

# The Halloween House

They called it the Halloween House. When Easter came and everyone in the neighborhood competed to see who could hang the most plastic eggs from their trees, the maples on the lawn of 124 Meadowbrook were decorated only by spring buds. They put no shamrocks on the door for St. Patrick's Day, no gourds on the porch for Thanksgiving, no flag in the window for Canada Day. Even at Christmas, they didn't so much as string up lights. But on Halloween . . . that's when they outshone everyone on the block, with tombstones, ghosts, bats, skeletons, cobwebs, everything one could imagine. And it all happened in one night. Like Christmas, we'd go to bed on October 30th and the lawn at 124 Meadowbrook would be festooned only with fallen leaves. But, come morning, it would be transformed into a child's dream of Halloween come true.

Despite all this work, the inhabitants of the Halloween House never gave out candy. Occasionally, a new kid would ring the doorbell, but most of us grew up knowing not to bother. Who lived at 124 Meadowbrook? No one was quite sure. Somebody did, we all knew that. Lights went on and off, voices could be heard from the street, shadows passed over the window. Some people said they'd seen people collecting the mail or putting out the garbage, but no one could agree on what they looked like. Grownups, and most of the kids, seemed to accept this with an astounding lack of curiosity. Randall and I did not.

Randall Parks and I been best friends since first grade, when my mother baby-sat him, back in the days before my dad left and Mom started teaching again. For as long as I could remember, Randall and I had wondered about the Halloween House. We made up stories about the inhabitants--axe-murderers, fairies, vampires, you name it, we considered it. Then, at the advanced age of eight, we decided we were old enough to find out for ourselves and thus began the annual Devil's Night Stakeout. Each October 30th, we'd sneak out, armed with a thermos of hot chocolate and candy our parents had bought for handouts. We'd creep through backyards to the Halloween House, then slip into our special hiding nook in the cedar shrubs and watch. We knew that whoever lived there had to come out that night, to decorate the lawn. But we never saw them. No matter how hard we tried to stay awake, we always drifted off and, when we awoke, the work was done.

Not everyone in our neighborhood appreciated the glories of the Halloween House. Some found it in bad taste. Others complained it gave their children nightmares. I couldn't understand that. There was nothing really scary at the house, no severed heads or limbs, no bloody corpses, nothing worse than the decorations our teachers hung up at school. I think what really rattled the grownups was the tombstones.

Instead of the usual funny or scary Halloween inscriptions, graves markers at 124 Meadowbrook bore real names, from real people who'd lived and died in our neighborhood, with inscriptions like 'Beloved Father and Husband', 'God has a New Angel', 'She will Always be Missed'. The sayings were always nice, but they still spooked some people.

The year I was ten, one of those people, Mrs. O'Malley started a petition to tell the occupants of 124 Meadowbrook to cease-and-desist. When she came by our house, Randall and I were doing homework at the kitchen table. My mom answered the door, listened to Mrs. O'Malley's spiel, then politely refused to sign.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Mrs. O'Malley asked. "Having little Katie exposed to things like that?"

"Exposed to what?" my mother asked. "To death?"

"To--to that--" Mrs. O'Malley jabbed her finger in the direction of the Halloween House. "All those ghosts and skeletons and gravestones."

"Reminders of death," my mother said. "Unpleasant, yes, but a reality we all have to face. That's what Halloween is for. To remind us that we're mortal."

"Memento mori," Randall said, looking up from his multiplication tables. When both women turned to look at him, he continued, "I read about that in a book. It means something that reminds us of death, like ancient philosophers who kept skulls on their desks as candleholders."

"Skulls?" I said. "Real skulls? Gross. That's so cool."

"It wasn't meant to be cool, Kate," my mother said. "It was to make them think, if they died tomorrow, what would they wish they'd done differently, what could they still do differently."

Randall nodded. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Mrs. O'Malley stood there, following the conversation.

"But it isn't right," she said at last.

"No, it isn't," Mom said. "It isn't right and it isn't fair. But it's an undeniable fact of life. We all die."

"No, no, I mean the house. The decorations. It isn't right."

"Freedom of expression," Mom said. "They have the right to do it and we have the right not to take our kids to see it." She opened the door. "I don't think the Changs are home, but you might find someone over at the Reynolds."

With that, Mrs. O'Malley had no choice but to leave, which she did.

I don't know whatever became of Mrs. O'Malley's petition. At first, it was all anyone could talk about, who'd signed and who hadn't, what would happen when it was delivered-- then it just seemed to fizzle out. That's pretty much what happened to my friendship with Randall. In seventh grade, I began pulling back, realigning myself with girls instead. By eighth grade, we'd abandoned even our annual Devil's Night stakeouts. Then, one dreary cold February day, Noah Patel disappeared and, suddenly, the Halloween House was once again on everyone's lips.

Noah Patel was two years my junior. A quiet, timid boy, there wasn't much about Noah that stuck in the mind. Even now all I remember is that he'd been crazy about trains. Once his grandparents took him out to Vancouver on a train and, when he returned, he'd talked more than anyone ever heard him talk before or since..

One afternoon, Noah stayed after school to help Mrs. Bryant. It seems she lost track of time and didn't realize that when she sent Noah on his way, the sky was already darkening. One of our neighbors, Mr. Bogard, was driving home from work and passed Noah. He thought of stopping and offering the boy a ride, but Noah had only another half-block to go, just past the Halloween House and around the corner. Noah never made it that final half-block. That evening, his mother reported him missing and the search began.

Attention soon focused on the Halloween House. There was no reason to think the people at 124 Meadowbrook had played any part in Noah's disappearance, nothing to suggest they were more likely suspects than the people at 122 Meadowbrook or 126 Meadowbrook or the half-dozen other houses between Noah's home and the spot where Mr. Bogard had last seen him. Yet, as the days passed and the official search parties were disbanded, people began to whisper, then to talk, and, finally, to shout.

Ten days after Noah disappeared, I stood with my friends in the schoolyard, trying desperately to keep warm, which certainly would have been easier if we'd worn hats and mitts. At that age, though, it's better to be cool than comfortable, so we were huddled together, rubbing our hands and counting the seconds until the school bell rang. Then Molly Eggers came racing over, huffing and puffing, and we knew something momentous had happened--no thirteen-year-old girl would be seen running in the playground without a very good reason.

"They're going after Noah," she panted. "Tonight. The Halloween House. They're going in to get him."

"The police?" I asked.

Molly rolled her eyes. "No, my dad and Mr. Bogard. They're going to the Halloween House tonight and they're going to demand to search for Noah."

By now Molly's excitement had attracted a small crowd of our classmates. Across the playground, even Randall had looked up from his book to peer over at us. He never seemed to be without a book these days. He even read walking to and from school. This provided endless amusement for the other boys, who never tired of tripping him or snatching his book away. Randall never fought back. Never said a word. Just stood there and waited for them to tire of the game and toss his book aside, then he'd retrieve it and resume reading. Sometimes I wanted to shout at him: 'do something!', 'do anything!' Other times I wanted to grab the book myself, tell him to stop acting like a geek, stop giving them an excuse to torment him. Most times, I just looked away.

"Your dad's going to the Halloween House?" Carleton said. "Cool. Wish I could be there."

Molly grinned slyly, "I don't see why we can't. I know I'm going. Anyone who wants to come, can meet me there."

"I'm not sure," Tina said. "It could get, you know . . . bad."

A quiet voice spoke up behind me. "Which is why some of us should go."

I turned to see Randall at my shoulder.

He continued, "The situation is less likely to get out of hand if the adults know their children are watching."

Everyone stared as if he was speaking Chinese.

"Who asked you?" Molly said.

Carleton waved Randall away. "Go back to your book, freak."

I opened my mouth but, as usual, nothing came out and I ended up staring down at the ground, waiting for Randall to go away. I thought I saw glance toward me, but I feigned a shiver and hunched into myself. A moment later, the shadow at my side receded.

By the time the bell rang, the plan was set. We'd meet behind the cedar hedge at eight that night.

I'd decided that, if Randall showed up, I'd defend him. He had as much, or as little, a right to be there as the rest of us and I'd say so. Oh, I knew he wouldn't show up. Not when he so clearly wasn't wanted. But I told myself that, on the outside chance he did, I'd go to bat for him. Probably.

Randall didn't show. Hardly anyone did. Despite the brave schoolyard talk, the only ones who actually made that eight o'clock rendezvous were Molly, Carleton and myself. We took up position behind the hedge and waited. The bitter cold night stretched every passing second into hours.

"Are you sure they're coming?" I asked at 8:02.

"My dad was getting ready when I snuck out," Molly said.

Carleton peered through the cedars. "I think I see someone."

I pushed aside a fistful of bough, frozen needles snapping like toothpicks. Three figures moved soundlessly across the front lawn. All were dressed in black, their pale faces bobbing like searchlights in the dark. Halfway up the yard, they stopped and conferred, then skirted around to the driveway and up alongside the garage, heading for the rear.

"They're using the back door," I said. "Come on."

We scurried along the hedge and quickly realized we'd picked the wrong side of the house. The neighbors on this side had a chain-link fenced back yard. When Carleton fussed with the gate, the metal latch clanked like an alarm bell. I hurried over to shush him and we saw that it was locked. I motioned that we'd have to scale the fence.

"Climb over?" Molly said. "I can't. I'm wearing my suede boots."

"What's that got to do--" I stopped and inhaled.

From behind the Halloween House, I could hear knocking. Any moment now, the door would open, the men would enter and we'd lose our chance to see inside.

"Well, then we go through the hedge," I said.

Before the others could answer, I'd pushed myself through the cedars and came out in beside 124 Meadowbrook. Carleton followed. Molly didn't.

"Hello!" a voice shouted.

We both froze.

"We want to talk to you!"

Carleton darted back into the hedge, but I grabbed the back of his coat.

"They're talking to the people in the house," I hissed.

"I knew that."

We scampered to the side of the house and inched along it until I could lean out and see the men at the back door.

"What're they doing?" Carleton whispered.

I leaned out farther. The men were looking around the yard. Then one turned, putting his back to the door, reached behind him and tried the handle. When it didn't open, one of his companions stepped forward, pushed him aside, grabbed the handle and threw his shoulder into the door. The sound cracked through the quiet night like gunfire. Carleton tried to yank me away so he could see, but I stood my ground.

"They're breaking in," I said. "It looks like--no, wait. They're inside!"

I lunged from my hiding place and bolted toward the door. This was what I was here for. My one chance to see inside the Halloween House. If only Randall could be--

I cut the thought short. He'd chosen not to be here. That wasn't my fault. Now I'd know what lay inside the house and he wouldn't. That's what he got for not trying harder to fit in.

When I got near the door, I slowed and crept forward, listening for Molly's father and the others. Distant footsteps told me they were far from the door, so I took a deep breath and stepped into the breach.

The moment I rounded the doorway, I stopped short and slapped my hand over my mouth.

"What's wrong?" Carleton whispered.

"Allergies," I said, waved a hand through the cloud of dust that floated in the entranceway.

"What?"

"The dust!" I hissed.

"What dust?"

I shook my head and stepped into the back hallway. The men's footsteps tracked trails down the hall and into another room. A thick sheet of dust covered a small table to my left. On top of the table was a vase, filled with brown twigs that might once have been flowers. I reached out and touched one. It crumbled over my fingers.

"They're dead," I whispered.

"Dead?" Carleton whirled, eyes wide. "What's dead?"

I pointed to the vase.

"Yeah, flowers. So? You said dead. What's dead?"

"Your brain," I muttered under my breath. "Forget it. Let's get a look inside."

"Hey!" a voice boomed.

We stopped in our tracks. Mr. Bogard came wheeling around the corner.

"What the--what are you kids doing here?" he said.

"We, uh--uh--" Carleton stammered.

I looked him in the eye. "We followed you."

Molly's dad rounded the corner, followed by a third man I only vaguely recognized from the neighborhood.

"Oh, Jesus," Molly's dad muttered. "Is Molly with you?"

"No," I said, which was the truth, at least at the moment. "Did you find Noah?"

The three men glanced at one another. Then Mr. Bogard cleared his throat.

"We--we thought we heard a boy's voice. From the street. We knocked, but no one answered and the door was open, so we just--"

"Did you find him?"

Mr. Bogard shook his head, then glanced sideways, breaking eye contact. "It seems we were mistaken. About the noise. There's no one here."

I looked around at the dust filled hallway. No one here? That was an understatement.

"How long ago did they move out?" I asked.

"Move out? No, no, they're probably just away for the evening. We'll speak to them tomorrow, but I don't think they know anything about Noah."

"Gone for the evening? But all this dust, the dead flowers."

Mr. Bogard frowned, uncomprehending. Then he shook his head.

"Let's get you kids out of here. Let's all get out of here."

"But--"

"We'll walk you two home," Molly's dad said. "And be thankful we aren't going to tell your parents about this."

With that, they hustled us out of the house.

All that night and the next day, I could think of nothing but the Halloween House. Why hadn't anyone else seen the dust or the dead flowers? Carleton was already going around telling everyone that I'd acted 'kinda weird' last night. I needed to go back there, to confirm for myself whether or not I'd been imagining things. More than that, I needed a second opinion. An opinion from someone I trusted, someone who wouldn't go around telling the other kids that I was crazy. So, after dinner that night, I snuck out again. This time, I went to Randall's house.

I knew better than to ring the bell. Randall's mother didn't let him have friends over after dinner. Once I overheard my mom saying that's because Mrs. Parks didn't want kids to see her drinking and tell their parents. So I slipped around the outside of Randall's house, to his basement bedroom window. I peered through. As usual, he was in there. As usual, he was reading.

When I rapped on the window, he looked up, then came over and opened the window to let me in. Last time I'd been through, I'd made it easily. This time, I had to wriggle and squirm and, for one panicked second, was certain I was stuck. When I finally made it inside, I brushed the snow off my coat and looked up at him.

"I was in the Halloween House last night," I said.

"So I heard."

"I saw something weird. Tell me what you think about this . . ."

I told Randall the story. Then I asked whether he'd come to the house with me, take a look. I knew I had no right to ask, not after the way I'd been treating him, but I asked anyway, and he responded exactly as I expected. He listened to my story and said, "So, when do you want to go?"

"Tonight?" I asked.

He nodded. "Let me get my coat and boots. Grab the flashlight out of the drawer and I'll meet you around front."

We'd planned to do nothing more criminal than sneak around the back of the Halloween House and look through the windows. Only, it wasn't that easy. Sure there were windows low enough for us to peek through, and they weren't covered with blinds. Yet we couldn't see anything. No, that's not true. We could see shapes and shadows, distortions of light and dark that resembled furniture and household appliances, but it was as if we were looking through marbles instead of clear glass. We even tried the front windows, to no avail.

"What now?" I asked.



"We knock."

Okay, that was stupidly simple. I followed Randall to the back door and held the screen while he rapped on the inside door. It creaked open. I jumped back, letting the screen slam into his arm.

"Sorry," I whispered.

He waved away the apology and leaned his head into the house, then pulled back and pinched his nostrils, stifling a sneeze.

"Dust confirmed," he said.

He held the door steady and knocked a second time. When no one answered, he prodded the door open and leaned sideways into the gap.

"Looks empty," he whispered. "Shall we?"

I nodded and we stepped inside.

Randall did see the dust, and the dead flowers. We followed the men's still-visible footprints into what looked like a living room. Only no one had done any 'living' there in a long time. Dust and white sheets covered all the furniture. Naturally, Randall headed straight for the bookshelf. He scanned the offerings.

"How old are they?" I asked.

"Very." He took down a leather-bound book and cracked open the cover. "Huckleberry Finn. Second edition . . . no, first edition, second printing. Wow."

"Maybe they just collect old books."

I took the book from his hand and found myself staring at a Reader's Digest Condensed Book containing four novels by Mark Twain.

I laughed. "You need glasses. This says--"

I blinked. The cover now read simply: 'Huckleberry Finn'.

"What does it say?" Randall asked.

"N--nothing." I put the book back and gave my head a sharp shake. "Should we check out the other rooms?"

We ventured into the kitchen next. As I stepped in, a wave of cinnamon rose to greet me.

"Do you . . .?" I asked cautiously.

Randall grinned. "Yeah, I do. Smells like apple pie. Weird, huh?"

He shone the flashlight beam over the ancient appliances.

"How old are these things?" I asked.

"1920s, if I'm not mistaken. Which would make them about as old as the house."

He headed into the dining room. I followed. The chandelier tinkled as we entered. This time, Randall and I only glanced at each other, asking and answering the question without exchanging a word. We'd both heard it.

"Same old furniture," he said, looking around. "Antiques." He glanced at me. "Where to next? Upstairs?"

I nodded. I expected the stairs to creak as we ascended. They didn't.

At the top we were faced with four closed doors.

"Pick a door, any door," Randall said.

I pointed at the farthest one.

Randall grinned. "An excellent choice, madam."

He walked down, opened the door and ushered me in with a grand wave of his arm. I stepped inside. My breath caught.

"Oh my god," I said. "It's beautiful."

The bedroom was like something out of a movie. In the middle was a big bed with a lace canopy. Even through the dust, I could see a white quilt, as thick and fluffy as a pillow. At least a dozen real pillows covered the bed, pink and white, lace and satin. All the furniture was also pink and white. And, everywhere you looked, there were china dolls.

"A girl's room," Randall said.

"A real girly girl's room," I said with a grin. "Look at all those--"

Tinkling music cut me short. I spun around.

"Must be a music box," I said. "Do you see--"

Someone giggled. A girl's giggle.

"Kate?" Randall said. "Tell me that was--"

"It wasn't." I stepped closer to him. The laughter and the music stopped together. "Okay. Maybe it was the music box."

I turned to the shelves beside the bed. There stood a collection of soccer trophies, in a spot where only a moment ago I'd seen a row of dolls.

"Randall?" I whispered. "Those are trophies, right?"

He frowned. "Where?"

The dolls were back. I inhaled. Okay, now I was--

The girl's giggle filled the room. I whirled around, nearly tripping over my own feet. Randall grabbed my arm to steady me.

"It's okay--" I began, then saw that Randall was across the room, nowhere near me. The pressure on my arm eased. I fought the urge to scream. "It's not real. It's--"

In an eye-blink, the room changed. Gone was the canopy bed. Gone were the dolls and the pillows. Gone was the dust. Instead, I found myself looking at a bunk bed littered with Barbie dolls and stuffed toys. The Beatles and Elvis smiled down from posters on the walls.

"No," I said. "No."

I rubbed my eyes. When I looked again, Elvis and the Beatles had changed to N'Sync and Britany Spears. Video games were scattered over the floor. I whirled around, looking for Randall, but he was gone.

"Randall!" I shouted.

"Shhh," said a soft voice at my shoulder. A girl's voice. "Stop fighting it. See what you really see."

I clapped my fists to my eyes. A gentle hand pulled them away and I found myself sitting on the floor, in the dust covered old-fashioned bedroom. Randall knelt beside me, his hand on my arm.

"Kate? Are you okay?"

"What?"

"You tripped and fell. Are you--"

"I want to go. Now."

I struggled to my feet. Randall didn't argue, just kept a supporting hand under my arm and led me down the stairs. I didn't look left or right, but kept moving until we were in the yard. Then I couldn't resist. I took one last look over my shoulder, and watched the back door slowly close behind us.

I wish I could say things improved between Randall and I after that. But they didn't. I continued to ignore him at school, pretend as if that night never happened. Three weeks later, a police team found Noah's body buried in his back yard and arrested his stepfather for murder.

Seems Noah made it home that February night after all. When he came in late, his stepfather lit into him for not calling and, well, everybody had their own version of what happened next, but it seems Noah's stepfather had been whaling on him for years and, this time, he went too far.

I didn't visit the Halloween House that October. In high-school, you don't do kiddy stuff like that, or so we told ourselves. As for Randall, things got better for him in high school, perhaps because he met new kids and outgrew the stigma of being 'the guy whose hangs around with girls'. Being in high school meant I no longer had to work so hard at ignoring him. The less I saw of him, the more I missed him. As ninth grade turned to tenth, I looked back on my behavior with horror. Had I really been that cruel? Had I really been that stupid, giving up my best friend to hang out with girls I no longer even acknowledged in the halls?

When Halloween rolled around again, I said 'to hell with being cool'. I liked Halloween. I liked dressing up. So, though I was too old to go trick-or-treating, I put on a costume and handed out candy and, if all the other kids in the neighborhood thought I was a dork, so be it.

But when the candy was gone and the kids stopped coming, I sat in the front window and stared into the night, watching the house lights turn off one by one. It felt . . . too soon. Unfinished. Like the night should only be beginning. I knew then what I had to do. I put on my coat, went out and walked to the Halloween House.

It was there, decorated just as I remembered. I stopped in the middle of the lawn and looked up at the cloth ghosts, twirling in the breeze. The wind whistled and sang. Then I realized it wasn't the wind I was hearing. I cocked my head to listen. There it was, a faint whistle, coming from the house. I turned. Orange and black minibulbs ringed the front windows, casting off a weird, dull glow. Something moved in the window and I jumped, heart pounding. I looked again. Nothing.

Okay, my mind was playing--wait, there it was again. A streak of red flashed just above the window sill, then was gone. I glanced around. The street was empty. I walked to the window and looked down. There, set up on a wooden table, was a toy train, chugging around the track, whistle blowing each time it passed in front of the window.

I pressed my fingers to the glass and thought of Noah. I thought of the year he'd disappeared. I thought of the scars it left on his family, his friends, his neighbors. I watched the train whistle happily past and I thought of that afternoon Mrs. O'Malley came to our door with the petition. I thought of what my mother had said. What Randall had said. I traced the words in the grime on the glass. Memento mori.

"What would you change?" I whispered. "What would you do differently?"

"Eat, drink and be merry," said a voice behind me. "For tomorrow we die."

I turned to see Randall standing there.

"Did you see--" I pointed at the train.

He nodded.

I moved my face against the glass, but still couldn't see though. "What do you think we saw that night? What's in there?"

"Does it matter?"

I shook my head. As I turned toward him, my eyes moved to the thermos in his hand.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked, smiling.

"Of course. I saw you walk by and . . . ." He shrugged. "Figured, what the hell. If you're not coming here, all the more hot chocolate for me."

I pulled a handful of candy from my pocket. "You share yours, I'll share mine."

He grinned. "Deal."

We walked to our usual hiding hole in the hedges. Randall peered in and laughed.

"Don't think we'll fit anymore," he said.

Instead, we sat on the ground in front of the hedge. We sat and we drank hot chocolate and we munched candy and we laughed about all the Devil's Night Stakeouts gone by. Then, as the moon dropped behind the trees and our voices rang out too loud in the night air, we simply sat in silence and watched the night pass. Every now and then, a muffled whistle would ring out, and I'd look over at the train and think, not of what I wish I'd done differently, but what I would do differently, starting tonight.