

# Happy Halloween

by Colin P. Davies

Clouds had gathered and darkened in the cleft between the distant mountains until, heavy and black, the storm burst out upon the yellow fields. The rain swept towards me, rattled through the trailer park, surged across the railway, and rushed headlong up the tidy avenues of our suburb. The view that could make me believe in people and the future was shrouded in a hopeless gray.

By the time the leaves above and around me began to whisper and hiss to the arrival of the raindrops, my cheeks were already wet.

From my perch in the tree, I could see water washing down the roof of my house, coursing along the gutter and spilling from the broken down-pipe. Dad should not have let things get this bad. He should have been on the landlord's back, or fixed it himself. But now he didn't care about the house.

I felt the bruises on my arms.

Now he didn't care about anything.

The rain grew heavier and colder. I knew I had to get down.

I took a firm grip and felt for the lower branches with my foot. Rain streamed into my eyes and I was struggling to find my next foothold when the world lit up and thunder exploded overhead. My fingers slipped. Something struck my back, my shoulder, my head...

I fell into blackness.

\* \* \*

The skeleton was one of those alloy jobs from Wal-Mart with the Interim Mark 4 brain and independent motor control in the fingers. I recognized it straight away — I'd been fascinated by animatronics since I was six and had an extensive knowledge of makes and models and systems. It had been a best seller some years back, until the recall. Official explanations cited a battery fault and gyroscope malfunction, but the rumor I heard was that a skeleton killed a kid and made a Halloween lantern out of his head. I didn't believe it, but it was a fun tale to tell on a spooky All Hallows evening.

I watched it approach along the dimly-lit sidewalk, with the low crescent moon at its back, white picket fences to its right and, to its left, a grass verge punctuated regularly with mature beech trees. The rubber-soled feet slapped heavily on the concrete. I glanced around for the kid with the remote control and spotted three groups of boys and girls trick or treating with bright white plastic skeletons. Whoever was controlling this one was out of sight.

I felt a moment's envy. Since my Mom had run off with that guy, Dad had lost his job and couldn't afford much in the way of toys. Not that we'd ever been able to afford something like this. Besides, I was too old now. I'd promised myself that by today — my fifteenth birthday — I would have cleared my room of toys and comics... but my room was as cluttered as ever. I wasn't good with promises.

The metal skeleton was coming towards me. I propped my bike against a tree. Someone was taking a risk; operation of recalled hardware was illegal, and claiming naivety cut little ice with the courts. I was

wary. Maybe I'd be safer up high, but Dad said I wasn't good with trees. He said I wasn't good with anything.

Anyway, I was letting that stupid story get to me. I stood boldly and waited.

When the skeleton drew alongside me, it stopped. Servos whirred softly as it turned its head — and two bulging white eyes — to look down at me. Neat move! And intended to spook me. I smiled, raised my wristphone and snapped a photo. The flash lit the skeleton and laughter came from far up the street.

Something dropped from the tree onto my shoulder. I flinched and struck out at the fluttering remote-controlled bat. A group of children were running down the middle of the road, and in the lead, who else but Angela Smith. The bat rose away from me, swooped at the skeleton's head, then circled above the road. Angela's Labrador came bounding over, barking up at the flying toy.

Angela, a tall, twelve-year old snob with short black hair and ugly nostrils, didn't like me, and that suited me fine. With her were the fat, balloon-faced Ameche brothers and Paula Thimble, a small thin girl who I could have liked if she hadn't hung around with Angela.

The dog knocked my bike over.

"Benny!" Angela called. "Get back here. Don't go near Dan's rusty old wreck." She rarely missed an opportunity to point out my bike was not shiny and expensive like her bike, like her toys, like her friends, like her parents' big house on the corner. Even her dog wore a diamond-studded collar — at least, she said they were diamonds. "Today's Halloween... Isn't it your birthday, Dan? What did you get?"

"Things..."

"You didn't get *anything*, did you!"

"Dad is getting me a present later."

Her dog jumped up at me and smeared mucky paw prints on my white T shirt.

"Hey! Get off!" I pushed the dog away.

Angela laughed. "Too bad you don't have a laundry service like we do." With her wrist-control, she piloted the bat towards her and snatched it out of the air.

One of the brothers giggled.

I noticed the skeleton was still staring at me. I didn't like that.

"I thought Daniel was controlling it," said Paula. "But he isn't."

Angela sneered in my face. "Don't be stupid. He couldn't afford a toy like that."

I bit on a cruel come-back that would have withered her.

"Whose skeleton is it?" Paula asked me. "Who's controlling it?"

"I dunno."

"It looks different, somehow, from the ones I've seen."

"It is," I told her with authority. "I know about these things."

Paula rubbed her small nose. “Go on, then. Tell me about it.”

“It’s an old model, recalled.” I glanced at her to gauge if she was really interested. “It was withdrawn for safety reasons. It shouldn’t be on the street. Anyway... why do you care?”

“Just interested... I think you’re very clever.”

“It could be dangerous. Maybe we should call the police.”

The skeleton was still staring at me. Its eyes hung in the dimness against a backdrop of black sky and sharp stars, like two luminous threatening alien worlds.

“It’s a bit creepy the way it does that,” said Paula.

“I’m not scared,” Angela announced.

The skeleton started towards us and Angela yelped and jumped away. But it didn’t follow her — it was heading directly for me.

The Labrador bounded in, barking at the skeleton and ducking and snarling in that way dogs weigh up the odds before deciding whether to attack or run. The skeleton rotated its eyes towards the animal.

The dog howled and threw itself at the skeleton. There was a *whoosh* as metal fingers slashed the air... the dog’s head tumbled away from its body, bounced on the sidewalk and rolled into the gutter. The jeweled collar landed at my feet.

Time froze as fragile perceptions struggled.

Then Angela began to scream and didn’t stop until the police arrived.

By then the skeleton had gone. As people had rushed out of their houses to see what all the fuss was about, it strode away up the avenue and turned onto the high street. None of us followed it.

The cop who questioned me was calm, matter-of-fact: *Time? Dog? Skeleton? Any distinguishing features?* Angela’s parents arrived. A white van pulled up and took Benny away. The gabble of rumor and radio, the flashing blue lights upon the faces of the houses, the three white skeletons standing shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalk... it was unreal. I felt dizzy, had to get away.

I collected my bike and headed home.

\* \* \*

“We use the word *coma*... which makes it sound like we completely understand the condition. But we don’t.” A strange male voice.

“When are you doing the scan?” My Dad’s voice.

“This afternoon.”

“Can he hear me?”

A sigh. “Perhaps. We can’t be sure.”

“Dan?” My Dad, right beside me. “I don’t know if you can hear me. You had quite a fall. But don’t worry. Everything will be all right.”

I nodded, but I couldn't feel my head, so I don't know if it moved.

"I'll be right here," he said.

\* \* \*

Our house had a back garden cut short by the steep drop down the railway embankment. The rent was cheap owing to the trains that rumbled past night and day. I'd learned to sleep through the noise.

I put my bike in the garage and went into the back garden. The dining room curtains were open and the light was illuminating the overgrown lawn and the laurel hedge that closed off the embankment. I'd been promising to mow the grass for days, and if I didn't get to it soon I'd be inviting another thrashing from Dad's belt. A shift in the light made me look at the window. Dad was in the dining room, talking to someone hidden by the wall. For an instant I let myself believe he'd organized a surprise, that he hadn't really forgotten my birthday...

*Idiot!* I bit my bottom lip till pain was the reason for the water in my eyes. Whatever he was up to, it wouldn't be for me.

The back door was locked.

I hurried to the front of the house, dug out the key, and unlocked the door. It wouldn't open. Someone had closed the bolt at the top.

I hammered on the door, but no-one came. I knocked again.

I raced around to the back of the house, rattled the door and peered in the window. The curtains were drawn and the light off. What was going on? I could feel panic rising in my stomach. I forced myself to calm down, walked around to the front again, and tried the door. This time it opened and I went in.

I found the dining room empty. I opened the door to the front lounge. Dad was sitting in his armchair watching MTV. I glanced around for a visitor.

"Didn't you hear me at the door?"

"Huh?" He didn't look at me.

"I was knocking."

"Right."

"Is someone else here? A visitor? I thought I saw you in the dining room."

"Get me a beer."

"Something big happened tonight."

"Right..." He tossed an empty beer bottle onto the settee.

"No, really. There was this crazy skeleton and it killed Angela's dog and then the Police came..."

"Tell me later." He ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. "Get me a cold beer."

I hesitated at the door. "You *were* in the dining room?"

"I haven't moved for the last hour."

\* \* \*

I collected a beer from the fridge and searched for the bottle-opener in the drawer. My thoughts were swimming in doubts. I tried the back door. It was locked. That much, at least, was not my imagination. I crept into the dining room. Using a chair, I reached up and carefully touched the light bulb. No doubt about it — a residue of warmth.

When I took the opened bottle to Dad, he stared at me. His eyes were odd, as though he was looking right through me.

They were the eyes of a stranger.

\* \* \*

I couldn't sleep that night and by about 4:00 a.m. I'd given up trying. I switched on the wall-screen and downloaded the pictures from my wristphone. I scrolled through snapshots from the last couple of days: Tom Bowie's new white kitten; the gold Pontiac Flybird that coasted through the neighborhood blaring *No Wheels, No Tolls*; Jenny Wong, the most beautiful, and unattainable, girl in school; the skeleton...

I peered at the shot. It wasn't centered, but it was good enough to see the skull and those white globes of eyes. And something else.

In the deep and dark nose hole, two red dots reflected the flash. I looked closer. The image was faint, but I could not mistake that familiar snout.

Gazing out from inside the metal skull was a rat.

I'd read that primitive people, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were scared of rats. The creatures lived in the sewers and carried disease. Maybe so, but the only thing carried by a rat these days is surveillance equipment.

I pulled out some old boxes from under the bed and found Blackie. Gently, I lifted the old toy rat and blew the dust from his fur, then ran a fingertip over his eyes.

I dug out some fuel cells and pushed one of the little spheres into Blackie's belly. The toy twitched and rolled onto his feet. How could anyone be frightened by this little creature? Maybe it was different when rats were flesh and blood and not this hybrid biotech. Back then, sighting a rat meant illness and even death. Today it only meant you were being watched by nosey neighbors, or the kid next door.

I established the link with my wristphone, then sent Blackie downstairs to the dining room to hide and observe.

\* \* \*

I left the house about 6:00 am, without breakfast or waking Dad, and headed over to World of Warriors. The streets were empty and the sound of my footsteps on the sidewalk came back at me from the dark faces of the houses.

A mailbox saw me approaching and illuminated its slot. I left it disappointed.

I was glad I'd put on jeans and a sweatshirt. The air was cool and wisps of mist drifted below the tree canopy. It wasn't long before I noticed I was being followed. Subtle sounds and glimpses of movement when I spun around. I walked faster. Soon the noise was unmistakable. I glanced behind and saw dark shapes scuttling after me. Rats — and lots of them. One or two rats might be cute, but I didn't relish

being swamped by a sea of thousands. I ran.

At the end of the dark street the sidewalk narrowed between another mailbox and a large bush which overhung the path. As I slowed to edge through the gap, the mailbox saw me and lit up. Its light revealed the skeleton lurking behind the bush. I dropped to my knees as a slashing metal hand skimmed my scalp. Leaves showered over me. I threw myself against the metal legs. Pain speared through my back, but the skeleton tumbled and crashed to the concrete.

I found myself lying, cheek pressed to the cold ground, looking at a tsunami of rats rolling towards my face.

It's surprising how fast you can move when the occasion calls for it. No time to think. You simply fly from the floor and start running...

Ten minutes later I was in World of Warriors, gasping for breath, and grasping for an explanation. The rats, the skeleton... and why was I the center of these strange events?

The disrupter was all I could afford. The criminal record check took thirty seconds and the personality test was over in two minutes. I was armed. The device was black and looked like a small flashlight. I felt safer already.

The dawn sun beamed through the gaps between the houses as I made my way home. I was on edge — every bush and fence likely to be hiding the skeletal assassin. The streets were quiet, with only occasional birdsong and a passing cyclist.

I hadn't gone far before I became aware of a rustling behind me — something moving through the dead leaves on the path. I suspected a rat.

I strolled around a fenced corner and waited. Soon a dark snout poked out beyond the base of the corner post. I fired. The disrupter made a fizzing sound and the rat slumped. I went back and picked it up. It was limp, but only temporarily disabled — I didn't know for how long. I tossed it into a garden and continued home.

My house came into view and I slowed my pace. My heart sounded loud enough to me to wake anyone still sleeping. I took a moment to catch my breath. Home was only three gardens away at the dead end of the street, where an overgrown footpath led down the embankment to the railway tracks.

The door to my house opened. I saw Dad emerge and walk briskly up the garden path towards the street. I threw myself into Mr. Johnson's front garden, behind a bushy conifer, and waited, listening for footsteps, imagining he was creeping up on me.

Nothing happened.

I peeked around the bush in time to see his back disappearing into the undergrowth as he went down the path to the railway.

As soon as he was out of sight, I followed.

\* \* \*

“The scan shows a degree of bruising to the right side of the brain.” It was the doctor's voice again. “I can't give a clear answer about consequences. We simply don't know. And there are bursts of intense activity, as though he's drifting in and out of a dream state.”

I heard my Dad muttering in a familiar mix of curses and confusion that usually ended in anger. “Can’t you use lasers, or nanotechnology? There must be some technique.”

“Maybe in the future, but not in 2007.”

“Dan’s always had such faith in the future.”

“I have to work with what we have now.”

“What can *I* do?”

“Talk to him. Hold his hand. Be there for him.”

The doctor had no idea what he was asking.

\* \* \*

I pushed through leaves wet with dew and made my way downhill, trying to make little noise and not get too close. The ground was muddy and uneven and I struggled not to slip down the embankment. Soon the path opened out onto the tracks. I held back behind the cover of a tall stand of fireweed.

The air down here was damp and smelled of rank vegetation. Beyond the two railway tracks, the opposite embankment climbed again in a thick growth of grass and brambles.

Standing between the rails... was my Dad.

He had the face of a madman, switching between placid and angry, grinning and crying. What was he doing?

The rumble of an approaching train threw me from my hiding place and I dashed across the tracks. “Dad! Get off the line!” He didn’t react. The oncoming train blared a warning.

“*Wake up!*” I grabbed his arm and tugged. He stumbled, but fought me and I couldn’t get him off the tracks. I panicked. Images of rats and skeletons flashed through my mind. He was like an automaton. He couldn’t help himself... he was being *controlled!*

I snatched the disrupter from my pocket and fired at his head. The weapon fizzed and he screamed and slapped his hands over his ears. I dragged him off the line. Moments later, the train clattered past, buffeting us with cold wind.

He stared at me, his face lined with confusion, and shouted above the noise, “Dan? How did I get here?”

“Dad... we’ve got to go... get away. We need help.”

A searing pain shot through my hand and I dropped the disrupter. I spun about and found myself facing metal ribs. The skeleton grabbed for me and managed to hook my sweatshirt collar. I spotted the rodent’s snout in the nasal cavity. Were the rats controlling the skeletons? Then who was controlling the rats?

“Dan! Help me!”

I looked around to see Dad being bundled away by two skeletons.

The skeleton holding me lifted its hand. I dropped my body. My sweatshirt tore free and I fell to the ground, rolled away and grabbed the disrupter. Again the weapon fizzed and the skeleton stumbled. I

kicked its knee and it fell. Its skull clanged against the rail.

I jumped to my feet and tore after the other skeletons as they dragged Dad into the embankment and disappeared.

I reached the cut-out in the slope and found a short tunnel with a closed steel door in the back wall. I screamed with frustration. I'd been so close! I beat my fists on the door. It didn't open. There was no handle. Nothing to pull at. I aimed a vicious kick at the door, but only managed to hurt my foot. I whirled away, desperate for a way in, trying to think of something, anything...

I gazed up the embankment and saw... *my house!*

The secret lair of these skeletons, the place where they had taken my Dad, was directly beneath my house.

"You haven't won!" I yelled at the door. *Not yet.*

I had one last card to play.

His name was Blackie.

\* \* \*

"Dan...." Dad's voice. "I'm sorry, Dan, about everything." He was struggling to find his breath. "I don't know if you fell out of the tree by accident, or if..." There was a sob in his voice. "You scared me to death."

I felt him rest his hand on my arm.

"I'll get treatment... stop drinking. Things will be different in the future, I promise."

I'd always believed in the future.

"But I can't do it without *you*... I need you. I need your help."

\* \* \*

I put Blackie down on my bed and stroked his soft fur. He'd shown me how the visitor, a skeleton, had disappeared from the dining room. I turned off the wallscreen and ran downstairs to the kitchen.

I stuffed a bag with a flashlight, matches, a small bottle of paraffin and the largest knife I could find. Taking a screwdriver, I dashed upstairs again to Dad's bedroom and forced open the drawer where he kept his handgun.

Back in the dining room, I stood in front of the cupboard that Blackie had revealed as the secret access to the lair below. How big that place was, I had no idea — but, with my bag and the disrupter, I was ready for anything.

I opened the door and pressed on the back of the cupboard. The wall swung open.

I froze, confused.

The staircase that should have descended into the darkness went sharply upwards towards a blinding light.



It made no difference. I knew this was the way I had to go. Nothing was going to stop me. I started up the stairs.

I had to save my Dad.

\* \* \*

The light grew brighter, until I had to squeeze my eyes shut. But I could hear, and behind that piercing glare was a voice.

“He moved... My God, he moved!”

My Dad’s voice.

Summoning all my courage and hope, I opened my eyes.

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