behind the pickup’s wheel, put the key into the ignition, and turned it.

The engine made one long groaning noise, rattled, and died.

Christ! Dan thought, close to panic. He'd never had any problem with the truck before! He pumped the accelerator and tried again. The engine was stone-cold dead, and all the warning lights—brake fluid, engine oil, battery, even gasoline—flashed red on the instrument panel.

Of course, he realized. Of course. He had paid off the truck with the money he'd won. The truck had been given to him while he was a resident of Essex—and now whatever was coming to their house tonight didn't want him driving that truck *away* from Essex.

They could run for it. Run along the road. But what if they ran into the Halloween visitor, there in the lonely darkness? What if it came up behind them on the road, demanding its trick-or-treat like a particularly nasty child?

He tried the truck again. Dead.

Inside the house, Dan slammed the door and locked it. He went to the kitchen door and locked that too, his wife and daughter watching him as if he'd lost his mind. Dan shouted, "Karen, check all the windows! Make sure they're shut tight! Hurry, damn it!" He went to the closet and took out his shotgun, got a box of shells off the shelf; he opened the box, put it on the table next to the pumpkin candies, broke open the gun's breech, and stuffed two shells into the chambers. Then he closed the breech and looked up as Karen and Jaime returned, clinging to each other.

"All... the windows are shut," Karen whispered, her scared blue eyes flickering back and forth from Dan's face to the shotgun. "Dan, what's wrong with you?"

"Something's coming to our door tonight," he replied. "Something terrible. We're going to have to hold it off. I don't know

if we can, but we have to try. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"It's... Halloween," she said, and he saw she thought he was totally cracked.

The telephone! he thought suddenly, and ran for it. He picked up the receiver and dialed for the operator in Barrimore Crossing to call for a police car. *Officer, the Devil's on his way to our house tonight and we don't have his favorite kind of candy.*

But on the other end of the line was a piercing crackle of static that sounded like a peal of eerie laughter. Through the static Dan heard things that made him believe he'd truly hurtled over the edge: the crazy theme music from a Porky Pig cartoon, a crash of cymbals, the military drumming of a marching band, assorted gurgles and gasps and moans as if he'd been plugged into a graveyard party line. Dan dropped the receiver, and it dangled from its cord like a lynched corpse. Have to think, he told himself. Figure things out. Hold the bastard off. Got to hold him off. He looked at the fireplace and felt a new hammerblow of horror. "Dear God!" he shouted. "We've got to block up the chimney!"

Dan got on his knees, reached up the chimney, and closed the flue. There were already pine logs, kindling, and newspapers in the fireplace, ready for the first cold night of the year. He went into the kitchen, got a box of Red Top matches, and put them into the breast pocket of his shirt; when he came back into the room, Jaime was crying and Karen was holding her tightly, whispering, "Shhh, darling. Shhhh." She watched her husband like one would watch a dog with foam on its mouth.

Dan pulled a chair about ten feet from the front door and sat down with the shotgun across his knees. His eyes were sunken into his head and ringed with purple. He looked at his new Bulova watch; somehow, the crystal had shattered. The hands had snapped off.

“Dan,” Karen said—and then she too started to cry.

“I love you, honey,” he told her. “You know I love both of you, don’t you? I swear I do. I won’t let him in. I won’t give him what he wants. Because if I do that, what will he take next year? I love you both, and I want you to remember that.”

“Oh, God... Dan...”

“They think I’m going to do it and leave it outside the door for him,” Dan said. His hands were gripped tightly around the shotgun, his knuckles white. “They think I could take a cleaver and—”

The lights flickered, and Karen screamed. Jaime’s wail joined hers.

Dan felt his face contorting with fear. The lights flickered, flickered—and went out.

“He’s coming,” Dan rasped. “He’s coming soon.” He stood up, walked to the fireplace, bent down, and struck a match. It took four matches to get the fire going right; its orange light turned the room into a Halloween chamber of horrors, and smoke repelled from the blocked flue swept around the walls like searching spirits. Karen was pressed against the wall, and Jaime’s clown makeup was streaming down her cheeks.

Dan returned to the chair, his eyes stinging with smoke, and watched the door.

He didn’t know how much longer it was when he sensed something on the front porch. Smoke was filling the house, but the room had suddenly become bone-achingly cold. He thought he heard something scratching out there on the porch, searching around the

door for the items that weren't there.

He'll come knocking at your door. And you don't want that. You really don't.

"Dan—"

"Shhhh," he warned her. "Listen! He's out there."

"Him? *Who*? I don't hear—"

There was a knock at the door like a sledgehammer striking the wood. Dan saw the door tremble through the smoke-haze. The knock was followed by a second, with more force. Then a third that made the door bend inward like cardboard.

"Go away!" Dan shouted. "There's nothing for you here!"

Silence.

It's all a trick! he thought. Roy and Tom and Carl and Steve and all the rest are out there in the dark, laughing fit to bust a gut!

But the room was getting viciously cold. Dan shivered, saw his breath float away past his face.

Something scraped on the roof above their heads, like claws seeking a weak chink in the shingles.

"GO AWAY!" Dan's voice cracked. "GO AWAY, YOU BASTARD!"

The scraping stopped. After a long moment of silence, something smashed against the roof like an anvil being dropped. The entire house groaned. Jaime screamed, and Karen shouted, "What is

it, Dan, what is it out there?”

Immediately following was a chorus of laughter from beyond the front door. Someone said, “Okay, I guess that’s enough!” A different voice called, “Hey, Dan! You can open up now! Just kiddin’!” A third voice said, “Trick-or-treat, Danny boy!”

He recognized Carl Lansing’s voice. There was more laughter, more whooping cries of “Trick-or-treat!”

My God! Dan rose to his feet. It’s a joke. A brutal, ridiculous joke!

“Open the door!” Carl called. “We can’t wait to see your face!”

Dan almost cried, but there was rage building in him and he thought he might just aim the shotgun at them and threaten to shoot their balls off. Were they all crazy? How had they managed the phone and the lights? Was this some kind of insane initiation to Essex? He went to the door on shaky legs, unlocked it— Behind him, Karen said suddenly, “Dan, *don’t!*”

—and opened the door.

Carl Lansing stood on the porch. His black hair was slicked back, his eyes as bright as new pennies. He looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary.

“You damned fools!” Dan raged. “Do you know what kind of scare you people put into me and my family? I ought to shoot your damned—”

And then he stopped, because he realized Carl was standing alone on the porch.

Carl grinned. His teeth were black. “Trick-or-treat,” he whispered, and raised the ax that he’d been holding behind his back.

With a cry of terror, Dan stumbled backward and lifted the shotgun. The thing that had assumed Carl’s shape oozed across the threshold; orange firelight glinted off the upraised ax blade.

Dan squeezed the shotgun’s trigger, but the gun didn’t go off. Neither barrel would fire. Jammed! he thought wildly, and broke open the breech to clear it.

There were no shells in the shotgun. Jammed into the chambers were Karen’s pumpkin candies.

“TRICK-OR-TREAT, DAN!” the thing wailed. “TRICK-OR-TREAT!”

Dan struck into the Carl-thing’s stomach with the butt of the shotgun. From its mouth sprayed a mess of yellow canary feathers, pieces of a kitten, and what might have been a piglet. Dan hit it again, and the entire body collapsed like an exploding gasbag. Then he grabbed Karen’s hand in a frantic blur of motion and was pulling her with him out the door. She held on to Jaime, and they ran down the porch steps and across the grass, along the driveway and the road and toward the main highway with the Halloween wind clutching around them.

Dan looked back, saw nothing but darkness. Jaime shrieked in tune with the wind. The distant lights of other Essex houses glinted in the hills like cold stars.

They reached the highway. Dan shouldered Jaime, and still they ran into the night, along the roadside where the high weeds caught at their ankles.

“Look!” Karen cried. “Somebody’s coming, Dan! Look!”

He did. Headlights were approaching. Dan stood in the middle of the road, frantically waving. The vehicle—a gray Volkswagen van—began to slow down. At the wheel was a woman in a witch costume, and two children dressed like ghosts peered out the window. People from Barrimore Crossing! Dan realized. Thank God! “Help us!” he begged. “Please! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“You in trouble?” the woman asked. “You have an accident or something?”

“Yes! An accident! Please, get us to the police station in Barrimore Crossing! I’ll pay you! Just please get us there!”

The woman paused. Then she said, “Okay. Climb in.” Dan pulled open the van's side door.

They started off, the engine backfiring, toward Barrimore Crossing.

“I don't see no accident,” the woman said. “You have a car wreck or what?”

Dan shook his head. The two ghost-children were watching him over the front seat. In his arms, Jaime was dazed and shaking. “We're okay,” he managed to say to Karen, and took her hand. “We're safe now, honey.”

And something wet dripped onto his cheek.

He looked up at the van's ceiling.

The van had teeth.

Long rows of triangular, serrated teeth.

As his mind cracked and he began to laugh, he saw the sticky fluid dripping down off the teeth, saw in the green glow of the instrument panel more teeth pushing up from the van's soft, wet gray sides and floorboard.

His last coherent thought, as Karen's scream filled his head, was that the Devil sure could come up with one hell of a costume.

“Trick-or-treat, Dan,” the shape at the wheel said.

And the entire van smashed shut like a huge mouth, the teeth grinding down until bone and flesh were pulverized and unrecognizable.

Then the van, looking more like a large shiny roach, scuttled off the road toward the Essex woods. It changed shape into something that would drive a man mad to behold—and then it was gone into the hills, with its bellyful of Halloween treats.

Tradition

Cathy and Neil Davies

Halloween, when ghosts and all manner of spooky things come out of hiding. Such a good time of year don't you think? Makes me happy and relaxed and excited all at the same time.

I love looking out of the window and seeing the kids go by all dressed up. Some of those costumes are really scary. Some, well, not so scary. But at least they make an effort.

I make an effort too. You know, to take part. It's a community thing, don't you agree?

The house. My house. It certainly looks the part, doesn't it? All run down and decaying. Can't afford to bloody well fix it can I! And he never did anything to improve it. The paint's peeling, the wood's rotten, the hedges are overgrown... Mind you, I prefer it that way. Stops the nosey neighbours looking in. At least I can go about my business without interference.

No one bothers me. They all ignore me, except on Halloween of course. I know the parents have told their kids to keep away, but hey, I make the effort don't I? I let them have their *big* scare. I love to hear them scream in fright and excitement and, yes, fun too. Not so many came round last year (bloody miserable parents) but I'm hoping for better this year. Anyone would think I was a danger to them. Me? I'm

just a frail old lady. What harm could I do to a bunch of kids?

It wasn't always like this. I had such a lovely house, back when we bought it during our second year of marriage. I thought he'd take pride in it, clean it and maintain it. Did he heck! Came home drunk nearly every night. Never did a bloody thing around the house. I couldn't do it. Didn't know a thing about DIY, and it just wasn't ladylike back in those days. It wasn't done. I did my best to keep the inside clean, he was meant to take care of the rest.

So, there you go. Now the house looks like something out of a horror movie. To tell the truth, I've kind of got used to it. I like it.

The neighbours complain about the smell. What bloody smell? Toffee-nosed bastards. Ha! Toffee, see? Toffee apples. Got loads of them to hand out. All part of the magic.

Soon as Halloween season starts I get all the props out. You know, to take part like I said. The kids love it. The adults don't. Don't know what's wrong with them. Mind you, the neighbourhood's not as safe as it used to be. Not that it bothers me. I've had to deal with worse in my time. In fact, that's how it all got started. That's how *he* started it, and I made the best of a bad job.

He came home with an electric hedge trimmer. Oh, I knew what for. Not because the hedge was untidy, no, but because it was blocking his view. He was always peeping through the hedge to her next door. Tarty bitch! I mean, all those men coming to her house. Just how many handymen did one woman need? No one needed that many jobs doing!

So, he thought he'd do some gardening didn't he. Not my fault he didn't know how to use the thing. Switched it on and couldn't control it. Like something out of an old comedy film. Like it had a mind of it's own. I could see it all from the upstairs window. Quite

fascinating, really, the way his head rolled, caught on a bramble, almost fell next door's side but then dropped on ours. I think his eyes blinked a few times. Weird that. So, I made the most of it.

The blood looked good, spread around the garden and the hall floor and my clothes for good measure. I put his head in the window (the serrated blades of the trimmer had made quite a pretty frilly effect of the skin around his neck), put a few lighted candles around it and one in his open mouth like a pumpkin, to make it more spooky. The other body parts were put to good use too, placed carefully about, one or two nailed to the wall and the tree. As you can probably guess, I managed better with the hedge trimmer than he did.

The kids loved it. I'm pretty certain my house was voted the spookiest in the area that year. That made me so happy that I determined to turn it into a tradition.

Of course, things go off don't they. You know, they rot!

The following Halloween he didn't look quite so effective, and that's when I had the brainwave. Turns out her next door actually ran a business hiring out handymen. Guess she wasn't the slut I thought she was after all, even if she did look like one. Anyway, all those men came in real handy (if you'll pardon the pun).

Now I get a nice new display for my house every year. Sometimes I amaze even myself with the ideas I come up with. This year, for example, I've got a lot of skeletons. I got very handy with a drill and string (even managed to put up a couple of shelves while I was at it) and the end result is so much better than those plastic ones you buy from the shops. I even left some bits of skin and clothes on for added effect. And I always make sure I have a good supply of blood. I keep it in jars in the garage. Looks brilliant smeared here and there and everywhere. Of course, I only do this at Halloween you understand. I wouldn't want you to think I was strange.

Oh, there's the door.

A quick peep through the curtains. Look at their little faces, mouths wide open, staring up at my latest addition. It was a bit of a bugger hanging him from the eaves, but I managed it with the help of a screwdriver and a wall plug in the back of his head. And I got really creative on the lawn, spelling out Happy Halloween in spare bones. There's a few heads around and some severed limbs too. They always look good.

Well, can't hang around here chatting all day. Got to go and hand out the candy. All part of my Halloween tradition.

Pumpkin Night

Gary McMahon

"Men fear death as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is increased with tales, so is the other."
-- Sir Francis Bacon, Essays [1625], "Of Death"

The pumpkin, faceless and eyeless, yet nonetheless intimidating, glared up at Baxter as he sat down opposite with the knife. He'd cleared a space on the kitchen table earlier in the day, putting away the old photographs, train tickets, and receipts from restaurants they'd dined in over the years. Katy had kept these items in a large cigar box under their bed, and he'd always mocked her for the unlikely sentimentality of the act. But now that she was dead, he silently thanked her for having such forethought.

He fingered the creased, leathery surface of the big pumpkin, imagining how it might look when he was done. Every Halloween, Katy had insisted upon the ritual, something begun in her family when she was a little girl. A carved pumpkin, the task undertaken by the man of the house; the seeds and pithy insides scooped out into a bowl and used for soup the next day. Katy had always loved Halloween, but not in a pathetic Goth-girl kind of way. She always said that it was the only time of the year she felt part of something, and rather than ghosts and goblins she felt the presence of human wrongdoing near at hand.

He placed the knife on the table, felt empty tears welling behind his eyes.

Rain spat at the windows, thunder rumbled overhead. The weather had taken a turn for the worse only yesterday, as if gearing up for a night of spooks. Outside, someone screamed; laughter; the sound of light footsteps running past his garden gate but not stopping, never stopping here.

The festivities had already started; if he wasn't careful, Baxter would miss all the fun.

The first cut was the deepest, shearing off the top of the pumpkin to reveal the substantial material at its core. He sliced around the inner perimeter, levering loose the bulk of the meat. With great care and dedication, he managed to transfer it to the glass bowl. Juices spilled onto the tablecloth, and Baxter was careful not to think about fresh blood dripping onto creased school uniforms.

Fifteen minutes later he had the hollowed-out pumpkin before him, waiting for a face. He recalled her features perfectly, his memory having never failed to retain the finer details of her scrunched-up nose, the freckles across her forehead, the way her mouth tilted to one side when she smiled. Such a pretty face, one that fooled everyone, and hiding behind it were such *unconventional* desires.

Hesitantly, he began to cut.

The eyeholes came first, allowing her to see as he carried out the rest of the work. Then there was the mouth, a long, graceful gouge at the base of the skull. She smiled; he blinked, taken by surprise. In his dreams, it had never been so easy.

Hands working like those of an Italian Master, he finished the sculpture. The rain intensified, threatening to break the glass of the large kitchen window. More children capered by in the night, their catcalls and yells of "Trick or treat!" like music to his ears.

The pumpkin did not speak. It was simply a vegetable with wounds for a face. But it smiled, and it waited, a noble and intimidating presence inhabiting it.

"I love you," said Baxter, standing and leaning towards the pumpkin. He caressed it with steady hands, his fingers finding the furrows and crinkles which felt nothing like Katy's smooth, smooth face. But it would do, this copy, this effigy. It would serve a purpose far greater than himself.

Picking up the pumpkin, he carried it to the door. Undid the locks. Opened it to let in the night. Voices carried on the busy air, promising a night of carnival, and the sky lowered to meet him as he walked outside and placed Katy's pumpkin on the porch handrail, the low flat roof protecting it from the rain.

He returned inside for the candle. When he placed it inside the carved head, his hands at last began to shake. Lighting the wick was difficult, but he persevered. He had no choice. Her hold on him, even now, was too strong to deny. For years he had covered-up her crimes, until he had fallen in line with her and joined in the games she played with the lost children, the ones who nobody ever missed. Before long, he loved it as much as she did, and his old way of life had become nothing but a rumour of normality.

The candle flame flickered, teased by the wind, but the rain could not reach it. Baxter watched in awe as it flared, licking out of the eye holes to lightly singe the side of the face. The pumpkin smiled again, and then its mouth twisted into a parody of laughter. Still, there were no sounds, but he was almost glad of that. To hear Katy's voice

emerging from the pumpkin might be too much. Reality had warped enough for now; anything more might push him over the edge into the waiting abyss.

The pumpkin swivelled on its base to stare at him, the combination of lambent candlelight and darkness lending it an obscene expression, as if it were filled with hatred. Or lust.

Baxter turned away and went inside. He left the door unlocked and sat back down at the kitchen table, resting his head in his hands.

Shortly, he turned on the radio. The DeeJay was playing spooky tunes to celebrate the occasion. *Werewolves of London*, *Bela Lugosi's Dead*, *Red Right Hand*... songs about monsters and madmen. Baxter listened for a while, then turned off the music, went to the sink, and filled the kettle. He thought about Katy as he waited for the water to boil. The way her last days had been like some ridiculous horror film, with her bedridden and coughing up blood, her thin face transforming into a monstrous image of death.

She had not allowed him to send for a doctor, or even call an ambulance at the last. She was far too afraid of what they might find in the cellar, under the shallow layer of dirt. Evidence of the things they had done together, the games they had played, must never be allowed into the public domain. Schoolteacher and school caretaker, lovers, comrades in darkness, prisoners of their own desires: their deeds, she always told him, must remain secret.

He sipped his tea and thought of better days, bloody nights, the slashed and screaming faces of the children she had loved—the ones nobody else cared for, so were easy to lure here, out of the way, to the house on the street where nobody went. Not until Halloween, when all the streets of Scarbridge, and all the towns beyond, were filled with the delicious screaming of children.

There was a sound from out on the porch, a wild thrumming, as if Katy's pumpkin was vibrating, energy building inside, the blood lust rising, rising, ready to burst in a display of savagery like nothing he'd ever seen before. The pumpkin was absorbing the power of this special night, drinking in the desires of small children, the thrill of proud parents, the very idea of spectres abroad in the darkness.

It was time.

He went upstairs and into the bedroom, where she lay there on the bed, waiting for him to come and fetch her. He picked her up off the old, worn quilt and carried her downstairs, being careful not to damage her further as he negotiated the narrow staircase. When he sat her down in the chair, she tipped to one side, unsupported. The polythene rustled, but it remained in place.

Baxter went and got the pumpkin, making sure that the flame did not go out. But it never would; he knew that now. The flame would burn forever, drawing into its hungry form whatever badness stalked the night. It was like a magnet, that flame, pulling towards itself all of human evil. It might be Halloween, but there were no such things as monsters. Just people, and the things they did to each other.

He placed the pumpkin in the sink. Then, rolling up his sleeves, he set to work on her body. He'd tied the polythene bag tightly around the stump of her neck, sealing off the wound. The head had gone into the ice-filled bath, along with... the *other things*, the things he could not yet bring himself to think about.

The smell hit him as soon as he removed the bag, a heavy meaty odour that was not at all unpleasant. Just different from what he was used to.

Discarding the carrier bag, he reclaimed the pumpkin from the sink, oh-so careful not to drop it on the concrete floor. He reached out

and placed it on the nub of Katy's neck, pressing down so that the tiny nubbin of spine that still peeked above the sheared cartilage of her throat entered the body of the vegetable. Grabbing it firmly on either side, a hand on each cheek, he twisted and pressed, pressed and twisted, until the pumpkin sat neatly between Katy's shoulders, locked tightly in place by the jutting few inches of bone.

The flame burned yellow, blazing eyes that tracked his movements as he stood back to inspect his work.

Something shifted, the sound carrying across the silent room – an arm moving, a shoulder shrugging, a hand flexing. Then Katy tilted her new head from side to side, as if adjusting to the fit.

Baxter walked round the table and stood by her side, just as he always had, hands by his sides, eyes wide and aching. He watched as she shook off the webs of her long sleep and slowly began to stand.

Baxter stood his ground when she leaned in to embrace him, fumbling her loose arms around his shoulders, that great carved head looming large in his vision, blotting out the rest of the room. She smelled sickly-sweet; her breath was tainted. Her long, thin fingers raked at his shoulder blades, seeking purchase, looking for the familiar gaps in his armour, the chinks and crevices she had so painstakingly crafted over the years they'd spent together.

When at last she pulled away, taking a short shuffling step back towards the chair, her mouth was agape. The candle burned within, lighting up the orange-dark interior of her new head. She vomited an orangey pulp onto his chest, staining him. The pumpkin seeds followed – hundreds of them, rotten and oversized and surging from between her knife-cut lips to spatter on the floor in a long shiver of putrescence. And finally, there was blood. So much blood.

When the stagnant cascade came to an end, he took her by the

arm and led her to the door, guiding her outside and onto the wooden-decked porch, where he sat her in the ratty wicker chair she loved so much. He left her there, staring out into the silvery veil of the rain, breathing in the shadows and the things that hid within them. Was that a chuckle he heard, squeezing from her still-wet mouth? Maybe, for a moment, but then it was drowned out by the sound of trick-or-treaters sprinting past in the drizzly lane.

He left the door ajar, so that he might keep an eye on her. Then, still shaking slightly, he opened the refrigerator door. On the middle shelf, sitting in a shallow bowl, were the other pumpkins, the smaller ones, each the size of a tennis ball. He took one in each hand, unconsciously weighing them, and headed for the hall, climbing the stairs at an even pace, his hands becoming steady once more.

In the small room at the back of the house, on a chipboard cabinet beneath the shuttered window, there sat a large plastic Tupperware dish. Standing over it, eyes cast downward and unable to lift his gaze to look inside, Baxter heard the faint rustle of polythene. He stood and listened, his eyes glazed with tears not of sorrow but of loss, of grief, and so much more than he could even begin to fathom.

Katy had died in childbirth. Now that she was back, the twins would want to join their mother, and the games they would play together promised to be spectacular.

The Halloween Man

William F. Nolan

Oh, Katie believed in him for sure, the Halloween Man. Him with his long skinny-spindly arms and sharp-toothed mouth and eyes sunk deep in skull sockets like softly glowing embers, charcoal red. Him with his long coat of tatters, smelling of tombstones and grave dirt. All spider-hairy he was, the Halloween Man.

“You made him up!” said Jan the first time Katie told her about him. Jan was nine, a year younger than Katie, but she could run faster and jump higher. “He isn’t real.”

“Is so,” said Katie.

“Is not.”

“Is.”

“Isn’t!”

Jan slapped Katie. Hard. Hard enough to make her eyes sting.

“You’re just mean,” Jan declared. “Going around telling lies and scaring people.”

“It’s true,” said Katie, trying not to cry. “He’s real and he could

be coming here on Halloween night—right to this town. This could be the year he comes here.”

The town was Center City, a small farming community in the Missouri heartland, brightened by fire-colored October trees, with a high courthouse clock (Little Ben) to chime the hour, with plowed fields to the east and a sweep of sun-glittered lake to the west.

A neat little jewel of a town by day. By night, when the big oaks and maples bulked dark and the oozy lakewater was tar-black and brooding, Center City could be scary for a ten-year-old who believed in demons.

Especially on Halloween night.

All month at school, all through October, Katie had been thinking about the Halloween Man, about what Todd Pepper had told her about him. Todd was very mature and very wise. And a lot older, too. Todd was thirteen. He came from a really big city, Cleveland, and knew a lot of things that only big-city kids know.

He was visiting his grandparents for the summer (old Mr. and Mrs. Willard) and Katie met him in the town library late in August when he was looking through a book on demons.

They got to talking, and Katie asked him if he'd ever seen a demon. He had narrow features with squinty eyes and a crooked grin that tucked up the left side of his face.

“Sure, I seen one,” said Todd Pepper. “The old Halloween Man, I seen him. Wears a big pissy-smelling hat and carries a bag over one shoulder, like Santa. But he's got no toys in it, nosir. Not in *that* bag!”

“What's he got in it?”

“Souls. That’s what he collects. Human souls.”

Katie swallowed. “Where... where does he get them from?”

“From kids. Little kids. On Halloween night.”

They were sitting at one of the big wooden library tables, and now he leaned across it, getting his narrow face closer to hers.

“That’s the only time you’ll see him. It’s the only night he’s got power.” And he gave her his crooked grin. “He comes slidin’ along, in his rotty tattered coat, like a big scarecrow come alive, with those glowy red eyes of his, and the bag all ready. Steppin’ along the sidewalk in the dark easy as you please, the old Halloween Man.”

“How does he do it?” Katie wanted to know. “How does he get a kid’s soul?”

“Puts his big hairy hands on both sides of the kid’s head and gives it a terrible shake. Out pops the soul, like a cork out of a bottle. Bingo! And into the sack it goes.”

Katie felt hot and excited. And shaky-scared. But she couldn’t stop asking questions. “What does he do with all the kids’ souls after he’s collected them?”

Another crooked grin. “*Eats ’em,*” said Todd. “They’re his food for the year. Then, come Halloween, he gets hungry again and slinks out to collect a new batch—like a squirrel collecting nuts for the winter.”

“And you—you saw him? Really *saw* him?”

“Sure did. The old Halloween Man, he chased me once when I was your age. In Haversham, Texas. Little bitty town, like this one.

He likes small towns.”

“How come?”

“Nowhere for kids to hide in a small town. Everything out in the open. He stays clear of the big cities.”

Katie shifted on her chair. She bit her lower lip. “Did he catch you—that time in Texas?”

“Nosir, not me.” Todd squinched his eyes. “If he had of, I’d be dead—with my soul in his bag.”

“How’d you get away?”

“Outran him. He was pretty quick, ran like a big lizard he did, but I was quicker. Once I got shut of him, I hid out. Till after midnight. That’s when he loses his power. After midnight he’s just gone—like a puff of smoke.”

“Well, *I’ve* never seen him, I know,” said Katie softly. “I’d remember if I’d seen him.”

“You bet,” said Todd Pepper, nodding vigorously. “But then, he isn’t always so easy to spot.”

“What’dya mean?”

“Magical, that old Halloween Man is. Can take over people. Big people, I mean. Just climbs right inside ’em, like steppin’ into another room. One step, and he’s inside lookin’ out.”

“Then how can you tell if it’s *him*?” Katie asked.

“Can’t,” said Todd Pepper. “Not till he jumps at you. But if

you're lookin' sharp for him, and you know he's around, then you can kind of spot him by instinct."

"What's that?"

"It's like an animal's got in the jungle when a hunter is after him. The animal gets an instinct about the hunter and knows when to run. It's that way with the ole Halloween Man—you can sort of sniff him out when you're sharp enough. He can't fool you then. Not if you're really concentrating. Then your instinct takes over."

"Is there a picture of him in that book?"

Todd riffled the pages casually. "Nope. No kid's ever lived long enough to take a picture of the Halloween Man. But I've described him to you—and unless he climbs inside somebody you'll be able to spot him easy."

"Thanks," said Katie. "I appreciate that." She looked pensive. "But maybe he'll never come to Center City."

"Maybe not." Todd shut the book of demons with a snap. "Then again, you never know. Like I said, he favors small towns. If you want my opinion, I'd say he's overdue in this one."

And that was the only talk she'd had with Todd Pepper. At summer's end he went back to Cleveland to school, and Katie was left in Center City with a head full of new thoughts. About the Halloween Man.

And then it was October, with the leaves blowing orange and yellow and red-gold over her shoes when she walked to school, and the lake getting colder and darker off beyond the trees, and the gusting wind tugging at her coat and fingering her hair. Sometimes it rained, a chill October drizzle that gave the streets a wet-cat shine and

made the sodden leaves stick to her clothes like dead skin.

Katie had never liked October, but this year was the worst, knowing about the Halloween Man, knowing that he could be walking through her town come Halloween night, with his grimy soul-bag over one shoulder and his red-coal eyes penetrating the dark.

Through the whole past week at school that was all Katie could think about and Miss Prentiss, her teacher, finally sent Katie home. With a note to her father that read:

Katie is not her normal self. She is listless and inattentive in class. She does not respond to lessons, nor will she answer questions related to them. She has not been completing her homework. Since Katie is one of our brightest children, I suggest you have her examined for possible illness.

“Are you sick, sugar?” her father had asked her. Her mother was dead and had been for as long as Katie could remember.

“I don’t think so,” Katie had replied. “But I feel kind of funny. I’ll be all right after Halloween. I want to stay home from school till after Halloween.”

Her father had been puzzled by this attitude. Katie had always loved Halloween. It had been her favorite holiday. Out Trick-or-Treating soon as it got dark with her best friend Jan. Now Jan never called the house anymore. Katie’s father wondered why.

“I don’t like her,” Katie declared firmly. “She slapped me.”

“Hey, that’s not nice,” said Katie’s father. “Why did she do that?”

“She said I lied to her.”

“About what?”

“I can’t tell you.” Katie looked down at her hands.

“Why not, sugar?”

“Cuz.”

“Cuz why?”

“Cuz it’s something too scary to talk about.”

“Are you sure you can’t tell your ole Daddy?”

She looked up at him. “Maybe after Halloween. *Then* I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, it’s a deal. Halloween’s just a few days off. So I guess I won’t have long to wait.”

And he smiled, ruffling her hair.

And now it was Halloween day and when it got dark it would be Halloween night. Katie had a sure feeling that *this* year he’d show up in Center City. Somehow, she knew this would be the year.

That afternoon Katie moved through the town square in a kind of dazed fever. Her father had sent her downtown for some groceries and she had taken a long time getting them. It was so hard to remember what he wanted her to bring home. She had to keep checking the list in her purse. She just couldn’t keep her mind on shopping.

Jan was on the street outside when Katie left Mr. Hakim’s

grocery store. They glared at each other. “Do you take back what you said?” asked Jan, sullen and pouting. “About that awful, smelly man.”

“No, I don’t,” said Katie. Her lips were tight.

“You lied!”

“I told the *truth*,” declared Katie. “But you’re just scared to believe it. And if you try to slap me again, I’ll kick your shins!”

Jan stepped back. “You’re the *meanest* person I know!”

“Listen, you’d better stay home tonight,” warned Katie. “That is, if you don’t want the Halloween Man to pop out your soul and eat it.”

Jan blinked at this, frowning.

“I figure he’ll be out tonight,” nodded Katie. “He’s *due*.”

“You’re crazy! I’m going Trick-or-Treating, like always.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Katie told her. “When he grabs you, just remember what I said.”

“I *hate* you!” Jan cried, and turned away.

Katie started home.

It was later than she thought. Katie had spent so much time shopping she’d lost track of the day. It had just slipped past.

Now it was almost dark.

God!

Almost dark.

The brightness had drained from the sky, and the westering sun was buried in thick-massed clouds. A thin rain was beginning to dampen the streets.

Katie shifted the heavy bag of groceries and began to walk faster. Only two miles and she'd be home. Just twenty blocks.

A rising wind had joined the rain, driving wet leaves against her face, whipping her coat.

Not many kids will be going out tonight, Katie thought. Not in this kind of weather. Which meant lean pickings for the Halloween Man. If he shows up there won't be many souls to bag. Meaning he'll grab any kid he finds on the street. No pick and choose for him.

I'm all right, Katie told herself. I've still got time to make it home before it gets really dark...

But the clouds were thickening rapidly, drawing a heavy gray blanket across the sky. It was getting dark. Katie hurried. An orange fell from the top of the rain-damp sack, plopped to the walk. Katie stopped to pick it up.

And saw him.

Coming along the walk under the blowing trees, tall and skeleton-gaunt, with his rotted coat flapping in tatters around his stick-thin legs, and with his sack slung over one bony shoulder.

The red of his deep-sunk eyes burned under a big wide-brimmed slouch hat.

He saw Katie.

The Halloween Man smiled.

She whirled around with an insucked cry, the soggy paper sack ripping, slipping from her fingers, the groceries tumbling to the sidewalk, cans rolling, spilt milk cartons spitting white foam across the dark concrete.

Katie ran. Not looking back, heart hammer-thumping her chest, she flung her body forward in strangled panic.

Where? Where to go? He was between her and home; she'd have to go back into the heart of town, run across the square and try to reach her house by another route.

But could she run that far? Jan was the runner; she could do it, she was faster and stronger. Already Katie felt a rising weakness in her legs. Terror was constricting her muscles, numbing her reflexes.

He could run like a lizard. That's what Todd had said, and lizards are fast. She didn't want to look back, didn't want to turn to see him, but she had to know how much distance she'd put between them. *Where was he?*

With a low moan, Katie swung her head around. And suddenly stopped running.

He was gone.

The long wet street stretched empty behind her, char black at its far end—just the wind-lashed trees, the gusting leaves, the blowing curtain of rain silvering the dark pavement. There was no sign of the Halloween Man.

He'd outfoxed her. He'd guessed her intention about doubling

back and had cut across the square ahead of her. And he'd done the final demon-clever thing to trap her. He'd climbed inside.

But inside *who?* And *where?*

Concentrate, she told herself. Remember what Todd Pepper said about trusting your instinct. Oh, I'll know him when I see him!

Now Katie was in the middle of the town square. No matter which route she took home she had to pass several stores and shops—and he could be waiting in any doorway, ready to pounce.

She drew a long, shuddering breath, steeling herself for survival. Her head ached; she felt dizzy, but she was prepared to run.

Then, suddenly, horribly, a hand tugged at her shoulder!

Katie flinched like a dog under the whip, looked up in drymouthed terror—into the calm, smiling face of Dr. Peter Osgood.

“Your father tells me you’ve been ill, young lady,” he said in his smooth doctor’s voice. “Just step into my office and we’ll find out what’s wrong.”

Step into my parlor said the spider to the fly. Katie backed away from him. “No...No. Nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.”

“Your face looks flushed. You may have a touch of fever, Katie. Now I really think we should—”

“Get away from me!” she screamed. “I’m not going anywhere with you. I know who you are—you’re *him!*”

And she broke into a pounding run.

Past Mr. Thurtle's candy shop: *Him*, waving from the window at her, with his red eyes shining...

Past the drug store: *Him*, standing at the door inside, Mr. Joergens, smiling with his shark's teeth. "In a big rush today, Katie?"

Yes, away from you! A big rush.

Across the street on the red light. *Him*, in a dirty Ford pickup, jamming on the brakes, poking his head out the window: "Watch where you're running, you stupid little bitch!"

Oh, she knew the Halloween Man.

When Katie reached her house, on Oakvale, she fell to her knees on the cold wooden porch, gasping, eyes full of tears, ears ringing. Her head felt like a balloon about to burst, and she was hot and woozy and sick to her stomach.

But she was safe. She'd made it; he hadn't caught her. Katie stood up shakily, got the door open and crossed the living room to the big rose sofa, dropped into it with a heavy, exhausted sigh.

Outside, a car pulled to the curb. She could see it through the window. A dark blue Chevy! *Dr. Osgood's car!* "No!" screamed Katie, running back to the front door and throwing the bolt.

Her father came downstairs, looking confused. "What's wrong, sugar?"

Katie faced him, panting, her back tight against the bolted door.

"We can't let him in. He's gonna steal my soul!"

“It’s just Dr. Osgood, Katie. I asked him to drop by and see you.”

“No, it *isn’t*, Daddy. He’s not Dr. Osgood. He’s *him!*”

“Him?”

“The Halloween Man. He can get into big people’s bodies. And he’s inside Dr. Osgood right now.”

Her father smiled gently, then moved to unlock the door. “I think you’ve been watching too many movies. You don’t have to be afraid of—”

But Katie didn’t wait for him to finish. She rushed up the stairs, ran to her room at the end of the hall, hurried inside, and slammed the door.

Panic. There was no lock on her door, no way to keep him out. She ran to the bed, jumping under the covers the way she used to do when she was little and things frightened her in the dark.

Below, muted sounds of greeting. Male voices. Daddy talking to him.

Then footsteps.

Coming up the stairs.

Katie leaped from the bed in a sudden frenzy, tipped over the tall wooden bookcase near her closet, dragged it against the door. *It probably wouldn’t hold him, but...*

A rapping at the door. Rap-rap-rap. Rap-rap-rap.

“Katie!”

“Go way!” she yelled.

“Katie, open the door.” It was Daddy’s voice.

“No. You’ve got him with you. I know he’s right there with you.”

“Go to the window,” her father told her. “See for yourself.”

She ran across the room, stumbling over spilled books, and looked out. Dr. Osgood was just driving away through the misting rain in his blue Chevy.

Which meant that her *father* could now be—

He pushed the door open. Katie swung around to face him. “Oh, no!” She was trembling. “It’s true! Now *you’re* him!”

Katie’s father reached out, put a big hand on each side of her face. “Happy Halloween, sugar!” he said.

And gave her head a terrible shake.

The Spirit of Things

John M. Skipp

They were screaming downstairs, in Bob Wallach's apartment. He couldn't tell how many people Bob had down there with him. He couldn't even tell how much of it was human screaming. He really didn't want to know.

"Damn it all, I tried to warn him," Wertzel hissed. It didn't help. The floorboards thudded and death-twitched beneath his feet. Books and knickknacks threatened to tumble from their perches. Something snapped and shattered against a wall below: furniture, bone, he couldn't be sure. A window exploded into tinkling shards. The stereo died in mid-song, groaning.

The screaming got louder, crazier. Wertzel swallowed painfully and white-knuckled the handgrip of his .45. Something, decidedly not human, shrieked. The screaming got worse, if that was possible.

A single lightbulb burned in the center of the white ceiling. Jake Wertzel sat directly below it on a rickety wooden chair, his back pointed toward the only featureless wall in his third-story walkup studio apartment. To his right were the windows that faced Thirty-Seventh Street. To the left were the doorways to his closet, his bathroom, the hallway and stairs beyond. Before him lay the kitchenette, the unusable fireplace, his bed.

Every entrance to the room... the windows, the doors, the mouth of the fireplace... were completely boarded up and blockaded. He hoped that it would be enough.

The walls and the floorboards were ceasing to shudder. The screaming, which had continued to mount, now began to dissemble into its component parts. He could distinguish maybe a half-dozen voices, all veering off toward their separate grand finales: this one, a woman's, spiraling up toward the ultrasonic as if someone or something were slowly twisting a dial; this one, a man's, trumpeting dissonant jazz that closed with a jagged, moist burbling sound; this one, which could have been either sex, rattling off a string of syllables that ended, very clearly, with the word *no*. Wertzel knew for a fact that that was the word, because it hovered in the air for a good ten seconds before something made a sound like shredding paper and silenced it.

There was more. Much more. *Wallach must've been having some kind of a party*, Wertzel thought bitterly. *Maybe he thought there was safety in numbers*. A pair of voices warbled and whooped in screeching, agonized harmony. *Stupid goddam kid. I tried to warn him...*

The screaming stopped, abruptly.

And the feeding sounds began.

Wertzel cupped his hands over his ears, clammy shields against the horror. A blood-red ocean roared and surged inside his head. It was better, but it was not enough. He wanted to hum something, set up a monochromatic drone that would amplify itself against the confines of his skull, drown out the cracking and smacking and slurping from below. He didn't dare. The tiniest sound might be enough to attract them. Even his breathing was carefully modulated for silence.

It went on for five minutes that seemed very much like forever.

Jake Wertzel was a squat, stocky man in his late thirties: barrel chest, paunch beneath it, massive arms to either side. Twenty years on the loading docks will do that to you. His features were pinched and unlovely; his hairline had receded all the way to the back of his head, crowning him with a bald plateau that shimmered in the light from the bare bulb in the ceiling. He looked like a man who had known much hardship, very little happiness. He looked exactly like what he was.

He wished to God that he were not so horribly alone.

He remembered the dogs. Fleetinglly, absurdly, he wished that they were still alive, wagging their tails or lapping at his cheeks or humping his knees with witless abandon. He had picked them up at the Humane Society three weeks before, anticipating the holiday rush: a pair of big, stupid, ungainly mutts that he named Haystacks and Calhoun. Wertzel had done his human best to remain detached from them, knowing what fate had in store. But three weeks is a long time: more than enough time to grow fond of them, their brainless devotion. More than enough time to make him miss them now.

At 10:45, the absolute latest that he could wait, Wertzel gave the last supper to Haystacks and Calhoun. The Purina Dog Chow was laced with enough sedatives to knock out an army: he wanted to make sure that they felt no pain. Fifteen minutes later, they were down for the count.

Wertzel had dragged them out into the hallway, gutted them, drawn a huge cross on the door with their blood, and left them on the mat: paws up, tongues lolling.

Then he had gone back into the apartment, locked and bolted

and nailed the door shut, boarded it up with heavy planks he had taken from skids at the loading dock, and moved to the chair in the middle of the room.

To wait. And hope.

It was now twenty after twelve. The witching hour had struck.

And they had come.

“Oh, God,” he moaned, and was startled by how loudly the words boomed in his ears. His hands jerked away from the sides of his head, and he realized that the downstairs had gone almost completely silent. There was a faint, airy sound that might have been the hissing of the pipes. Somehow, he didn’t believe it.

Why me? he thought. *Why here? Why now?* Last year, the worst of it had gone down in Chelsea and the Village. The year before that... the first year... had laid waste to much of the Upper East Side. If there was a pattern there, Wertzels couldn’t see it; but he’d hoped that the horror would focus itself uptown again, give him enough time to save up enough money to maybe get the hell out of New York before the fall.

As if there were anywhere safe to go.

Most of all, he wished that things would revert to the way they used to be. He wished for the sound of children’s voices, giddy with laughter and hoarse with demands. He wished for cheesy plastic masks, eyeholes sliced in ratty sheets, prosthetic warts and theatrical blood.

He longed for the days when it was easy to pretend that the whole thing was just a joke.

Gone now, his mind whispered silently. *All gone. All gone...*

They were coming up the stairs.

Wertzel felt his bowels tighten like a hangman's knot. Ice water drained down his spine and gathered in the pit of his stomach. His scrotum constricted like a slug under a magnifying glass, and hot moisture like acid seeped into his eyes from the unlimited slope of his forehead.

They were coming up the stairs. He didn't know what they were, what they looked like, how they moved. He didn't want to know. They made sounds that his ears rejected as unreal, though his heart and soul knew better. They skittered and slithered and fluttered and muttered and howled like brain-damaged hyenas from Hell. One of them made a noise like a spoons-player in a jug band; it moved along the stairway wall with incredible speed, blasted down the hall toward him, clattered across the length of the door in a split-second, raced halfway up to the fourth floor and came all the way back before the others reached the third floor landing.

One of them made the walls shake as it approached.

I will not move, he urged himself with a silent, sickly whining voice. *I will not scream. I will not lose control*. He prayed that the sacrifice would work. Rumor had it that blood offerings had been known to, on occasion.

Wertzel found himself wishing, suddenly, that he'd sacrificed a child instead; supposedly, they worked the best. But killing the dogs had been bad enough.

At the time.

They were coming down the hall. They were coming to his door.

The books and knickknacks that had threatened to tumble now made good on their promise, slamming and shattering against the floor, filling the room with gunshot echoes that ricocheted off the walls. The heavy chest of drawers rocked back and forth on its heels like a Bozo punching bag. The kitchen cupboard flew open; plates and saucers and glasses and cups exploded into the sink like a string of firecrackers.

Wertzel screamed and pissed himself. He couldn't help it. The crotch of his Lee Jeans ballooned with moisture, and wet sticky tendrils crept down his thighs, while his mouth flew open and all the terror in his heart flew up, up, and out in a torrential spasm.

“NO PLEASE GOD NO PLEASE NO OH GOD PLEASE DON'T KILL ME! I...I...”

In the bathroom, behind the boarded-up door, the toilet flushed.

“...I...I...”

A light came on in the sealed closet. There was the sound of rending fabric.

“...I...”

Something scratched against the window, screeched, and flapped its leathery wings.

“I GAVE YOU A SACRIFICE!” he bellowed. *“I GAVE YOU A SACRIFICE, PLEASE DON'T KILL ME, OH GOD PLEASE I'LL DO ANYTHING YOU WANT...”*

Silence.

Jake Wertzel fell back in his seat, breath catching in his throat.

The room had stopped shaking. Nothing moved. Nothing fell.

Silence from the bathroom.

Silence from the closet.

Silence from the windows.

Silence in the hall.

Wertzel held his breath for a good thirty seconds, not daring to believe.

Silence.

Slowly, then, he let out one long shuddering exhalation. The muscles in his face twitched; the corners of his mouth arced tentatively upward in a smile. He let the useless .45 dangle by one finger like an ornament on an artificial tree.

Then he started to cry.

And God, did it ever feel good to cry, to let out all the pent-up emotion, to bask and wallow in the fact that he was *alive!*, he was *alive!*, and no sound remained to haunt him but the manic intermingling of his own tears and laughter, punctuated by the steady...

(Drip. Drip. Drip.)

Of what? He laughed and cried some more. It could have been swollen teardrops, landing at his feet. It could have been the piss, still dribbling down his legs. Lord knew he had dropped enough fluids in the last few minutes to account for any amount of...

(Drip. Drip. Drip.)

It was coming from above him.

He opened his eyes.

The room was turning red.

(Drip. Drip. Drip.)

He looked up.

There was a quarter-inch of blood at the bottom of the lightbulb in the center of the ceiling, directly above his head. He looked up just in time to watch a tiny blue spark catch off the filament, just before the bulb blew up, showering him with blood and broken glass.

And total darkness.

Wertzel shrieked and hit the floor on his hands and knees. The glass bit through his clothes, his skin, sinking into the meat and lodging there like bee-stingers. He yowled and rolled over. His back erupted with pain.

The toilet flushed.

Light winked on under the closet door.

Something dragged its talons along the window-glass outside.

And the spitfire staccato of the wall-climbing thing burst out from the hole in the wall behind the oven, the hole he had forgotten to patch, the hole that now allowed it entrance. Like a methedrine freak with a pair of spoons, it clattered and streaked toward him so fast that he barely had time to aim the .45 in the direction of the sound and

fire.

In the muzzle-flash, he could see the scuttling crabthing turn inside-out and spray all over the kitchenette. Then it was dark again, totally dark. Spots danced in front of his eyes. His ears were filling with the hiss of melting metal as the crabthing's guts ate holes in the oven, the Frigidaire...

No.

Not total darkness.

In the fireplace, something was moving. He could see it through the cracks between the boards, red and yellow and orange like flame. But brighter. More solid.

And moving.

A pair of tiny flaming hands pried their way between the boards. The wood crackled and blackened at their touch. A tiny head poked through the opening.

It stared at him.

And suddenly Wertzel knew why there would be no more plastic masks, no tattered sheets with holes for the eyes, no warts and scars and blood from the lab. Suddenly, he knew why they had come.

They had been watching, and waiting, for a long long time. They had watched the Church march arrogantly across the face of the earth, twisting the old pagan holidays to suit it, stripping and homogenizing away all meaning, then positing nonsense in its place.

And though centuries passed like seconds to them, it still dragged on too long. Where the Great Dark Ones had once strode the

earth, there now stood Kolchak, The Night Stalker and Casper, The Friendly Ghost. They had seen the shitty movies. They had read the shitty books. They had seen themselves turned into limp-wristed Bela Lugosis and carrot-headed James Arnasses, heard too many bad actors get the spells all wrong and conjure up demons that couldn't scare the fleas off a pink-nosed bunny.

Worst of all, they had seen All Hallow's Eve transformed into a ritual for posturing, preening babies; had seen their glorious faces mocked and strung up in too many dime store windows. For far too long.

But that was over.

Wertzel understood it all, staring into those coal-black, ageless eyes.

He understood perfectly.

He started to scream.

Then the windows imploded, and the front door blew apart like a matchstick house in a hurricane's hands, and the Old Ones slithered and stalked and soared into Jake Wertzel's third-floor walkup apartment in beautiful Godless midtown Manhattan.

After a while, the screaming stopped.

And the feeding sounds began.

Halloween. It ain't just kid stuff.

Any more.

Yesterday's Witch

Gahan Wilson

Her house is gone now. Someone tore it down and bulldozed away her trees and set up an ugly apartment building made of cheap bricks and cracking concrete on the flattened place they'd built. I drove by there a few nights ago; I'd come back to town for the first time in years to give a lecture at the university, and I saw blue TV flickers glowing in the building's living rooms.

Her house sat on a small rise, I remember, with a wide stretch of scraggly lawn between it and the ironwork fence which walled off her property from the sidewalk and the rest of the outside world. The windows of her house peered down at you through a thick tangle of oak tree branches, and I can remember walking by and knowing she was peering out at me, and hunching up my shoulders because I couldn't help it, but never, ever, giving her the satisfaction of seeing me hurry because of fear.

To the adults she was Miss Marble, but we children knew better. We knew she had another name, though none of us knew just what it was, and we knew she was a witch. I don't know who it was told me first about Miss Marble's being a witch; it might have been Billy Drew. I think it was, but I had already guessed in spite of being less than six. I grew up, all of us grew up, sure and certain of Miss Marble's being a witch.

You never managed to get a clear view of Miss Marble, or I don't ever remember doing so, except that once. You just got peeks and hints. A quick glimpse of her wide, short body as she scuttled up the front porch steps; a brief hint of her brown-wrapped form behind a thick clump of bushes by the garage where, it was said, an electric runabout sat rusting away; a sudden flash of her fantastically wrinkled face in the narrowing slot of a closing door, and that was all.

Fred Pulley claimed he had gotten a good long look at her one afternoon. She had been weeding, or something, absorbed at digging in the ground, and off guard and careless even though she stood a mere few feet from the fence. Fred had fought down his impulse to keep on going by, and he had stood and studied her for as much as two or three minutes before she looked up and saw him and snarled and turned away.

We never tired of asking Fred about what he had seen.

"Her teeth, Fred," one of us would whisper—you almost always talked about Miss Marble in whispers—"did you see her *teeth*?"

"They're long and yellow," Fred would say. "And they come to points at the ends. And I think I saw blood on them."

None of us really believed Fred had seen Miss Marble, understand, and we certainly didn't believe that part about the blood, but we were so very curious about her, and when you're really curious about something, especially if you're a bunch of kids, you want to get all the information on the subject even if you're sure it's lies.

So we didn't believe what Fred Pulley said about Miss Marble's having blood on her teeth, nor about the bones he'd seen her pulling out of the ground, but we remembered it all the same, just in case, and it entered into any calculations we made about Miss Marble.

Halloween was the time she figured most prominently in our thoughts. First because she was a witch, of course, and second because of a time-honored ritual among the neighborhood children concerning her and ourselves and that evening of the year. It was a kind of test by fire that every male child had to go through when he reached the age of thirteen, or be shamed forever after. I have no idea when it originated; I only know that when I attained my thirteenth year and was thereby qualified and doomed for the ordeal, the rite was established beyond question.

I can remember putting on my costume for that memorable Halloween, an old Prince Albert coat and a papier-mâché mask which bore a satisfying likeness to a decayed cadaver, with the feeling I was girding myself for a great battle. I studied my reflection in a mirror affixed by swivels to my bedroom bureau and wondered gravely if I would be able to meet the challenge this night would bring. Unsure, but determined, I picked up my brown paper shopping bag, which was very large so as to accommodate as much candy as possible, said goodbye to my mother and father and dog, and went out. I had not gone a block before I met George Watson and Billy Drew.

"Have you got anything yet?" asked Billy.

"No." I indicated the emptiness of my bag. "I just started."

"The same with us," said George. And then he looked at me carefully. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I said, realizing I had not been ready until that very moment, and feeling an encouraging glow at knowing I was. "I can do it all right."

Mary Taylor and her little sister Betty came up, and so did Eddy Baker and Phil Myers and the Arthur brothers. I couldn't see where

they all had come from, but it seemed as if every kid in the neighborhood was suddenly there, crowding around under the streetlamp, costumes flapping in the wind, holding bags and boxes and staring at me with glistening, curious eyes.

"Do you want to do it now," asked George, "or do you want to wait?"

George had done it the year before and he had waited.

"I'll do it now," I said.

I began walking along the sidewalk, the others following after me. We crossed Garfield Street and Peabody Street and that brought us to Baline Avenue where we turned left. I could see Miss Marble's iron fence half a block ahead, but I was careful not to slow my pace. When we arrived at the fence I walked to the gate with as firm a tread as I could muster and put my hand upon its latch. The metal was cold and made me think of coffin handles and graveyard diggers' picks. I pushed it down and the gate swung open with a low, rusty groaning.

Now it was up to me alone. I was face to face with the ordeal. The basic terms of it were simple enough: walk down the crumbling path which led through the tall, dry grass to Miss Marble's porch, cross the porch, ring Miss Marble's bell, and escape. I had seen George Watson do it last year and I had seen other brave souls do it before him. I knew it was not an impossible task.

It was a chilly night with a strong, persistent wind and clouds scudding overhead. The moon was three-fourths full and it looked remarkably round and solid in the sky. I became suddenly aware, for the first time in my life, that it was a real *thing* up there. I wondered how many Halloweens it had looked down on and what it had seen.

I pulled the lapels of my Prince Albert coat close about me and

started walking down Miss Marble's path. I walked because all the others had run or skulked, and I was resolved to bring new dignity to the test if I possibly could.

From afar, the house looked bleak and abandoned, a thing of cold blues and grays and greens, but as I drew nearer, a peculiar phenomenon began to assert itself. The windows, which from the sidewalk had seemed only to reflect the moon's glisten, now began to take on a warmer glow; the walls and porch, which had seemed all shriveled, peeling paint, and leprous patches of rotting wood, now began to appear well kept. I swallowed and strained my eyes. I had been prepared for a growing feeling of menace, for ever darker shadows, and this increasing evidence of warmth and tidiness absolutely baffled me.

By the time I reached the porch steps the place had taken on a positively cozy feel. I now saw that the building was in excellent repair and that it was well painted with a smooth coat of reassuring cream. The light from the windows was now unmistakably cheerful, a ruddy, friendly pumpkin kind of orange suggesting crackling fireplaces all set and ready for toasting marshmallows. There was a very unwitchlike clump of Indian corn fixed to the front door, and I was almost certain I detected an odor of sugar and cinnamon wafting into the cold night air.

I stepped onto the porch, gaping. I had anticipated many awful possibilities during this past year. Never far from my mind had been the horrible pet Miss Marble was said to own, a something-or-other, which was all claws and scales and flew on wings with transparent webbing. Perhaps, I had thought, this thing would swoop down from the bare oak limbs and carry me off while my friends on the sidewalk screamed and screamed. Again, I had not dismissed the notion Miss Marble might turn me into a frog with a little motion of her fingers and then step on me with her foot and squish me.

But here I was feeling foolish, very young, crossing this friendly porch and smelling—I was sure of it now—sugar and cinnamon and cider and, what's more, butterscotch on top of that. I raised my hand to ring the bell and was astonished at myself for not being the least bit afraid when the door softly opened and there stood Miss Marble herself.

I looked at her and she smiled at me. She was short and plump, and she wore an apron with a thick ruffle all along its edges, and her face was smooth and red and shiny as an autumn apple. She wore bifocals on the tip of her tiny nose and she had her white hair fixed in a perfectly round bun in the exact center of the top of her head. Delicious odors wafted round her through the open door and I peered greedily past her.

"Well," she said in a mild, old voice, "I am so glad that someone has at last come to have a treat. I've waited so many years, and each year I've been ready, but nobody's come."

She stood to one side and I could see a table in the hall piled with candy and nuts and bowls of fruit and platesful of pies and muffins and cake, all of it shining and glittering in the warm, golden glow which seemed everywhere. I heard Miss Marble chuckle warmly.

"Why don't you call your friends in? I'm sure there will be plenty for all."

I turned and looked down the path and saw them, huddled in the moonlight by the gate, hunched wide-eyed over their boxes and bags. I felt a sort of generous pity for them. I walked to the steps and waved.

"Come on! It's all right!"

They would not budge.

"May I show them something?"

She nodded yes and I went into the house and got an enormous orange-frosted cake with numbers of golden sugar pumpkins on its sides.

"Look," I cried, lifting the cake into the moonlight, "look at this! And she's got lots more! She always had, but we never asked for it!"

George was the first through the gate, as I knew he would be. Billy came next, and then Eddy, then the rest. They came slowly, at first, timid as mice, but then the smells of chocolate and tangerines and brown sugar got to their noses and they came faster. By the time they had arrived at the porch they had lost their fear, the same as I, but their astonished faces showed me how I must have looked to Miss Marble when she'd opened the door.

"Come in, children. I'm so glad you've all come at last!"

None of us had ever seen such candy or dared to dream of such cookies and cakes. We circled the table in the hall, awed by its contents, clutching at our bags.

"Take all you want, children. It's all for you."

Little Betty was the first to reach out. She got a gumdrop as big as a plum and was about to pop it into her mouth when Miss Marble said:

"Oh no, dear, don't eat it now. That's not the way you do with tricks and treats. You wait till you get out on the sidewalk and then you go ahead and gobble it up. Just put it in your bag for now, sweetie."

Betty was not all that pleased with the idea of putting off eating her gumbdrop, but she did as Miss Marble asked and plopped it into her bag and quickly followed it with other items such as licorice cats and apples dipped in caramel and pecans lumped together with some lovely-looking brown stuff, and soon all the other children, myself very much included, were doing the same, filling our bags and boxes industriously, giving the task of clearing the table as rapidly as possible our entire attention.

Soon, amazingly soon, we had done it. True, there was the occasional peanut, now and then a largish crumb survived, but by and large, the job was done. What was left was fit only for rats and roaches, I thought, and then was puzzled by the thought. Where had such an unpleasant idea come from?

How our bags bulged! How they strained to hold what we had stuffed into them! How wonderfully heavy they were to hold!

Miss Marble was at the door now, holding it open and smiling at us.

"You must come back next year, sweeties, and I will give you more of the same."

We trooped out, some of us giving the table one last glance just to make sure, and then we headed down the path, Miss Marble waving us good-bye. The long, dead grass at the sides of the path brushed stiffly against our bags, making strange hissing sounds. I felt as cold as if I had been standing in the chill night air all along, and not comforted by the cozy warmth inside Miss Marble's house. The moon was higher now and seemed—I didn't know how or why—to be mocking us.

I heard Mary Taylor scolding her little sister: "She said not to eat any till we got to the sidewalk!"

"I don't care. I want some!"

The wind had gotten stronger and I could hear the stiff tree branches growl high over our heads. The fence seemed far away and I wondered why it was taking us so long to get to it. I looked back at the house and my mouth went dry when I saw that it was gray and old and dark, once more, and that the only light from its windows was reflections of the pale moon.

Suddenly little Betty Taylor began to cry, first in small, choking sobs, and then in loud wails. George Watson said "What's wrong?" and then there was a pause, and then George cursed and threw Betty's bag over the lawn toward the house and his own box after it. They landed with a queer rustling slither that made the small hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I let go of my own bag and it flopped, bulging, into the grass by my feet. It looked like a huge, pale toad with a gaping, grinning mouth.

One by one the others rid themselves of what they carried. Some of the younger ones, whimpering, would not let go, but the older children gently separated them from the things they clutched.

I opened the gate and held it while the rest filed out onto the sidewalk. I followed them and closed the gate firmly. We stood and looked into the darkness beyond the fence. Here and there one of our abandoned boxes or bags seemed to glimmer faintly, some of them moved—I'll swear it—though others claimed it was just an illusion produced by the waving grass. All of us heard the high, thin laughter of the witch.

Boo

Richard Laymon

The last time I ever went out trick-or-treating, it was with my best friend Jimmy and his sisters, Peggy and Donna. Peggy, Jimmy's kid sister, had a couple of her little friends along, Alice and Olive. There was also Olive's older brother, Nick.

Donna, Jimmy's older sister, was in charge.

We all wore costumes except Donna. Being sixteen, Donna thought of herself as too old for dressing up, so she went as herself in a plaid chamois-cloth shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers.

Peggy wore a Peter Pan outfit. When I saw her in the green elf outfit and feathered cap, I said, "Peter Pan!" She corrected me. "Not Peter Pan, Peggy Pan."

One of her little friends, I don't remember whether it was Olive or Alice, sported a tutu and a tiara and carried a wand with a star at one end. The other girl wore a store-bought E.T. costume. Or maybe she was Yoda. I'm not sure which.

Nick I remember. All of fourteen, he was a year older than Jimmy and me. He was supposed to be a Jedi warrior. He wore black coveralls, a black cape, and black galoshes. No mask, no helmet. We only knew he was a Jedi warrior because he told us so. And because he carried a "light saber," pretty much a hollow plastic tube attached

to a flashlight.

Jimmy was "the Mummy." Earlier that night, Donna and I had spent ages wrapping him up in a white bedsheet that we'd cut into narrow strips. We kept pinning the strips to Jimmy's white longjohns. It took forever. It would've driven me nuts except for Donna. Every so often, she gave Jimmy a poke with a pin just to keep things interesting. We finally got it done, though, and Jimmy made a good-looking mummy.

My costume was easy. I was Huck Finn. I wore a straw hat, an old flannel shirt, and blue jeans. I had a length of clothesline over one shoulder, tied at the ends to a couple of my belt loops to look like an old rope suspender. As a final touch I had a corncob pipe that my dad let me borrow for the night.

So that was our group: who we were and how we were dressed that night.

Jimmy and me, Donna and Peggy, Alice and Olive and Nick.

Seven of us.

Except for Donna, we carried paper bags for our treats. Donna carried a flashlight. For the most part, she took up the rear. She usually didn't even go to the doors with us but waited on the sidewalk while we rang doorbells, yelled "Trick or treat!" and held out our bags to receive the goodies.

For the first couple of hours that night, everything went along fine. If you don't count Nick going on occasional rampages, bopping us on the heads or prodding us in the butts with his light saber, proclaiming, "The Dark Side rules!" After a while, Jimmy's bandages started to come off and droop. At one point, ET (or Yoda) fell down and skinned her knee and spent a while bawling. But nothing major

went wrong and we kept on collecting loot and roaming farther and farther into unknown territory.

It was getting very late when we came to a certain house that was not at all like the others on its block. Whereas they were brightly lighted and most had jack-o'-lanterns on their porches, this house was utterly dark. Whereas their shrubbery and lawns were neatly trimmed, this house seemed nearly lost in a jungle of deep grass, wild foliage, and brooding trees. It also seemed much older than the other houses on the block. Three stories high (not two like its neighbors) and made of wood (not brick), it looked as if it belonged to a different century.

The houses on both sides of the old one seemed unusually far away from it, as if whoever'd built them had been afraid to get too close.

Though Nick usually ran from house to house without returning to the sidewalk, cutting across lawns and brandishing his light saber with Peggy and Olive and Alice chasing after him, this time he thought better of it. All four of them came back to the sidewalk, where Jimmy and I were walking along with Donna.

"What's with that house?" Nick asked.

"It's creepy-eeepy-eeepy," said either Olive or Alice, whichever one was the fairy godmother princess ballerina.

"It doesn't look like anyone lives there," Donna said.

"Maybe like the Munsters," I said.

"I think maybe we should skip this one," Donna said.

"Hey, no," Jimmy protested. "We can't skip this one. It's the best one yet!"

I felt exactly the same way, but I never could've forced myself to disagree with Donna.

She shook her head, her bangs swaying across her brow. "I really don't like the looks of it. Besides, it'd be a waste of time. Nobody's there. You won't get any treats. We might as well just—"

"You never know," Jimmy interrupted. "Maybe they just forgot to turn their lights on."

"I think Donna's right," I said. "I don't think anyone's there."

Jimmy shook his head. By this time, all the "bandages" had slipped off his head. They dangled around his neck like rag necklaces. "If somebody does live in a place like that," he said, "wouldn't you wanta meet him? Or her. Maybe it's a creepy old woman. Just imagine. Like some crazy old witch or hermit or something, you know?"

For a while, we all just stood there and stared at the dark old house—what we could see of it through the bushes and trees, anyway, which wasn't much.

Looking at it, I felt a little shivery inside.

"I think we should just go on," Donna said.

"You're in charge," Jimmy muttered. He'd been ordered by his parents to obey Donna, but he sounded disappointed.

She took a deep breath and sighed. It felt good to watch her do that.

"It's probably deserted," she said. Then she said, "Okay, let's

give it a try."

"All *right!*" Jimmy blurted.

"This time, I'll lead the way. Who else wants to come?"

The three girls jumped up and down, yelling, "Me! I do! Me! Me-me-me!"

Nick raised his light saber, and said, "I'll come and protect you, Princess Donna."

"Any trouble," I told him, "cut 'em to ribbons with your flashlight."

"Take that!" He jabbed me in the crotch.

He didn't even do it very hard, but the tube got me in the nuts. I grunted and gritted my teeth and barely managed not to double over.

"Gotcha!" Nick announced.

Donna bounced her flashlight off his head. Not very hard, but the bulb went dark and Nick yelped, "Ow!" and dropped his light saber and candy bag and grabbed the top of his head with both hands and hunched over and walked in circles.

"Oh, take it easy," she told him. "I barely tapped you."

"I'm gonna tell!" he blurted.

"Tell your little ass off, see if I care."

The ballerina fairy-godmother princess gasped.

ET or Yoda blurted, "Language!"

Little sister Peggy Pan almost split a gut, but seemed to know she shouldn't laugh at Nick's misfortune so she clamped a hand across her mouth.

Jimmy, more concerned about my fate than Nick's, patted me on the back and asked, "You okay, man?"

"Fine," I squeezed out.

Donna came closer. Looking me in the eyes, she said, "Did he get you bad?"

I grimaced and shrugged.

"Right in the nads," offered Jimmy.

I gave him a look.

Instead of killing him, as intended, my look seemed to inspire him. "Donna's a certified lifeguard, you know. All that first-aid training. Want her to take a look?"

"Shut up!" I snapped at him.

"Stop it, Jimmy," she said.

"How'd you like to have her kiss—"

I punched his arm. He yelled, "Hey!" and grabbed it.

"Okay, okay," Donna said. "Everybody calm down. No more hitting. How are you doing, Matt?" she asked me.

"Okay, I guess."

"Nick?" she asked.

He was standing nearby, gently touching the top of his head. "I've got a bump."

"Well, that's too bad, but you asked for it."

"Did not."

Donna said, "You busted my damn flashlight."

Jimmy and I laughed. So did Peggy Pan.

ET or Yoda blurted, "Language!"

"You shouldn't go around whumping people on the head," Nick explained. "You can cause 'em brain damage."

"Not you!" Jimmy said. "You haven't got one."

"That's enough," Donna said. "Come on, are we gonna check out this house or aren't we?" Without even waiting for a response, she stepped off the sidewalk and started trudging toward the creepy old place.

I went after her, hurting. Each step I took, it felt like a little hand was squeezing one of my balls. But I didn't let it stop me and it seemed to pretty much go away by the time we reached the porch stairs.

Donna stopped and turned around. She still held the flashlight in one hand, though it wasn't working anymore. With her other hand, she put a finger to her lips.

In a few moments, everyone was standing in front of her, motionless and silent.

Donna took the forefinger away from her lips. She pointed it at each of us, counting heads the way a school bus driver does before bringing a bunch of kids back from a field trip. Done, she whispered, "Okay, six."

"Seven," I said.

She turned her head toward me. The moon was full, so I could see her face pretty well. She raised her eyebrows.

"You," I whispered.

"Ah. Okay. Right." In a somewhat louder voice, she said, "Okay, there're seven of us right now. Let's hope and pray there're still seven when we get back to the street."

Her words gave me the creeps.

One of the girls made a whiny sound.

"I wanna go back," said one of them. Maybe the same one who'd whined. I don't know whether it was Alice or Olive. It wasn't Peggy Pan, though.

Peggy Pan whispered, "Wussy."

Jimmy chuckled.

And I saw the look on Donna's face and realized she was trying to psych us out.

Not us, really. Them.

Nick had made her mad, and she wasn't exactly tickled by Alice or Olive, either, so she figured to make life a little more interesting for them.

"If anybody wants to go back and wait for us on the sidewalk," she said, "that's fine. It'd probably be a good idea. No telling what might happen when we go up and ring the doorbell."

One of the girls whined again.

"You're just trying to scare us," Nick said. In the full moon, I could see the sneer on his face. "Can't scare a Jedi," he said.

Donna continued, "I just think... everyone needs to know the score. I wasn't planning to mention it, but... I've heard about this house. I know what happened here. And I happen to know it isn't deserted."

"Yeah, sure," Nick said.

Lowering her voice, Donna said, "A crazy man lives here. A crazy man named... Boo. Boo Ripley."

I almost let out a laugh, but held it in.

"Boo who?" Jimmy asked.

I snorted and gave him my elbow.

"Ow!"

"Shhh!" Donna went. "Want Boo to hear us?" She looked at the others, frowning slightly. "When he was only eight years old,

Boo chopped up his mom and dad with a hatchet... and ate 'em. Gobbled 'em up! Yum yum!"

"Did not," Nick said.

"I wanna go home!"

"Shut up," Nick snapped.

"But Boo was a little boy, back then. And his mom and dad were very large. Even though he gobbled them day and night, night and day, there was always more that needed to be eaten.

"Well, Boo's mom was a real cat lover. She had about a dozen cats living in the house all the time and stinking it up, so finally Boo started feeding his folks to the cats. Day and night, night and day, Boo and the cats ate and ate and ate. At last, they managed to polish off the last of Boo's mom and dad. And you know what?"

"What?" asked Peggy Pan. She sounded rather gleeful.

"I don't wanna hear!" blurted tutu girl.

"Knock it off, pipsqueak," Nick snapped at her.

"Boo and the cats," Donna said, "enjoyed eating the mom and dad so much that they lost all interest in any other kind of food. From that time forth, they would only eat people. Raw people. And you know what?"

"What?" asked Peggy Pan and I in unison.

"They still live right here in this house. Every night, they hide in the dark and watch out the windows, waiting for visitors."

"You're just making this up," Nick said.

"Sure I am."

"She isn't, man," said Jimmy.

"They're probably up in the house right this very minute watching us, licking their lips, just praying we'll climb the stairs and go across the porch and ring the doorbell. Because they're very hungry, and you know what?"

"What?" asked Peggy Pan, Jimmy, and I in unison.

In a low, trembling voice, Donna said, "The food they love most of all is..." Shouting, "Little girls like you!" She lunged toward Alice and Olive.

They shrieked and whirled around and ran for their lives. Yoda or ET waved her little arms overhead as she fled. The fairy dancer whipped her magic wand as if swatting at bats. One of them fell and crashed in the weeds and started to cry.

Nick yelled, "Fuck!" and ran after them, his light saber jumping.

"Language!" Jimmy called after him.

Donna brushed her hands together. "Golly," she said. "What got into them?"

"Can't imagine," I said.

"What a bunch of wussies," said Peggy Pan.

"I can't stand that Nick," said Jimmy. "He is such a shit."

"Language," Donna told him.

We laughed, all four of us.

Then Donna said, "Come on, gang," and trotted up the porch stairs. We hurried after her.

And I'll always remember trotting up those stairs and stepping onto the dark porch and walking up to the door. Even while it was happening, I knew I would never forget it. It was just one of those moments when you think, *It doesn't get any better than this.*

I was out there in the windy, wonderful October night with cute and spunky little Peggy Pan, with my best buddy Jimmy, and with Donna. I was in love with Donna. I'd fallen in love with her the first time I ever met her and I'm in love with her to this day and I'll love her the rest of my life.

That night, she was sixteen and beautiful and brash and innocent and full of fun and vengeance. She'd trounced Nick and done quite a number on Alice and Olive, too. Now she was about to ring the doorbell of the creepiest house I'd ever seen.

I wanted to run away screaming myself. I wanted to yell with joy. I wanted to hug Donna and never let her go. And also I sort of felt like crying.

Crying because it was all so terrifying and glorious and beautiful — and because I knew it wouldn't last.

All the very best times are like that. They hurt because you know they'll be left behind.

But I guess that's partly what makes them special, too.

"Here goes," Donna whispered.

She raised her hand to knock on the door, but Jimmy grabbed her wrist. "That stuff about Boo and the cats," he whispered. "You made it up, didn't you?"

"What do you think?"

"Okay." He let go of her hand.

She knocked on the door.

Nothing.

I turned halfway around. Beyond the bushes and trees of the front yard, Nick and the two girls were watching us from the sidewalk.

Donna knocked again. Then she whispered, "I really don't think anyone lives here anymore."

"I hope not," I whispered.

Donna reached out and gave the screen door a pull. It swung toward us, hinges squawking.

"What're you doing?" Jimmy blurted.

"Nothing," said Donna. She tried the main door. "Damn," she muttered.

"What?" I asked.

"Locked."

Oh, I thought. That's too bad.

The wooden door had a small window at about face level. Donna leaned forward against the door, cupped her hands by the sides of her eyes, and peered in.

Peered and peered and didn't say a word.

"Can you see something?" Jimmy asked.

Donna nodded ever so slightly.

"What? What's in there?"

She stepped back, lowered her arms and turned her back to the door and said very softly, "I think we'd better get out of here."

Peggy Pan groaned.

Jimmy muttered, "Oh, shit."

I suddenly felt cold and shrivelly all over my body.

We let Donna take the lead. Staying close behind her, we quietly descended the porch stairs. At the bottom, I thought she might break into a run. She didn't, though. She just walked slowly through the high weeds.

I glanced back at the porch a couple of times. It was still dark. Nobody seemed to be coming after us.

Entering the shadows of some trees near the middle of the lawn, Donna almost disappeared. We all hurried toward her. In a hushed voice, Jimmy said, "What did you see?"

"Nothing, really," she said.

"Yes, you did," Peggy Pan insisted.

"No, I mean..." She stopped.

The four of us stood there in the darkness. Though we weren't far from the sidewalk where Nick and the girls were waiting, a high clump of bushes blocked our view of them.

"Okay," Donna said. "Look, this is just between us. They ran off so they've got no right to hear about it, okay?"

"Sure," I said.

Peggy Pan nodded.

Jimmy whispered, "They'll never hear it from me."

"Okay," Donna said. "Here's the thing. It was really dark in the house. I didn't see anything at first. But then I could just barely make out a stairway. And something was on the stairway. Sitting on the stairs partway up, and it seemed to be staring straight at me."

"What was it?" Peggy Pan whispered.

"I'm not really sure, but I think it was a cat. A white cat."

"So?" Jimmy asked.

I felt a little letdown, myself.

"I think it was sitting on someone's lap," she said.

"Oh, jeez."

Peggy Pan made a high-pitched whiny noise. Or maybe that was me.

"He was wearing dark clothes, I think. So I really couldn't see him. Or her. All I could see was this darkness on the stairs."

"How do you know it was even there?" Jimmy asked.

"The cat was white."

"So?"

"Someone was petting it."

"Let's get outta here," Jimmy said.

Donna nodded. "Remember, not a word to Nick or Alice or Olive. We'll just say nothing happened."

We all agreed, and Donna led us through the trees. Out in the moonlight, we walked around the clump of bushes and found Nick and the girls waiting.

"So what happened?" Nick asked.

We shrugged and shook our heads. Donna said, "Nothing much. We knocked, but nobody was home."

Smirking, he said, "You mean Boo and his cats weren't there?"

Donna grinned. "You didn't believe that story, did you? It's Halloween. I made it up."

Nick scowled. The ballerina fairy godmother princess looked

very relieved, and Yoda or ET sighed through her mask.

"Good story," I said.

"Thanks, Matt," said Donna.

"Can we still trick-or-treat some more?" Peggy Pan asked.

Donna shrugged. "It's getting pretty late. And we're a long way from home."

"Please?" asked Peggy Pan.

Her little friends started jumping and yelling, "Please? Please-please-please? Oh, please? Pretty please?"

"How about you, Nick?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Guys?" she asked Jimmy and me.

"Yeah!"

"Sure!"

"Okay," Donna said. "We'll go a little longer. Maybe just for a couple more blocks."

"Yayyy!"

The girls led the way, running up the sidewalk to the next house — a normal house— cutting across its front lawn and rushing up half a dozen stairs to its well-lighted porch. Nick chased them up the stairs. Jimmy and I hurried. By the time the door was opened by an

elderly man with a tray of candy, Jimmy and I were also on the porch, Donna waiting at the foot of the stairs.

We were back to normal.

Almost.

We hurried from house to house, reached the end of the block, crossed the street, and went to the corner house on the next block. It was just after that house, when we met on the sidewalk and headed for the next house, that Donna, lagging behind, called out, "Hang on a minute, okay? Come on back."

So we all turned around. As we hurried toward the place where Donna was waiting on the sidewalk, she raised her hand, index finger extended, and poked the finger at each of us. Like a school bus driver counting heads before starting home from a field trip.

She finished.

"Seven," she said.

"That's right," I said as I halted in front of her.

"Seven not including me," she said.

I whirled around and there was Jimmy the weebegone mummy dangling loose strips of sheet, some of which by now were trailing on the sidewalk. There was Nick the Jedi warrior with his light saber. And Peggy Pan and the ballerina fairy princess godmother and Yoda or ET and— bringing up the rear but only a few paces behind the girls— someone else.

He carried a grocery bag like any other trick-or-treater, but he was bigger than the girls, bigger than Nick, bigger than any of us.

He wore a dark cowboy hat and a black raincoat and jeans. Underneath his hat was some sort of strange mask. I couldn't tell what it was at first. When he got closer, though, I saw that it seemed to be made of red bandannas. It covered his entire head and neck. It had ragged round holes over his eyes, a slot over his mouth.

I had no idea where he'd come from.

I had no idea how long he'd been walking along with us, though certainly he'd shown up sometime after we'd left the dark old house.

Is that where he joined us? I wondered.

Speaking in his direction, Donna said, "I don't think we know you." Though she sounded friendly and calm, I heard tension in her voice.

The stranger nodded but didn't speak.

The girls, apparently noticing him for the first time, stepped away from him.

"Where'd you come from?"

He raised an arm. When he pointed, I saw that his hand was covered by a black leather glove.

He pointed behind us. In the direction of the dark old house... and lots of other places.

"Who are you?" Donna asked.

And he said, "Killer Joe."

Alice and Olive took another step away from him, but Peggy Pan stepped closer. "You aren't gonna kill us are you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Cool costume," Jimmy said.

"Thanks," said Killer Joe.

"So who are you really?" Donna asked.

Killer Joe shrugged.

"How about taking off the mask?" she said.

He shook his head.

"Do we know you?" Jimmy asked.

Another shrug.

"You wanta come along trick-or-treating with us?" Peggy Pan asked.

He nodded. Yes.

Donna shook her head. No. "Not unless we know who you are." Her voice no longer sounded quite so calm or friendly. She was speaking more loudly than before. And breathing hard.

She's scared.

And she wasn't the only one.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you'll either have to let us see who

you are or leave. Okay? We've got little kids here, and... and we don't know who you are."

"He's Killer Joe," Nick explained.

"We know," Jimmy said.

"But he's all by himself," Peggy Pan said. "He shouldn't have to go trick-or-treating all by himself." She stepped right up to him and took hold of a sleeve of his raincoat and tilted her head back.

"Peggy," Donna said. "Get away from him. Right now."

"No!"

Killer Joe shrugged, then gently pulled his arm out of Peggy's grip and turned around and began to walk away very slowly, his head down.

And I suddenly figured this was some poor kid— a big and possibly somewhat weird kid, granted— but a kid nevertheless without any friends, trying his best to have fun on Halloween night, and now he was being shunned by us.

I actually got a tight feeling in my throat.

Peggy Pan, sounding desolate, called out, " 'Bye, Killer Joe!"

Still walking away, head still down, he raised a hand to acknowledge the girl's farewell.

"Come on back!" Donna called.

He stopped walking. His head lifted. Slowly, he turned around and pointed to himself with a gloved hand.

"Yeah, you," Donna said. "It's all right. You can come with us. But we are almost done for the night."

Killer Joe came back, a certain spring in his walk.

Though he never removed his strange and rather disturbing bandanna mask and never told us who he was, he stayed with us that night as we went on from house to house, trick-or-treating.

Before his arrival, we'd been on the verge of quitting and going home. But even though he rarely spoke— mostly just a gruff "Trick or treat" when people answered their doors— he was so strange and friendly and perky, we just couldn't seem to quit.

This had been going on for a while and I was about to follow the bunch toward another house when Donna called softly, "Matt?"

I turned around and went back to her.

She took hold of my forearm. In a quiet voice, she said, "What do you think of this guy?"

"He's having a great time."

"Do you trust him?"

I shrugged.

"I don't," Donna said. "I mean, he could be anyone. I think it's very weird he wouldn't take off his mask. I'm afraid he might be up to something."

"Why'd you let him come with us?"

She shrugged. "Guess I felt sorry for him. Anyway, he's probably fine. But how about helping me keep an eye on him, okay? I mean, he might be after the girls or something. You just never really know."

"I'll watch him," I promised.

"Thanks." She gave my arm a squeeze. "Not that we'd be able to do anything much about it if he does try something."

"I don't know," I said. "I know one thing, I won't let him do anything to Peggy. Or you."

She smiled and squeezed my arm again. "Sure. We'll let him have Alice and Olive."

"But we'll encourage him to take Nick."

Donna laughed. "You're terrible."

"So are you," I said.

After that, I joined up with the rest of them and kept a close eye on Killer Joe as we hurried from door to door.

Sometimes he touched us. He gave us friendly pats. But nothing more than what a buddy might do. I started to think of him as a buddy, but warned myself to stay cautious.

Finally, Donna called us all over to her. She said, "It's really getting late, now. I think we'd better call it quits for the night."

Sighs, moans.

"Just one more house!" the girls pleaded. "Please, please, just one more house? Pretty please?"

"Well," said Donna. "Just one more."

Olive and Alice went, "Yayyyyyy!"

Killer Joe bobbed his masked head and clapped his hands, his gloves making heavy whopping sounds.

We all took off for our final house of the night. It was a two-story brick house. Its porch light was off, but one of the upstairs windows glowed brightly.

All of us gathered on the porch except Donna, who waited at the foot of the stairs as she often did.

Peggy Pan rang the doorbell. Olive and Alice stood beside her, and the rest of us stood behind them. I was between Mummy Jimmy and Killer Joe.

Nobody came to the door.

Peggy jabbed the button a few more times.

"Guess nobody's home," I said.

"Somebody has to be!" said Peggy. "This is the last house. Somebody has to be home."

Olive and Alice started shouting, "Trick or treat! Trick or treat! Open the door! Trick or treat!"

Killer Joe stood there in silence. He seemed to be swaying slightly as if enjoying some music inside his head.

"Maybe we'd better give it up," Jimmy said.

"No!" Peggy jabbed the doorbell some more.

Suddenly, the wooden door flew open.

We all shouted *"Trick or treat!"*

An old woman in a bathrobe blinked out at us. "Don't any of you kids know what time it is?" she asked. "It's almost eleven o'clock. Are you out of your minds, ringing people's doorbells at this hour?"

We all stood there, silent.

I felt a little sick inside.

The old woman had watery eyes and scraggly white hair. She must've been eighty. At least.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Well, y'oughta be, damn kids."

"Trick or treat?" asked Peggy Pan in a small, hopeful voice.

"No! No fucking trick or treats for any of you, you buncha fuckin' assholes! Now get the fuck off my porch!"

That's when Killer Joe reached inside his raincoat with one hand and jerked open the screen door with his other.

If the door had been locked, the lock didn't hold.

The woman in the house yelled, *"Hey, you can't!..."*

Killer Joe lurched over the threshold and the woman staggered

backward but not fast enough and I glimpsed the hatchet for just a moment, clutched in Joe's black leather glove, and then he swung it forward and down, chopping it deep into the old woman's forehead.

That's all I saw.

I think I saw more than most. Then all of us were running.

We were about a block away and still running, some of the girls still screaming, when I did a quick head count.

Seven.

Including Donna.

Not including Killer Joe.

Joe had still been in the house when we ran off.

We never saw him again. He was never identified, never apprehended.

That was a long time ago.

I never again went trick-or-treating after that. Neither did Donna or Jimmy or Peggy. I don't know about Nick and Alice and Olive, and don't care.

Now I have a kid of my own. I hate for her to miss out on the strange and wonderful and frightening joys of dressing up and going house to house on Halloween night.

Trick-or-treating...

Sometimes, what happens on Halloween is as good as it gets.

Sometimes not. Judy agrees.

"What the hell," she said, "let's go with her, show her how it's done."

Judy's not Donna, but... she's terrific in her own ways and I have my memories.

The Folding Man

Joe R. Lansdale

They had come from a Halloween party, having long shed the masks they'd worn. No one but Harold had been drinking, and he wasn't driving, and he wasn't so drunk he was blind. Just drunk enough he couldn't sit up straight and was lying on the back seat, trying, for some unknown reason, to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which he didn't accurately recall. He was mixing in verses from "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the Boy Scout oath, which he vaguely remembered from his time in the organization before they drove him out for setting fires.

Even though William, who was driving, and Jim, who was riding shotgun, were sober as Baptists claimed to be, they were fired up and happy and yelling and hooting, and Jim pulled down his pants and literally mooned a black bug of a car carrying a load of nuns.

The car wasn't something that looked as if it had come off the lot. Didn't have the look of any car maker Jim could identify. It had a cobbled look. It reminded him of something in old movies, the ones with gangsters who were always squealing their tires around corners. Only it seemed bigger, with broader windows through which he could see the nuns, or at least glimpse them in their habits; it was a regular penguin convention inside that car.

Way it happened, when they came up on the nuns, Jim said to

William at the wheel, "Man, move over close, I'm gonna show them some butt."

"They're nuns, man."

"That's what makes it funny," Jim said.

William eased the wheel to the right, and Harold in the back said, "Grand Canyon. Grand Canyon. Show them the Grand Canyon... Oh, say can you see..."

Jim got his pants down, swiveled on his knees in the seat, twisted so that his ass was against the glass, and just as they passed the nuns, William hit the electric window switch and slid the glass down. Jim's ass jumped out at the night, like a vibrating moon.

"They lookin'?" Jim asked.

"Oh, yeah," William said, "and they are not amused."

Jim jerked his pants up, shifted in the seat, and turned for a look, and sure enough, they were not amused. Then a funny thing happened, one of the nuns shot him the finger, and then others followed. Jim said, "Man, those nuns are rowdy."

And now he got a good look at them, even though it was night, because there was enough light from the headlights as they passed for him to see faces hard as wardens and ugly as death warmed over. The driver was especially homely, face like that could stop a clock and run it backwards or make shit crawl uphill.

"Did you see that, they shot me the finger?" Jim said.

"I did see it," William said.

Harold had finally gotten "The Star-Spangled Banner" straight, and he kept singing it over and over.

"For Christ sake," William said. "Shut up, Harold."

"You know what," Jim said, studying the rearview mirror, "I think they're speeding up. They're trying to catch us... Oh hell. What if they got the license plate? Maybe they already have. They call the law, my dad will have my mooning ass."

"Well, if they haven't got the plate," William said, "they won't. This baby can get on up and get on out."

He put his foot on the gas. The car hummed as if it had just had an orgasm, and seemed to leap. Harold was flung off the backseat, onto the floorboard. "Hey, goddamnit," he said.

"Put on your seat belt, jackass," Jim said.

William's car was eating up the road. It jumped over a hill and dove down the other side like a porpoise negotiating a wave, and Jim thought: Goodbye, penguins, and then he looked back. At the top of the hill were the lights from the nuns' car, and the car was gaining speed and it moved in a jerky manner, as if it were stealing space between blinks of the eye.

"Damn," William said. "They got some juice in that thing, and the driver has the foot down."

"What kind of car is that?" Jim said.

"Black," William said.

"Ha! Mr. Detroit."

"Then you name it."

Jim couldn't. He turned to look back. The nuns' car had already caught up; the big automotive beast was cruising in tight as a coat of varnish, the headlights making the interior of William's bright as a Vegas act.

"What the hell they got under the hood?" William said. "Hyperdrive?"

"These nuns," Jim said, "they mean business."

"I can't believe it, they're riding my bumper."

"Slam on your brakes. That'll show them."

"Not this close," William said. "Do that, what it'll show them is the inside of our butts."

"Do nuns do this?"

"These do."

"Oh," Jim said. "I get it. Halloween. They aren't real nuns."

"Then we give them hell," Harold said, and just as the nuns were passing on the right, he crawled out of the floorboard and onto his seat and rolled the window down. The back window of the nuns' car went down and Jim turned to get a look, and the nun, well, she was ugly all right, but uglier than he had first imagined. She looked like something dead, and the nun's outfit she wore was not actually black and white, but purple and white, or so it appeared in the light from headbeams and moonlight. The nun's lips pulled back from her teeth and the teeth were long and brown, as if tobacco stained. One of her eyes looked like a spoiled meat ball, and her nostrils flared like a

pig's.

Jim said, "That ain't no mask."

Harold leaned way out of the window and flailed his hands and said, "You are so goddamn ugly you have to creep up on your underwear."

Harold kept on with this kind of thing, some of it almost making sense, and then one of the nuns in the back, one closest to the window, bent over in the seat and came up and leaned out of the window, a two-by-four in her hands. Jim noted that her arms, where the nun outfit had fallen back to the elbows, were as thin as sticks and white as the underbelly of a fish and the elbows were knotty, and bent in the wrong direction.

"Get back in," Jim said to Harold.

Harold waved his arms and made another crack, and then the nun swung the two-by-four, the oddness of her elbows causing it to arrive at a weird angle, and the board made a crack of its own, or rather Harold's skull did, and he fell forward, the lower half of his body hanging from the window, bouncing against the door, his knuckles losing meat on the highway, his ass hanging inside, one foot on the floorboard the other wagging in the air.

"The nun hit him," Jim said. "With a board."

"What?" William said.

"You deaf, she hit him."

Jim snapped loose his seat belt and leaned over and grabbed Harold by the back of the shirt and yanked him inside. Harold's head looked like it had been in a vice. There was blood everywhere. Jim

said, "Oh, man, I think he's dead."

BLAM!

The noise made Jim jump. He slid back in his seat and looked toward the nuns. They were riding close enough to slam the two-by-four into William's car; the driver was pressing that black monster toward them.

Another swing of the board and the side mirror shattered.

William tried to gun forward, but the nuns' car was even with him, pushing him to the left. They went across the highway and into a ditch and the car did an acrobatic twist and tumbled down an embankment and rolled into the woods tossing up mud and leaves and pine straw.

Jim found himself outside the car, and when he moved, everything seemed to whirl for a moment, then gathered up slowly and became solid. He had been thrown free, and so had William, who was lying nearby. The car was a wreck, lying on its roof, spinning still, steam easing out from under the hood in little cotton-white clouds. Gradually, the car quit spinning, like an old-time watch that had wound down. The windshield was gone and three of the four doors lay scattered about.

The nuns were parked up on the road, and the car doors opened and the nuns got out. Four of them. They were unusually tall, and when they walked, like their elbows, their knees bent in the wrong direction. It was impossible to tell this for sure, because of the robes they wore, but it certainly looked that way, and considering the elbows, it fit. There in the moonlight, they were as white and pasty as pot stickers, their jaws seeming to have grown longer than when Jim had last looked at them, their noses witchlike, except for those pig-

flare nostrils, their backs bent like long bows. One of them still held the two-by-four.

Jim slid over to William, who was trying to sit up.

"You okay?" Jim asked.

"I think so," William said, patting his fingers at a blood spot on his forehead. "Just before they hit, I stupidly unsnapped my seat belt. I don't know why. I just wanted out I guess. Brain not working right."

"Look up there," Jim said.

They both looked up the hill. One of the nuns was moving down from the highway, toward the wrecked car.

"If you can move," Jim said, "I think we oughta."

William worked himself to his feet. Jim grabbed his arm and half pulled him into the woods where they leaned against a tree. William said, "Everything's spinning."

"It stops soon enough," Jim said.

"I got to chill, I'm about to faint."

"A moment," Jim said.

The nun who had gone down by herself bent down out of sight behind William's car, then they saw her going back up the hill, dragging Howard by his ankle, his body flopping all over as if all the bones in his body had been broken.

"My God, see that?" William said. "We got to help."

"He's dead," Jim said. "They crushed his head with a board."

"Oh, hell, man. That can't be. They're nuns."

"I don't think they are," Jim said. "Least not the kind of nuns you're thinking."

The nun dragged Harold up the hill and dropped his leg when she reached the big black car. Another of the nuns opened the trunk and reached in and got hold of something. It looked like some kind of folded up lawn chair, only more awkward in shape. The nun jerked it out and dropped it on the ground and gave it a swift kick. The folded up thing began to unfold with a clatter and a squeak. A perfectly round head rose up from it, and the head spun on what appeared to be a silver hinge. When it quit whirling, it was upright and in place, though cocked slightly to the left. The eyes and mouth and nostrils were merely holes. Moonlight could be seen through them. The head rose as coat-rack-style shoulders pushed it up and a cage of a chest rose under that. The chest looked almost like an old frame on which dresses were placed to be sewn, or perhaps a cage designed to contain something you wouldn't want to get out. With more squeaks and clatters, skeletal hips appeared, and beneath that, long bony legs with bent back knees and big metal-framed feet. Sticklike arms swung below its knees, clattering against its legs like tree limbs bumping against a window pane. It stood at least seven feet tall. Like the nuns, its knees and elbows fit backwards.

The nun by the car trunk reached inside and pulled out something fairly large that beat its wings against the night air. She held it in one hand by its clawed feet, and its beak snapped wildly, looking for something to peck. Using her free hand, she opened up the folding man's chest by use of a hinge, and when the cage flung open, she put the black, winged thing inside. It fluttered about like a heart shot full of adrenaline. The holes that were the folding man's eyes filled with a red glow and the mouth hole grew wormy lips, and

a tongue, long as a garden snake, dark as dirt, licked out at the night, and there was a loud sniff as its nostrils sucked air. One of the nuns reached down and grabbed up a handful of clay, and pressed it against the folding man's arms; the clay spread fast as a lie, went all over, filling the thing with flesh of the earth until the entire folding man's body was covered. The nun, who had taken the folding man out of the car, picked Harold up by the ankle, and as if he were nothing more than a blow-up doll, swung him over her head and slammed him into the darkness of the trunk, shut the lid, and looked out where Jim and William stood recovering by the tree.

The nun said something, a noise between a word and a cough, and the folding man began to move down the hill at a stumble. As he moved his joints made an unoiled hinge sound, and the rest of him made a clatter like lug bolts being knocked together, accompanied by a noise akin to wire hangers being twisted by strong hands.

"Run," Jim said.

Jim began to feel pain, knew he was more banged up than he thought. His neck hurt. His back hurt. One of his legs really hurt. He must have jammed his knee against something. William, who ran alongside him, dodging trees, said, "My ribs. I think they're cracked."

Jim looked back. In the distance, just entering the trees, framed in the moonlight behind him, was the folding man. He moved in strange leaps, as if there were springs inside him, and he was making good time.

Jim said, "We can't stop. It's coming."

It was low down in the woods and water had gathered there and the leaves had mucked up with it, and as they ran, they sloshed and

splashed, and behind them, they could hear it, the folding man, coming, cracking limbs, squeaking hinges, splashing his way after them. When they had the nerve to look back, they could see him darting between the trees like a bit of the forest itself, and he, or it, was coming quite briskly for a thing its size until it reached the lower-down parts of the bottomland. There its big feet slowed it some as they buried deep in the mud and were pulled free again with a sound like the universe sucking wind. Within moments, however, the thing got its stride, its movements becoming more fluid and its pace faster.

Finally Jim and William came to a tree-thickened rise in the land, and were able to get out of the muck, scramble upwards and move more freely, even though there was something of a climb ahead, and they had to use trees growing out from the side of the rise to pull themselves upward. When they reached the top of the climb, they were surprised when they looked back to see they had actually gained some space on the thing. It was some distance away, speckled by the moonlight, negotiating its way through the ever-thickening trees and undergrowth. But, still it came, ever onward, never tiring. Jim and William bent over and put their hands on their knees and took some deep breaths.

"There's an old graveyard on the far side of this stretch," Jim said. "Near the wrecking yard."

"Where you worked last summer."

"Yeah, that's the one. It gets clearer in the graveyard, and we can make good time. Get to the wrecking yard, Old Man Gordon lives there. He always has a gun and he has that dog, Chomps. It knows me. It will eat that thing up."

"What about me?"

"You'll be all right. You're with me. Come on. I kinda know

where we are now. Used to play in the graveyard, and in this end of the woods. Got to move."

They moved along more swiftly as Jim became more and more familiar with the terrain. It was close to where he had lived when he was a kid, and he had spent a lot of time out here. They came to a place where there was a clearing in the woods, a place where lightning had made a fire. The ground was black, and there were no trees, and in that spot silver moonlight was falling down into it, like mercury filling a cup.

In the center of the clearing they stopped and got their breath again, and William said, "My head feels like it's going to explode... Hey, I don't hear it now."

"It's there. Whatever it is, I don't think it gives up."

"Oh, Jesus," William said, and gasped deep once. "I don't know how much I got left in me."

"You got plenty. We got to have plenty."

"What can it be, Jimbo? What in the hell can it be?"

Jim shook his head. "You know that old story about the black car?"

William shook his head.

"My grandmother used to tell me about a black car that roams the highways and the back roads of the South. It isn't in one area all the time, but it's out there somewhere all the time. Halloween is its peak night. It's always after somebody for whatever reason."

"Bullshit."

Jim, hands still on his knees, lifted his head. "You go down there and tell that clatter-clap thing its all bullshit. See where that gets you."

"It just doesn't make sense."

"Grandma said before it was a black car, it was a black buggy, and before that a figure dressed in black on a black horse, and that before that, it was just a shadow that clicked and clacked and squeaked. There's people go missing, she said, and it's the black car, the black buggy, the thing on the horse, or the walkin' shadow that gets them. But, it's all the same thing, just a different appearance."

"The nuns? What about them?"

Jim shook his head, stood up, tested his ability to breathe. "Those weren't nuns. They were like... I don't know... Anti-nuns. This thing, if Grandma was right, can take a lot of different forms. Come on. We can't stay here anymore."

"Just another moment, I'm so tired. And I think we've lost it. I don't hear it anymore."

As if on cue, there came a clanking and a squeaking and cracking of limbs. William glanced at Jim, and without a word, they moved across the lightning-made clearing and into the trees. Jim looked back, and there it was, crossing the clearing, silver-flooded in the moonlight, still coming, not tiring.

They ran. White stones rose up in front of them. Most of the stones were heaved to the side, or completely pushed out of the ground by growing trees and expanding roots. It was the old graveyard, and Jim knew that meant the wrecking yard was nearby,

and so was Gordon's shotgun, and so was one mean dog.

Again the land sloped upward, and this time William fell forward on his hands and knees, throwing up a mess of blackness. "Oh, God. Don't leave me, Jim... I'm tuckered... Can hardly... breathe."

Jim had moved slightly ahead of William. He turned back to help. As he grabbed William's hand to pull him up, the folding man squeaked and clattered forward and grabbed William's ankle, jerked him back, out of Jim's grasp.

The folding man swung William around easily, slammed his body against a tree, then the thing whirled, and as if William were a bullwhip, snapped him so hard his neck popped and an eyeball flew out of his skull. The folding man brought William whipping down across a standing gravestone. There was a cracking sound, like someone had dropped a glass coffee cup, then the folding man whirled and slung William from one tree to another, hitting the trees so hard bark flew off of them and clothes and meat flew off William.

Jim bolted. He ran faster than he had ever run; finally he broke free of the woods and came to a stretch of ground that was rough with gravel. Behind him, breaking free of the woods, was the folding man, making good time with great strides, dragging William's much-abused body behind it by the ankle.

Jim could dimly see the wrecking yard from where he was, and he thought he could make it. Still, there was the aluminum fence all the way around the yard, seven feet high. No little barrier. Then he remembered the sycamore tree on the edge of the fence, on the right side. Old Man Gordon was always talking about cutting it because he thought someone could use it to climb over and into the yard, steal one of his precious car parts, though if they did, they had Gordon's

shotgun waiting along with the sizeable teeth of his dog. It had been six months since he had seen the old man, and he hoped he hadn't gotten ambitious, that the tree was still there.

Running closer, Jim could see the sycamore tree remained, tight against the long run of shiny wrecking yard fence. Looking over his shoulder, Jim saw the folding man was springing forward, like some kind of electronic rabbit, William's body being pulled along by the ankle, bouncing on the ground as the thing came ever onward. At this rate, it would only be a few seconds before the thing caught up with him.

Jim felt a pain like a knife in his side, and it seemed as if his heart was going to explode. He reached down deep for everything he had, hoping like hell he didn't stumble.

He made the fence and the tree, went up it like a squirrel, dropped over on the roof of an old car, sprang off of that and ran toward a dim light shining in the small window of a wood and aluminum shack nestled in the midst of old cars and piles of junk.

As he neared the shack, Chomps, part pit bull, part just plain big ole dog, came loping out toward him, growling. It was a hard thing to do, but Jim forced himself to stop, bent down, stuck out his hand, and called the dog's name.

"Chomps. Hey, buddy. It's me."

The dog slowed and lowered its head and wagged its tail.

"That's right. Your pal, Jim."

The dog came close and Jim gave it a pat. "Good boy."

Jim looked over his shoulder. Nothing.

"Come on, Chomps."

Jim moved quickly toward the shack and hammered on the door. A moment later the door flew open, and standing there in overalls, one strap dangling from a naked arm, was Mr. Gordon. He was old and near toothless, squat and greasy as the insides of the cars in the yard.

"Jim? What the hell you doing in here? You look like hell."

"Something's after me."

"Something?"

"It's outside the fence. It killed two of my friends."

"It? Some kind of animal?"

"No... It."

"We'll call some law."

Jim shook his head. "No use calling the law now, time they arrive it'll be too late."

Gordon leaned inside the shack and pulled a twelve-gauge into view, pumped it once. He stepped outside and looked around.

"You sure?"

"Oh yeah. Yes sir, I'm sure."

"Then I guess you and me and Pump Twelve will check it out."

Gordon moved out into the yard, looking left and right. Jim stayed close to Gordon's left elbow. Chomps trotted nearby. They walked about a bit. They stopped between a row of wrecked cars, looked around. Other than the moon-shimmering fence at either end of the row where they stood, there was nothing to see.

"Maybe whatever, or whoever it is, is gone," Gordon said. "Otherwise, Chomps would be all over it."

"I don't think it smells like humans or animals."

"Are you joshin' an old man? Is this a Halloween prank?"

"No sir. Two of my friends are dead. This thing killed them. It's real."

"What the hell is it then?"

As if in answer, there was the sound like a huge can opener going to work, and then the long, thin arm of the folding man poked through the fence and there was more ripping as the arm slid upwards, tearing at the metal. A big chunk of the fence was torn away, revealing the thing, bathed in moonlight, still holding what was left of William's ragged body by the ankle.

Jim and Gordon both stood locked in amazement.

"Sonofabitch," Gordon said.

Chomps growled, ran toward it.

"Chomps will fix him," Gordon said.

The folding man dropped William's ankle and bent forward, and just as the dog leaped, caught it and twisted it and ran its long arm

down the snapping dog's throat, and began to pull its insides out. It flung the dog's parts in all directions, like someone pulling confetti from a sack. Then it turned the dog inside out.

When the sack was empty, the folding man bent down and fastened the dead, deflated dog to a hook on the back of what passed for its ankle.

"My God," Gordon said.

The thing picked up William by the ankle, stepped forward a step, and paused.

Gordon lifted the shotgun. "Come and get you some, asshole."

The thing cocked its head as if to consider the suggestion, and then it began to lope toward them, bringing along its clanks and squeaks, the dead dog flopped at the folding man's heel. For the first time its mouth, which had been nothing but a hole with wormy lips, twisted into the shape of a smile.

Gordon said, "You run, boy. I got this."

Jim didn't hesitate. He turned and darted between a row of cars and found a gap between a couple of Fords with grass grown up around their flattened tires, ducked down behind one, and hid. He lay down on his belly to see if he could see anything. There was a little bit of space down there, and he could look under the car, and under several others, and he could see Gordon's feet. They had shifted into a firm stance, and Jim could imagine the old man pulling the shotgun to his shoulder.

And even as he imagined, the gun boomed, and then it boomed again. Silence, followed by a noise like someone ripping a piece of thick cardboard in half, and then there were screams and more rips.

Jim felt light-headed, realized he hadn't been breathing. He gasped for air, feared that he had gasped too loudly.

Oh my God, he thought. I ran and left it to Mr. Gordon, and now... He was uncertain. Maybe the screams had come from... It, the folding man? But so far it hadn't so much as made breathing sounds, let alone anything that might be thought of as a vocalization.

Crawling like a soldier under fire, Jim worked his way to the edge of the car, and took a look. Stalking down the row between the cars was the folding man, and he was dragging behind him by one ankle what was left of William's body. In his other hand, if you could call it a hand, he had Mr. Gordon, who looked thin now because so much had been pulled out of him. Chomps' body was still fastened to the wire hook at the back of the thing's foot. As the folding man came forward, Chomps dragged in the dirt.

Jim pushed back between the cars, and kept pushing, crawling backwards. When he was far enough back, he raised to a squat and started between narrower rows that he thought would be harder for the folding man to navigate; they were just spaces really, not rows, and if he could go where it couldn't go, then—

There was a large creaking sound, and Jim, still at a squat, turned to discover its source. The folding man was looking at him. It had grabbed an old car and lifted it up by the front and was holding it so that the back end rested on the ground. Being as close as he was now, Jim realized the folding man was bigger than he had thought, and he saw too that just below where the monster's thick torso ended there were springs, huge springs, silver in the moonlight, vibrating. He had stretched to accommodate the lifting of the car, and where his knees bent backwards, springs could be seen as well; he was a garage sale collection of parts and pieces.

For a moment, Jim froze. The folding man opened his mouth

wide, wider than Jim had seen before, and inside he could glimpse a turning of gears and a smattering of sparks. Jim broke suddenly, running between cars, leaping on hoods, scrambling across roofs, and behind him came the folding man, picking up cars and flipping them aside as easily as if they had been toys.

Jim could see the fence at the back, and he made for that, and when he got close to it, he thought he had it figured. He could see a Chevy parked next to the fence, and he felt certain he could climb onto the roof, spring off of it, grab the top of the fence, and scramble over. That wouldn't stop the thing behind him, but it would perhaps give him a few moments to gain ground.

The squeaking and clanking behind him was growing louder.

There was a row of cars ahead, he had to leap onto the hood of the first, then spring from hood to hood, drop off, turn slightly right, and go for the Chevy by the fence.

He was knocked forward, hard, and his breath leaped out of him.

He was hit again, painfully in the chest.

It took a moment to process, but he was lying between two cars, and there, standing above him, was the folding man, snapping at him with the two dead bodies like they were wet towels. That's what had hit him, the bodies, used like whips.

Jim found strength he didn't know he had, made it to his feet as Mr. Gordon's body slammed the ground near him. Then, as William's body snapped by his ear, just missing him, he was once more at a run.

The Chevy loomed before him. He made its hood by scrambling up on hands and knees, and then he jumped to the roof. He felt something tug at him, but he jerked loose, didn't stop moving. He

sprang off the car top, grabbed at the fence, latching his arms over it. The fence cut into the undersides of his arms, but he couldn't let that stop him, so he kept pulling himself forward, and the next thing he knew, he was over the fence, dropping to the ground.

It seemed as if a bullet had gone up through his right foot, which he now realized was bare, and that the tug he had felt was the folding man grabbing at his foot, only to come away with his shoe. But of more immediate concern was his foot, the pain. There hadn't been any bullet. He had landed crooked coming over the fence, and his foot had broken. It felt like hell, but he moved on it anyway, and within a few steps he had a limp, a bad limp.

He could see the highway ahead, and he could hear the fence coming down behind him, and he knew it was over, all over, because he was out of gas and had blown a tire and his engine was about to blow too. His breath came in chops and blood was pounding in his skull like a thug wanting out.

He saw lights.

They were moving very quickly down the highway. A big truck, a Mac, was balling the jack in his direction. If he could get it to stop, maybe there would be help—maybe.

Jim stumbled to the middle of the highway, directly into the lights, waved his arms, glanced to his left—

—and there it was. The folding man. It was only six feet away.

The truck was only a little farther away, but moving faster, and then the folding man was reaching for him, and the truck was a sure hit, and Jim, pushing off his good foot, leaped sideways and there was a sound like a box of dishes falling downstairs.

Jim felt the wind from the truck, but he had moved just in time. The folding man had not. As Jim had leaped aside, his body turned, through no plan of his own, and he saw the folding man take the hit.

Wood and springs and hinges went everywhere.

The truck bumped right over the folding man and started sliding as the driver tried to put on brakes that weren't designed for fast stops. Tires smoked, brakes squealed, the truck fishtailed.

Jim fell to the side of the highway, got up and limped into the brush there, and tripped on something and went down. He rolled on his back. His butt was in a ditch and his back was against one side of it, and he could see above it on the other side, and through some little bushes that grew there. The highway had a few lights on either side of it, so it was lit up good, and Jim could see the folding man lying in the highway, or rather he could see parts of it everywhere. It looked like a dirty hardware store had come to pieces. William, Gordon, and Chomps lay in the middle of the highway.

The folding man's big torso, which had somehow survived the impact of the truck, vibrated and burst open, and Jim saw the birdlike thing rise up with a squawk. It snatched up the body of Mr. Gordon and William, one in either claw, used its beak to nab the dog, and ignoring the fact that its size was not enough to lift all that weight, it did just that, took hold of them and went up into the night sky, abruptly became one with the dark.

Jim turned his head. He could see down the highway, could see the driver of the truck getting out, walking briskly toward the scene of the accident. He walked faster as he got closer, and when he arrived, he bent over the pieces of the folding man. He picked up a spring, examined it, tossed it aside. He looked out where Jim lay in the ditch, but Jim figured, lying as he was, brush in front of him, he

couldn't be seen.

He was about to call out to the driver, when the truck driver yelled, "You nearly got me killed. You nearly got you killed. Maybe you are killed. I catch you, might as well be, you stupid shit. I'll beat the hell out of you."

Jim didn't move.

"Come on out so I can finish you off."

Great, Jim thought, first the folding man, and now a truck driver wants to kill me. To hell with him, to hell with everything, and he laid his head back against the ditch and closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The truck driver didn't come out and find him, and when he awoke the truck was gone and the sky was starting to lighten. His ankle hurt like hell. He bent over and looked at it. He couldn't tell much in the dark, but it looked as big as a sewer pipe. He thought when he got some strength back, he might be able to limp, or crawl out to the edge of the highway, flag down some help. Surely, someone would stop. But for the moment, he was too weak. He laid back again, and was about to close his eyes, when he heard a humming sound.

Looking out at the highway, he saw lights coming from the direction the trucker had come from. Fear crawled up his back like a spider. It was the black car.

The car pulled to the side of the road and stopped. The nuns got out. They sniffed and extended long tongues and licked at the fading night. With speed and agility that seemed impossible, they gathered up the parts of the folding man and put them in a sack they placed in the middle of the highway.

When the sack was full of parts, one nun stuck a long leg into the sack and stomped about, then jerked her leg out, pulled the sack together at the top and swung it over her head and slammed it on the road a few times, then she dropped the sack and moved back and one of the nuns kicked it. Another nun opened it and reached inside the sack and took out the folding man. Jim lost a breath. It appeared to be put back together. The nun didn't unfold the folding man. She opened the trunk of the car and flung it inside.

And then she turned and looked in his direction, held out one arm and waited. The bird thing came flapping out of the last of the dark and landed on her arm. The bodies of William and Gordon were still in its talons, the dog in its beak, the three of them hanging as if they were nothing heavier than rags. The nun took hold of the bird's legs and tossed it and what it held into the trunk as well. She closed the lid of the trunk. She looked directly where Jim lay. She looked up at the sky, turned to face the rising sun. She turned quickly back in Jim's direction and stuck out her long arm, the robe folding back from it. She pointed a sticklike finger right at him, leaned slightly forward. She held that pose until the others joined her and pointed in Jim's direction.

My God, Jim thought, they know I'm here. They see me. Or smell me. Or sense me. But they know I'm here.

The sky brightened and outlined them like that for a moment and they stopped pointing.

They got quickly in the car. The last of the darkness seemed to seep into the ground and give way to a rising pink; Halloween night had ended. The car gunned and went away fast. Jim watched it go a few feet, and then it wasn't there anymore. It faded like fog. All that was left now was the sunrise and the day turning bright.

