

“On a midnight dark and dreary...”

by Rasmussen T. Finsdale

Growing up, there weren't many things to get excited about, but as kids, we made a big deal out of Halloween and going trick or treating, especially if Halloween fell on a Friday and there was no school the next couple of days. All Hallows Evening had religious overtones and all that; we just knew it meant a whole bunch of free candy. In a small town, everybody gets into the act—carved pumpkins, decorated houses, scary music—all over the city. The parents didn't want their kids messed with and didn't want to cause trouble for any other youngster; nobody had some dark ulterior motive. If someone gave you a candied apple or popcorn ball, it was only just that—apple and popcorn; no weird object or surprise inside. The worst you'd get is bad teeth and a stomach ache from too much sugar (enough sweets, as Grandma used to say, to “*Rot your teeth on the spot*”).

Halloween didn't just happen; it was a planned event. Just as you pay attention to details for a wedding, a birthday or a New Year's Eve party, Halloween deserved no less. All the getting ready and preparation culminated in “Cabbage Night,” the evening before the actual Halloween; kind of a final full dress rehearsal for the real thing. Most all of the older kid's pranks—egging, toilet papering, soaping windows—was done that

night (the owner of the local store—there was only the one—as a precaution, wouldn't sell stick or canning paraffin to any kid during Halloween week. [*“No one's puttin' up jelly in October.”*]) Kids could see if their costumes were practical; if you couldn't see or move well or if a passing car had trouble noticing you, it was pretty smart to rethink it. For grown-ups, it was a last chance to see if everything was effective but harmless; a jack-o-lantern might be striking or look good on a stand in the middle of the front porch but if a kid has to go around it or every trick-or-treater is a potential fire hazard, it's probably best to move it. Big Halloween costumes and open flames aren't a good mix. Shrieks and fire might lend more realism to someone dressed as a devil but they don't do too much for anybody else. Rarely would you ever expect or want to see an angel running around, screaming and crying in fear.

If everything was a go, then you were ready for Halloween Night and official trick-or-treating. Most everybody in town got into the festivities of the evening. It kinda looked like a Norman Rockwell painting; even if it was just a jack-o-lantern and a scarecrow (old clothes stuffed full of Autumn leaves), everyone got involved. Most houses, though, were really decked-out with Halloween paraphernalia. (Christmas was truly intense.) Every year we'd get the biggest bag we could find, sure we could fill it (like a ten year old could lug around a garbage bag filled with penny candy) but after a couple hours, that plan was pretty well shot.

Grandparents greeted us at their front door and doled out candy after we gave the obligatory “trick or treat” greeting. One of the cassette tape companies made a small fortune marketing various collections of creepy

music (there was one long-hair piece titled “March to the Scaffold” that just seemed like it ought to be scary), groans, shrieks, wails and rattling chains—every weird, spine-tingling sound you might think of. They were novel and new only in the fact that they were sold for the first time that year but almost everybody in town had them.

We’d usually travel in packs of about ten. When you went trick-or-treating, unless you just wanted to show off, you’d never go as Batman or Superman; it was too recognizable. As a ghost or hobo you were pretty much nondescript and just one of twenty or so ghosts. That way, if a house had really neat treats, like full-size Reese Cups, Bit-o-Honeys or Clark Bars, you could go back for seconds by joining another group of the night’s trick-or-treaters.

We’d go from house to house collecting candy but on Center Street we had to go inside Mr. and Mrs. Henry’s house to get stuff. Theirs was a big three story painted-white wood house, a mish-mash of three or four different house plans with a “witch’s hat” on top; really it was just a turret (actually it was just an unfinished attic) with a really long wrap-around-on-two-sides fieldstone porch. Their house was really, really warm, almost too much. They were an older couple; he always wore a bright white shirt with a coat and tie; she always had on a dark dress with a pretty little pink cameo pinned onto it. (I swear she looked like the Queen of England without the little white purse.) We’d all gather around in the living room with tons of plants—especially two great big ferns, enormous windows and really high ceilings and then they would tell us how excellent our costumes were. Mrs. Henry gave us stuff she’d cooked, usually chocolate chip or sugar cookies

(“for now”), and Mr. Henry would give us store-bought candy and a nickel (“for later”). They sure were happy for old people. You’d have thought they’d never seen kids before. They carried on and on—Mr. Henry kinda running around and tending to every little thing; Mrs. Henry, with her hands usually folded in her lap, in a big old tan stuffed cozy-chair—the center of attention. But she was never moving around; just telling Mr. Henry what to do; where to go; when to do it. They fussed a lot but because of the way their voices sounded you could tell they actually liked each other a lot. (*“You don’t know what you’re doing.” “I know. But you want me to do it faster.”*)

But no one ever saw Mrs. Henry out and about town, though, or even in her own garden, only Mr. Henry by himself, smiling, singing, tipping his hat and giving a “Good morning” to folks. They didn’t have any kids of their own and over the years, they became sorta everybody’s “stand-by grandparents.” Much, much later, after she had passed away, I found out; Mrs. Henry couldn’t walk.