

STEVE RASNIC TEM

TRICKS & TREATS

One Night on Halloween Street

TRICKS

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE THE last time they'd all go trick or treating together, but it didn't seem right that the gang go out now that Tommy was dead.

Every year all the gang had gone trick or treating together: Allison and Robbie, Maryanne and John, Sandra and Willona and Felix and Randall. And Tommy. They'd been doing it since fourth grade. Now they were teenagers, and they figured this was the last time. The last chance to do it up right.

Not that they'd ever done anything particularly malicious on Halloween. A few soaped windows. A few mailboxes full of cow shit. Not much more than that.

But Tommy had said this particular Halloween needed to be special. "For chrissakes, it's the last time.!"

But then Tommy had died in that big pileup on the interstate. They'd all gone to the funeral. They'd seen the casket lowered into the ground, the earth dark as chocolate. It wasn't like in the movies. This movie, Tommy's movie, would last forever. Sandra kept saying that word, "forever," like it was the first time she'd ever heard it.

The dead liked playing tricks. She figured that out quick. Dying was a great trick. It was great because people just couldn't believe it. You'd play the trick right in front of their eyes and they still just couldn't believe it.

He'd only been dead a week when Sandra wondered if Tommy's life itself had been a trick. She couldn't remember his face anymore. Even when she looked at pictures of him something felt wrong. Tommy had this trick: he was never going to change, and because he didn't change she couldn't remember what he looked like.

Sandra and Willona had both had crushes on Tommy. And now he was going to be their boyfriend forever. He used to take them both to the horror shows, even the ones they were too young for. He knew places he could get them in. Sandra thought about those shows a lot -- she figured Willona did, too. Tommy loved the horror shows. Now he was the star of his own horror show that played in their heads every night. He'd always be with them, because they just couldn't stop thinking about him.

Sometimes it felt so great just to be alive, now that somebody you knew was dead. Sandra thought that must be the ugliest feeling in the world, but it was real. That was what Halloween was all about, wasn't it? Remembering the dead and celebrating hard because you weren't one of them.

Tommy had liked Halloween the best of all of them -- he'd been the one who'd organized all their parties, the one who'd come up with the tricks they would play. So this last night as they went door to door they thought of him when they called out "Trick or treat!" They thought of him while they munched on the candy on their way to the next house, like they were eating his memory a piece at a time.

Halloween Street was always the last place to go. It was traditional. You could play the best tricks on Halloween Street, too, since none of the neighbors ever came out to bother you. You could just do whatever you pleased.

Sandra led the way to the first house on the street: a tall thing missing most of its roof and leaning toward the rest of the block like it was drunk. She knocked on the door and knocked on the door until finally they gave up and started to go away. But as they turned away the door opened and oranges came rolling out for all of them. They put them into their sacks and walked on down the street.

At the next house, a wide place with fire damage on the outside walls, Willona did the knocking. An old man with no teeth gave each of them a peanut butter log and then they left and walked on down the street.

The middle two houses looked even emptier than the others, twins that seemed to be looking at each other all the time with small window eyes. Maryanne and John knocked at both houses and at each house one of the old twin brothers who lived there gave them a box of raisins.

By the time they all got to the end of the street the sacks were getting heavy, unbelievably heavy, and Sandra insisted that they sit down to rest. The gang sat in a circle and reached into their sacks for the goodies.

When Sandra looked into her sack her orange had turned into Tommy's head, bleeding from a gash that crossed the crown of his head.

When Willona reached into her sack for the peanut butter log she found a slippery finger instead, Tommy's ring wedged on it so tightly she couldn't get it off no matter how hard she tried.

What John and Maryanne found in their sacks when they went looking for the raisins was a mass of black insects, each one carrying a small pale bit of Tommy's broken flesh.

But the gang never said a word to each other about what they had found, nor did they show any alarm on their faces. They went on munching and smacking their lips, giggling to themselves because it was so good to be alive on this the final Halloween of their childhoods.

And thinking about how this was Tommy's last trick on them -- and what a grand

trick it was! -- and how this was their last trick on Tommy.

THE INVISIBLE BOY

J.P. was acting stupid again. Susan was sorry she'd brought him along, as usual, but she never had any choice anyway. J.P. always went where he wanted to go, and unfortunately the places he wanted to go always seemed to be the places she wanted to go.

She tried to walk as far away from him as possible so that maybe people wouldn't know that he was her brother. But people always knew anyway. Like she had a big sign: J.P.'S SISTER, painted on her forehead.

He looked so stupid in his regular streetclothes on Halloween night. That yellow shirt and those brown corduroy pants he always wore. Always. He never took them off, and she didn't think he ever washed them. It made her mad that Mom let him get away with stuff like that.

J.P. was so ignorant. I'll be the invisible boy, he said, and laughed that stupid horse laugh of his. I'll wear my same old clothes but I'll be the invisible boy so that no one can see me!

"J.P., you're so ignorant!" she'd said but he'd just laughed at her. That stupid laugh. Here she'd worked forever on her fairy princess costume m it had wings and everything -- and her brother thought he could be the invisible boy just by saying he was the invisible boy.

You can't see me! he'd said.

"J.P., that's dumb! Of course I can see you! You're wearing that stupid yellow shirt and those stupid brown pants and no way are you an invisible boy!"

He'd looked worried then. Don't tell anybody you can see me, then.., don't tell or you'll ruin everything!

It made her mad when he asked her that because he knew she could never tell him no. He always took advantage of her. It made her feel stupid, too.

"Okay okay...let's just go."

So they started across the street just as a car was coming across the bridge onto Halloween Street when J.P. turned to her and started making faces just like he always did. And Susan started screaming just like she always did.

And the car passed through J.P., the headlights trapped inside him for a second like he was burning smoke, just like it always did.

J.P., the Invisible Boy, turned around and looked at her and laughed that stupid horse laugh of his before jumping backwards onto the sidewalk and then walking backwards like that all the way up Halloween Street.

J.P. was so ignorant.

SACK LUNCH

He was just a little boy but he carried the biggest treat sack any of the kids had ever seen. It grew out of his hands like a big dark hole and it reached to the ground and even dragged behind him for several feet.

Some of the big boys thought it was silly -- he looked crazy dragging that big sack around, almost tripping over it every second and stepping on it all the time. But what if he got more candy because he was such a little boy carrying such a great big sack? Adults were funny that way --they might think it was cute.

So they stopped him, and they took the big sack away from him, and just for a moment they considered dropping it and running away because the sack was so light, and felt so strange in their hands -- like an oily cloud as it rose and drifted and hummed as the October wind wrapped it around them.

But they just had to look inside.

Later, when the little boy picked the big sack up out of the street it felt just a little heavier, and there were harsh whispers inside, briefly.

SWEET & SOUR

The boy loved the taste of sweet and sour. Sweet, then sour. Sour, then sweet. Ice cream, then pickles. Lemons, then peaches.

"That's the way of things," his daddy used to tell him. "You wouldn't know the good without the bad to compare it to." His daddy used to say that over and over to him, like some kind of preacher with his sermon. But his daddy just had no idea. Why was one thing good and the other thing bad? Sweet and sour. It was just another flavor, another kind of taste.

Grapefruit and strawberries. Kisses and slaps. Silk and razor blades. Living and dying.

The boy was too old to be out trick or treating. He knew that but he liked the candy too much. He had a sweet tooth. He had a sour tooth.

That night on Halloween Street he was having the best time. Hardly anyone seemed to be home in those houses but he didn't care. There were lots of little kids running up and down that street with their silly store-bought costumes and their grocery sacks full of treats.

He helped one little kid pick up all his spilled candy. He took another kid's mask off and threw it in the creek. He cut a little girl's arm with the penknife he carried and tried to comfort her when she cried. He pulled her arm up to

his
lips and teeth and tasted her frightened skin: he couldn't figure out if it
tasted sweet or if it tasted sour, and finally decided it was both.

He ate as much of his favorite candy as he could steal, until he was almost
sick
with it. Almost, but not quite. Sweet and sour. Sour and sweet.

Rhubarb and honey. Sugar and alum.

He liked being the biggest one out on Halloween Street, using just his
sweetest
smile and his most twisted snarl for a costume. But that didn't mean he wanted
to be an adult. Adults didn't know a thing, for all they acted like they knew
everything. They didn't know that clover stems were sweet, or that dandelion
stems were as sour as can be. They never tasted them like kids did.

Adults had the power, but they were just a few trick or treats away from
dying.
Sweet and sour. Sour and sweet. The boy didn't want to die, although sometimes
he didn't much like living. Limes and strawberries. Hugs and teeth.

He ran up to each house on Halloween Street, knocking on doors and ringing
bells. Sometimes the curtains moved, but no one came to the door. Sometimes
someone came to the door, but you couldn't see their face.

A little goblin came around the corner, an ugly mask on the beautiful little
body. The boy smiled and frowned, took out his knife and went to give the
goblin
a little kiss.

The goblin reached up its arms to hug the big boy, but the goblin's little
fingers were too sharp, and the big boy's skin too thin.

The boy smiled and frowned, and turned upside down.

He lay there until morning came up and his eyelids went down, smelling the
fruit
trees and tasting his own blood.

Was it Delicious? Or was it Granny Smith? The boy couldn't decide.

BUTCHER PAPER

Jean had spent weeks arranging the outing. The terminal kids got out all too
rarely, although most of them were still ambulatory. Just bureaucratic
hospital
regs that made no sense. Anxieties over lawsuits. But she'd gotten to the
right
people and worn them down. And they put her in charge.

The kids were given any materials they wanted so that they might construct
their
own costumes. The first few days they'd just stared at the materials --
picking
up glue and markers and glitter and putting them right back down again,
touching
the giant roll of butcher's paper again and again as if it were silk -- as if
these were alien artifacts that they were handling, objects which might have
been contaminated with some rare disease.

She wasn't prepared for what the kids finally came up with.

Each kid had wrapped his or her body in the stiff brown butcher's paper. Wide rolls of tape were used to fasten the pieces together securely. When they were all done they looked like a walking line of packages. Packages of meat.

And that was the way they went out on Halloween Street. And that was the way they went out.

CLOWNS

The only ones that really scared her were the clowns. Clown masks always smiled, but that made it even harder to guess at the faces underneath.

Sometimes you could tell from the eyes inside the holes: they'd be red or clark above the impossible ugly smile. But sometimes you couldn't see the eyes.

Sometimes all you could see were the spaces where the eyes were missing. Sometimes all you could see was the space where the mouth was missing.

She thought it must be terrible pretending to smile all the time. She thought it must be terrible to be a smile.

But the clowns filled the streets during Halloween every year, more and more of them every year, and the most hideous of all the clowns seemed to be on Halloween Street this year. She saw clowns with large scars across their faces and big ball noses chewed by something worse than a rat. She saw clowns with vampire teeth sticking out from their messy red lips and clowns with mouths and ears sewn shut by bright blue shoelaces. There were mad clowns and suicidal clowns, crazed and sick and dead clowns. And half of them didn't carry treat sacks. And half of those were much too large to be children in disguise.

Laugh, child! said a voice behind her. She turned and there was the fattest clown she had ever seen, with rolls of brightly painted fat spilling out of his baggy white pants.

Be happy! said another voice, and suddenly there was the thinnest clown she had ever seen, his shirt torn away to show the white flesh like tissue covering the narrow rib cage.

Smile... said a crawling clown with a head like a snake. Sing a merry tune..., said a leaping clown with red axes for hands.

And she felt so scared she did begin to laugh, laughing so hard until she peed her pants and then laughing some more. Laughing so hard that when a clown no more than six inches tall and with an orange rat's tail hanging out of the back of his pants handed her a tube of black grease paint she took it, and drew her own smile around her shrieking lips.

So that ever after that she could smile, no matter how she felt inside.

MASKS OF ME

Ronald went to the door and was surprised to see a little boy standing there wearing a mask that looked just like Ronald's own face.

"Where'd you get that mask of me?" Ronald asked, but the little boy just turned and ran away. Ronald went out on the front porch and yelled as loudly as he could, "WHERE'D YOU GET THAT MASK OF ME?" But the little boy just kept on running, and never looked back.

Ronald jumped off the porch and ran after the little boy. Behind him, he could hear his mother and father calling after him in panic, but Ronald kept running, just knowing that he had to catch that little boy and find out about the mask of his own face.

"I WON'T HURT YOU! I JUST WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THAT MASK OF ME!" he called, but the little boy just kept getting further and further away, like he had leopard legs or something. Leopard legs and Ronald's own face.

He chased that little boy with the mask of himself up Fredericks Lane and down Lincoln Avenue. He spun into Jangle Road so fast he almost fell down. The wind was blowing hard and the trees were moving like they were getting ready to dance and the whole thing made Ronald feel like he was flying, soaring after that little boy wearing his mask of Ronald.

"...where'd you get that mask of me..." Ronald tried to say but the wind caught his words and blew them away so hard he could hardly hear them himself.

"...where'd you...where'd you..." the wind spat back at him.

Then finally the little boy turned onto Halloween Street and Ronald felt pretty good about that because he knew Halloween Street was a dead end. But he wasn't ready for all the kids trick or treating there, hundreds of them of all sizes, and all of them wearing these masks with Ronald's own face.

"Where'd you get those masks of me?" Ronald cried out in confusion.

"Where'd you get that mask of me?" they all chorused back in panic and fatigue.

"...where'd you...where'd you..." the wind gently crooned.

And then there was nothing else to say. All the children with Ronald's face sat down on Halloween Street and said nothing. Ronald wondered if maybe they were all waiting for the real Ronald to stand up, for the real Ronald to make it perfectly clear exactly who was who.

So the real Ronald stood up and tried to take his face off, just to show all the others that it wasn't a mask. And all the other real Ronalds stood up and tried to take their faces off, to finally put an end to the crowded masquerade.

And all of Ronald's faces did come off. And there were the Willies and the Arms and the Bobbies and the Janes. And there was no one named Ronald there at all. And no one could remember ever knowing any kid with such a strange name.

PLAY PARTY

Ellen left the party early because she didn't belong.

Freddie left the party early because he didn't belong.

Willa left the party early because she didn't belong.

Johnny left the party early because he didn't belong.

They wandered their separate ways toward Halloween Street, empty and waiting sacks clutched desperately in their hands.

Behind them faded the community sounds, the get-together songs of corn-husking, apple-paring, rock and roll dancing, bobbing for apples and stealing a kiss.

Come, all ye young people that's wending your way, And sow your wild oats in your youthful day...

But there would always be a place where the loners could go.

So choose your partner and be marching along...

Halloween Street was always open to the Ellens, the Willas, the Freddie's and Johnnys.

For daylight is past, the night's coming on...

Where the doors to the empty houses would open only to their special knocks.

And close them up safe. And close them up tight.

JACK

Marsha cut her thumb real bad last year carving pumpkins, so this year her dad said she couldn't carve pumpkins at all. He said she was too careless. She didn't understand how he could remember things that far back -- sometimes she had trouble just remembering what happened last week--but he did. And she had made him mad the last couple of days and sometimes that made him remember more.

She had let the soup boil over on the stove and she had borrowed her mother's ring and lost it and she had let the baby crawl away when she was supposed to be watching him.

Sometimes it was hard for her to remember things especially when she was excited about something like Halloween. But Dad didn't seem to understand that at all. That's why she'd taken the knife out of the kitchen and hid it in her treat sack. There was a big pumpkin patch behind Halloween Street and she'd find herself one there to carve.

All up and down Halloween Street the jack o' lanterns were wonderful this year.

She didn't know any of the people who lived on this street, and she didn't know anyone else who did either, and that made her wonder all the more what kind of people would carve such great pumpkins.

On the pumpkins there were faces with great mustaches and faces with huge noses.

Enormous, deep-set eyes and mouths that stretched ear-to-ear. Some of the pumpkins had other vegetables attached -- carrots and onions and potatoes and turnips -- to make features that stood out on the pumpkin's head. There were pumpkin cats and pumpkin dogs, bats, walruses, spiders, and fish.

There was every kind of face on those pumpkins a person could imagine: faces Marsha had seen lots of times and faces Marsha had never seen once in her entire life.

But there wasn't a single pumpkin that matched anyone in her head she might have called a "Jack." As far as Marsha was concerned there wasn't a "Jack o' lantern" in the bunch. So she'd just have to make herself one.

She slipped down a well-worn pathway that ran between two dilapidated houses, crept along a waist-high fence whose paint had peeled and furred to the point where it gave her the creeps just to touch it, until finally she stepped out into the pumpkin patch: yards and yards of green foliage studded with the big orange pumpkins.

She couldn't see the ends of the patch -- it stretched out as far as she could see on this side of the river. But for all the pumpkins to choose from, finding the right one for "Jack" was easy.

It was a squat, warped-looking thing just beginning to rot. But she could already see Jack's face in the bulgy softness of its sides. She cleared off the dirt from its surface, pulled out the knife, and stuck it in as deep as she could make it go. The patch sighed and shook as she wiggled the knife back and forth. It felt icky, like she was carving up a baby or something.

Finally Jack's face started coming out of all that softness: a wide mouth with teeth as big as knife blades, a nose like a hog's nose, or maybe some other animal that liked to stick its face down in the mud, and two deep deep little eye holes, like the eyeballs had sunk way down so that you couldn't look at them, so that you could never know exactly what old Jack was feeling.

That was the other thing -- somehow Marsha just knew that Jack's face was old, as old a face as Marsha had ever seen. So old it was like Jack could have nothing in common with Marsha, or even care.

So that after she'd made Jack, Marsha decided she really didn't like him very much. The fact was, she hated him. So she dropped him on his big ugly face and ran out of there. She ran out of the patch and back down the path that led between the dark houses and out into the shadowy lane that was Halloween Street itself. Then she remembered she had forgotten the kitchen knife.

It wasn't an ordinary knife -- it was part of a set her parents got for their wedding and it had a different sort of handle and once her dad found it gone then he would know who had taken it.

Marsha went back up the pathway slowly, but when she reached the pumpkin patch she saw that a man was standing there, right in the middle of the Halloween Street pumpkin patch, just staring at her.

He wore a big black coat and a big black hat and his hands had been swallowed up
by big orange gloves.

And Marsha could see that he was standing right where she had dropped Jack. So her parents' kitchen knife had to be someplace near his feet.

"Excuse me, sir?" she said and the man took a step toward her. "Did you see..."
And the man took another step. "...a knife?" And the man stepped closer still.

When the man took several more fast steps Marsha turned and ran. She ran back down the path and she ran out in the street but when she turned her head the man
was right there.

So she ran to the end of the street and beat on a door there but she could hear
the man coming up the steps and so she ran to the edge of the porch and jumped off and ran to the next empty house with a pumpkin on the porch and then the next and then the next but nobody ever answered even though all the jack o' lanterns were lit and she could hear the man behind her with every terrified step.

Finally she was stuck in one corner of a dark yard and there was no place to turn and the man was coming right up to her he was so tall she couldn't see the
top of him and he had one orange hand held up high.

"Your knife, I've got your knife, little girl," the man said in a friendly voice
and she felt all better again.

Until he took off his hat with that big orange glove of his and his head was that pumpkin she carved, that big old ugly Jack with the knife blade teeth and her parents' kitchen knife was stuck in all the way to the handle right beside his nose but he didn't seem to mind.

OWLS

All night long the owls gathered in the trees up and down Halloween Street.

All night long they rustled their feathers and stared with their eyes of glass.

All night long they wept while the children played.

For owls know that some days the sacks are empty. For owls know a sack can't be
filled with wishes.

And owls know the children eventually go home, lock their doors, and never

come
out again.

The children hooted and screeched their way from house to house, the tears of the owls glistening on their shoes.

TREATS

Almost midnight, when the last of the children should have been home, but were not, their bags too full of treats to carry, and Halloween Street full of the sounds of rustling costumes and laughter, candles were seen to light up all over the lane and both sides of the creek.

The children, if they hadn't been so excited by the bizarre and exciting shapes of each other, by the heady scent of colored sugars in their bags, might have been a little frightened by this, but for the moment it seemed like a great deal of fun. The world was full of treats for them, and each new event offered them more. They all laughed out loud.

Some of them cheered.

But then the individual flames began to drift away from their individual candletops, rising swiftly to join one another in the sky above, where they paused as if sad and reluctant before floating up into the dark night.

As quickly as that. As quickly as a hungry child emptying his bag of its bright and shiny, but ultimately unsatisfying, treats.

Only one child cried, but all the others recognized what he felt. For a brief moment they thought of the ends of things, of how alone they were in this dark and treatless night.

One by one the children drifted away to home and their separate dreams, even the youngest among them trying to pretend he was younger still, a baby, some unknowing sprite who might last this night forever.