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HAUNTED EVE

FOUR HALLOWEEN FRIGHTS

LISA MORTON

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Haunted Eve: Four Halloween Frights © 2021 Lisa Morton

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“HALLOWE’EN IN BLUE AND GRAY”

“The dead don’t come back, Nelly.”

It was after ten p.m. on October 31st, 1863 – Hallowe’en night. Johnny stood in the doorway to the parlor, eyeing his sister with a mix of anger and pathos. She sat by herself at a round table; before her was her childhood school slate, with chalk nearby. The room was lit by only a single candle on a sideboard, the curtains drawn so that no illumination entered from the street. Nell didn’t look at her brother.

“Give this up,” Johnny said.

“You can either join me or leave.” Nell’s voice was a soft monotone. She didn’t sound angry. She sounded determined. She sounded older than her eighteen years.

Johnny stepped closer but didn’t join her at the table. “Remember what happened a year ago?”

She still didn’t look up. “That was different. *Everything* was different.”

Johnny had to admit she was right about that.



A year ago, they’d held a party on this night. The house had still known joy then, even surrounded by war.

Johnny and Nell’s parents had gone out to their own party, leaving their seventeen-year-old daughter, twelve-year-old son, and their children’s friends with old Nurse Janet, who’d looked after the children since Nell’s birth. The younger ones had started the evening with molasses pulling and bobbing for apples, a game which resulted in a shrieking argument when Willie Simpson accused Matthew Guild of pushing his head into the water just as he almost had an apple between his teeth. It had taken poor Janet five minutes, warm towels, and the promise of telling especially frightening ghost stories to calm them down.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Nell and her three friends Lulu Parks, Molly Evers, and Hannah Alexander were making a “dumb cake”. They moved about in silence, trying not to giggle as they formed small cakes out of flour, sugar, and butter. Once the cakes were made, they marked their initials in them, baked them, and set them on the kitchen table. Each took a chair nearby, waiting for apparitions of their future husbands to enter and claim a cake. When the girls had waited what they thought a sufficient amount of time and no such specters had entered, they’d exploded in talking and laughter as they’d eaten the cakes themselves while gossiping about boys.

About nine, Janet gathered both groups around her before the hearth, and while the older girls roasted nuts on the fire – naming them for various suitors and waiting to see which would pop first – the old Scottish woman entertained them all with the story of Red Mike.

“Red Mike was a strange one from his birth, an’ no wonder, for he first saw the light atween dusk an’ dark on a Hallowmas Eve. People thereabouts said that any bairn born on that night ran

the risk o' being possessed by dark fairies or worse." Janet leaned forward for emphasis, and the listeners all clutched themselves, shivering in spite of the fire.

Red Mike, Janet went on, was a bad sort, causing all kinds of trouble to those around him. Finally, one Hallowe'en night he came to a party at the Flannigans' house; he was courting Mary Flannigan, but she wanted nothing to do with Mike.

"Now," Janet told her breathless listeners, "in those days they played a game on Hallowmas wi' stalks of cabbage. They'd pull seven stalks from the garden and hand 'em out to seven at the party while reciting this:

*"One, two, three, and up to seven;
If all are white, all go to heaven;
If one is black as Murtagh's evil,
He'll soon be screechin' wi' the devil.*

"Six got white stalks, but when it came time for Mike to reveal his, it was black an' foul wi' worms and slugs, and smelled like something dead. When all laughed, Mike said he carried special powers on account of being born on Hallowe'en, and he tried to curse the lot. But fortunately Father O'Connor was there, and when he stepped forward with a crucifix held before him Mike screamed like a banshee and ran off. The last anyone saw of him, he was still screamin' and shoutin' as he ran into a bog, and the bog just swallowed him up whole, so he was never seen again. To this day, that bog is still called Red Mike's Rest."

Finished with her story, Janet leaned back in her rocker, satisfied at the looks on the young faces gathered around her feet. None of them spoke a word until a knock at the front door made them all jump.

Parents had arrived to take the younger children home. Nell's friends soon departed, Janet retired to bed, and Nell and Johnny were alone. Johnny had promised Janet that he'd go to bed, too, but he crept downstairs for one last bit of molasses candy. He was surprised to find his sister slumped over the kitchen table, looking glum. Even his attempt to frighten her with a covert tap on the shoulder was met with little beyond a heavy sigh.

"Didn't you like the party?" Johnny asked.

"Oh, I liked the party well enough, but...*Ned*..."

He should've known. *Ned*. Of course. It was always *Ned*.

Nell was in love with their neighbor Ned Graham, and Johnny didn't doubt that Ned loved his sister in return – he'd seen their furtive glances and smiles, so obvious that even a twelve-year-old could tell. He'd once spied them on a moonlit night in the garden kissing; when he'd teased his sister about it, she'd turned a glorious red and threatened him should he ever reveal what he'd seen to their parents. Johnny had enjoyed her huffing as he'd refused to agree, but they both knew that he had no intention of saying anything. The Barlowes had known the Grahams for ten years, ever since they'd arrived in the Ohio town from their native England – a land Johnny no longer had any memory of – and both families had commented on what a fine pair Ned and Nell made. Johnny found girls in general repulsive and hoped to *never* marry, but he liked Ned and would be happy to call him brother-in-law some day.

When Ned had enlisted in the Army two months ago, both sets of parents had been irate. "But Ned," Johnny's mother had argued, "you've got a fine future ahead of you taking over the Graham business."

"I understand, Mrs. Barlowe," Ned had answered, with his usual courtesy, "but there's a war on. My country needs me. I have a duty to defend the Union, and besides – the Graham wood mill will still be here when I return."

Nell had been even more vociferous in her opposition. “How *could* you, Ned Graham?”

But if his sister didn’t understand why Ned had signed on, Johnny did.

He thought being a soldier fighting a war on behalf of your nation must be the most splendid thing in the world. He read newspaper accounts from the front lines, of great battles and grand charges, and he imagined himself there, rifle held resolutely before him as he ran at the enemy, firing, bayoneting them, surviving fierce fights to emerge victorious. He would stand before President Lincoln, perhaps still healing from a wound or two, to accept his medals. The great man would shake his hand and thank him, and Johnny would answer, “I was honored to serve, Mr. President.”

Of course they’d all told him he couldn’t enlist at twelve. But he heard of other young boys who worked with the regiments. “Orphans,” his mother had said. “Nothing but boot-shiners, Ned,” his father had added.

Left with no alternative, he would live through Ned’s adventures, at least until he was old enough to join. Ned had written to Nell twice a week, telling her all about his training and his commanding officers and the other soldiers and the marching, the endless marching that made Johnny wonder when Ned would get to experience anything else.

“What time is it?” Nell abruptly looked up from the table, eyes darting for the kitchen clock.

“A few minutes before twelve.”

“There’s still time, then,” Nell breathed out excitedly as she rushed from the kitchen, “still time to see Ned tonight!”

Curious, Johnny followed as Nell ran to her bedroom, grabbed a mirror and a candle, and went to the cellar door. She opened the door, stepped onto the top stair, then turned around and held the mirror before her.

“You’re off your chump,” Johnny muttered, watching her in perplexity.

“No,” Nell answered, “don’t you remember what Janet said about Hallowe’en? She told us it’s the one night of the year when the veil between worlds lifts. All sorts of amazing things can happen on Hallowe’en. You can see ghosts, or meet a *fetch*.”

“A *fetch*?”

“The ghost of someone still alive. I read in a magazine about this old Hallowe’en charm: at exactly midnight, you descend the cellar stairs backward while looking in a mirror, and you’ll see the *fetch* of your beloved.”

Johnny was about to tell Nell that just confirmed his opinion of her mental state when the grandfather clock in the hallway began to strike.

“That’s it,” Nell said. She took a deep breath, hefted her skirts, and stepped backward.

Johnny waited on the landing, expecting to hear his sister cry out and tumble any second. What he did not expect was a deafening shriek as the clock struck twelve. As he stood paralyzed in shock, his sister exploded into the kitchen, her breath hastened by fear.

“Nell, what –”

“Something touched me! I thought I saw a face in the mirror, and then I felt a hand on my shoulder.”

Janet appeared from the main hallway, still pulling a dressing robe around her. “What is it?”

“I –”

Nell was about to answer when a young, masculine voice called from the cellar, “Nelly?”

She gasped, turned to the doorway – and Ned Graham stepped into view, grinning, looking dapper in his dark blue uniform.

They all called his name and rushed toward him. He hugged all three then looked at Nell's shocked face. "I'm sorry, darling, that was a mean trick to play, but I couldn't resist when I peeked through the cellar window and saw you on those stairs."

"How did you get here?"

Ned wiped tears from her face, his own eyes brimming. "They gave us a few days' furlough. I caught the first train back and just arrived."

Janet took Johnny by the shoulder and guided him from the kitchen. "Come on, these two have a lot to catch up on."

Johnny protested, "But I want to hear about the war!"

"Tomorrow."



The next day, Johnny was disappointed to hear that Ned had seen no fighting. Ned thought that might change soon, though, and promised to write down all the details for Johnny.

He also asked for Nell's hand in marriage when he left the Army. The Barlowes agreed. Nell cried and promised to wait for him.

Two days later, Ned left on the train, leaning out the window for a last kiss from Nell before the train pulled out.

"He'll be fine, dear," Mrs. Barlowe said, her hand on her daughter's arm.

Nell didn't answer.



Ned continued to write twice a week. He was unable to return home for the holidays, but assured them that the men in his regiment had made "a very merry Christmas eve."

By the turn of 1863, Johnny was thrilled to read that Ned had been involved in a few skirmishes. In March, he finally fired his rifle for the first time, but confessed that he couldn't be sure he'd hit anything.

In late April and May, the Confederates gained ground with their victory at the Battle of Chancellorsville, and in June the Northern soldiers were unsuccessful in repelling the South as they crossed the Potomac and pushed into Maryland.

On June 25th, Ned told them he was being sent to some place in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg. It was the last letter they received from him.

Nell grew increasingly frantic as newspapers filled with accounts of the fierce fighting at Gettysburg. Casualties ran high for both the blue and the gray. There was no word from Ned.

Johnny imagined Ned, stalwart and bold in his uniform, leading his men to take out entire squadrons of the rebels. He wished he was by Ned's side, even if it was just to keep his guns loaded and sword oiled.

On July 6th, the train arrived with a new list of those lost in battle. The list was posted on the wall of the telegraph office. Nell was there with Ned's parents.

She crumpled when she saw his name.

Mr. and Mrs. Graham, nearly as distraught as Nell, pulled her with them as they returned to a house that would be forever empty of a son's voice. Mr. and Mrs. Barlowe carried Nell to her room.

Johnny didn't believe it.

“It’s a mistake,” he insisted. “They got the names wrong.”

But a few days later the Grahams received a letter that they shared with the Barlowes. It was from a young man who had served with Ned, but had escaped injury. It said Ned had been near a cannonball strike and had been blown nearly to bits.

Over the next four months, Johnny watched helplessly as his sister retreated from the world. On the rare occasions that she left her room, she moved listlessly, the light in her eyes dull. She read Ned’s letters over and over until the writing on the sheets was blurred by tears.

Johnny spent his time imagining terrible revenges enacted on rebel soldiers. He loaded and fired the cannon that destroyed an entire squadron. He charged into their midst, killing any still left alive. He ground his foot into one man’s wound, smiling grimly when the gray shrieked for mercy.

Summer became fall, and then October, and then Hallowe’en.

Johnny attended Willie Simpson’s Hallowe’en party, but mostly sat in a corner by himself, barely noticing the festivities. He knew the others whispered about him, but he didn’t care.

At nine, Janet collected him. “Don’t you like Hallowe’en, my boy?” she asked.

“Not so much,” he said.

Later, he found himself wandering down to the kitchen, believing the rest of the house to be in bed, when he saw Nell in the parlour, with slates and chalk. He knew that his sister had recently acquired – as had many others grieving over a loved one lost in the war – an interest in Spiritualism, which taught that spirits were real and helpful and could be contacted. Certainly there was no better night to contact the dead than Hallowe’en, that night when veils lifted.

“You can either join me or leave.”

Johnny stepped closer but didn’t join her at the table. “Remember what happened a year ago?”

She still didn’t look up. “That was different. *Everything* was different.”

Inwardly sighing, Johnny took a seat next to her. “So what do we do?”

Nell took both of his hands in hers. “We call out to him.” She looked up into the shadowed high corners of the room. “He’s *here*. I’m sure of it. I can feel him.”

Johnny shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He didn’t feel anything except a little scared by the look on his sister’s face.

Nell closed her eyes and tilted her head back. “Ned Graham, we are asking you to join us. We call out to you, Ned, to cross over and speak to us.”

The candle flame flickered.

Nell opened her eyes. “Darling, are you here? It’s me, Nelly. Johnny’s here, too. We’ve left a slate and chalk for you to write on.”

Johnny was surprised to find himself staring at the slate, expecting to see writing appear there any instant.

When several seconds went by, Nell called out, “Ned, I know you’re out there. Give us some sign, please. Anything.”

The glass in the nearest window thudded as if something had been slapped against it. Johnny jumped, but Nell held fast to his hands. “Yes! I knew it, darling – you *are* here!”

Johnny saw nothing but black night outside the window; even the moonlight was obscured by a thick blanket of clouds.

“Talk to us, Ned.”

There was a pounding on the outer wall of the house, to the left of the window, as if something was moving around the side of the house toward the front.

Nell began to cry. “Ned, I’ve missed you so much, and now you’re here –”

Johnny yanked his hands from Nell’s. “Somebody’s outside the house, Nell.”

“Yes, it’s Ned –”

Johnny didn’t believe ghosts could pound that solidly on walls and windows. He lit a lantern, stood indecisively for a few seconds...

There was a single huge knock on the front door.

Nell leapt from her chair, excitedly, but Johnny placed himself between her and the door. “Nell, don’t –”

The knocking came again, and again – now a slow, ominous, repeated sound.

Nell pushed past Johnny, ignoring him. All Johnny could do was run after her. “Nell –!”

“I’m coming, Ned!”

Nell reached the door, grasped the knob, twisted it, and threw the door back as Johnny joined her.

Ned Graham stood there...or at least *most* of him stood there.

He was four months dead by cannon blast. His left side was a wasteland of flesh, bone, and tattered blue uniform. The lower jaw hung partly loose, held to his head only by the right joint. The left eye socket was shattered, leaving nothing but a viscous mess. The arm on that side was gone. Ribs and organs protruded from the left side of the torso.

But the skin might have been the worst part, for it had turned the color of the Confederates.

“Ned,” Nell said as she reached out.

Instinct claimed Johnny, the instinct to defend a loved one. He leapt forward, pushed his sister back, and slammed the door just as Ned thrust his right hand forward. Johnny pushed hard, fighting the hand that kept the door from closing. He mustered all his strength, heard a sickly crunching sound, the hand was withdrawn and the door clicked shut. Johnny threw the lock, falling against the door in exhaustion as the dead man on the other side pounded against it.

Nell regained her footing and rushed forward, staring at Johnny with wide eyes. “What are you doing?”

Confused, Johnny couldn’t form an answer.

“That’s *Ned* out there,” she continued.

Still panting, Johnny could only stare at his sister for a moment, at the madness in her. “That thing is *dead*, Nell.”

“I don’t care. I brought him back, my Ned. Move away from the door.”

On the other side of the door, Ned continued to hammer, slow blows powerful enough to rattle the door in its frame.

When Johnny refused to move, Nell said, piteously, “But he *wants* me.”

Ned struck the door again, strongly enough to make Johnny stagger, and he feared the door would soon give way, trapping him between his sister and the dead man. He thought furiously then remembered what was in the closet just a few steps away.

He rushed forward, pulled open the closet door, and retrieved his father’s old shotgun. Father had taken him hunting with it just last month. Johnny had cried when they’d shot a rabbit, and Father had asked him what kind of soldier he’d make if he cried over animals. Later, Johnny went hungry rather than take a single bite of the rabbit stew Janet had made.

But he knew how to use the gun. He cracked it open, pulled down a cartridge from a shelf nearby, shoved it in, snapped the gun closed, and turned back to the front entry.

Nell was fumbling with the door lock. She finally managed it, threw it back, flung the door open, and reached for Ned.

Their fingers met just for a second – withered gray flesh and pink, living skin.

Then Johnny ran forward, again pushed his sister aside, and fired at Ned.

The buckshot collided with Ned's head, creating an explosion of pulp and bone. Ned collapsed.

Nell screamed.

Johnny, deafened from the sound of the blast in the house, stumbled forward, past his sister, to see that Ned hadn't simply collapsed – he'd vanished. Nothing remained but dust the color of an autumn storm.

Johnny jumped as a hand reached around him to take the shotgun, but he saw it was only Janet. The old Scotswoman set the gun aside and put an arm around Johnny. He fell into her, grateful, uncaring about his sister's madness or his own sobbing. When he was able to form words, he asked, "Did you see it, too? It was Ned, come back."

Janet shook her head. "No, child – it was a Hallowe'en *boggart*. A bogey, nothing more."

Nell stopped screaming and slid to the floor, her eyes hollow, defeated. Johnny knew that even if she regained her sanity, she would never forgive him.

With that realization came another: he saw the lies behind the façade of courage, sacrifice, honor; he saw the death and ruination that defined war.

He pulled away from Janet, took the shotgun from her, and returned it to the closet.

"Are you all right, boy?" his old nurse asked.

Johnny offered her a wan smile. "I'm fine, but...I'm not a boy."

With that he went to help his sister back to her room.

GATE NIGHT

The Kansas Plains, 1935

Jim figured it was somewhere close to midnight when he and Happy stood at the crossroads, deciding where to go next.

Happy raised the lantern he held, its small flame casting a glow on the road leading north. “I say that way – quarter mile down we can get both the McPhersons and the Blakes.”

“You got the lantern, you lead the way,” Jim answered before falling into step beside his friend.

Truth be told, this whole evening had been at Happy’s direction. Jim’s father had told him that, at fifteen, he was too old to still be playing pranks on Hallowe’en. “Ain’t nobody can afford Gate Night no more anyway,” his mother had added. “World’s changed too much.” She turned back to her chores in the kitchen, going silent again. Jim remembered a time when his mother had been beautiful, before her face had become a permanent map of worry lines.

Jim’s folks were already packing up to leave for California in a week, he and his two sisters and whatever their truck could carry. The farm had been in the family for generations, but it was a useless thing now, a dust-shrouded wasteland, a memorial to a broader failure. This would be the last holiday he’d have with Happy, the best friend he’d known since they’d met in Sunday school when both were in diapers and Happy was still Randolph, before he acquired the nickname that his burgeoning grin would soon inspire. Jim understood that they couldn’t stay here anymore – the dust storms had destroyed their livelihood, heading west was their last hope – but Happy had always been a part of his life.

Everything was changing.

“There’s the McPherson place,” Happy said, as he threw a black cloth over the lantern to hide its light.

Ahead was a farm that looked like most of those around: withered fields, rusting equipment, buildings badly in need of repair that no one could afford. Happy ran ahead of Jim, reaching the front yard gate which would soon be disassembled and moved to someplace like the horse corral or the top of the barn.

“C’mon,” Happy whispered, flashing his trademark toothy smile.

Jim trudged forward. He’d lost his enthusiasm for pranks this year; maybe his daddy was right and he really was too old for it, or maybe it didn’t seem right when folks were already struggling so much to add one more burden, however small. He should’ve been home, sitting with Lettie and Alice listening to Granddaddy tell stories he’d heard when he was little, about fairy caverns that magically appeared only on Hallowe’en night in Ireland to lure unwary mortals to their death. Every year he told the same story – about the foolish young man who entered a barrow to frolic with a fairy, and when they found him a year later he was just a bag of bones, danced to death – but Jim liked hearing his granddaddy’s stories, no matter how many times he told the same ones. The old man still had a trace of a lilting accent that he exaggerated when he told the ancient tales, which Jim had thoroughly believed when he was little.

“Jim, get over here!” Happy already had his pocket knife out and was busily prying off the gate’s hinges. Jim reluctantly joined him.

A few minutes later they had the gate free; together they moved it to the empty cow pasture, where they stood it up against a tree stump. “That looks mighty fine, and hoo boy, won’t old man McPherson be red in the face when he sees it!” Happy said, clapping his hands.

Jim didn’t share Happy’s glee; the night had turned cold, leaving him to shiver in his threadbare jacket. In the distance a cat howled in fury, its cries echoing across the Kansas plain, sounding like a baby in distant distress.

Finished with their latest victim, the boys ran down the road to the Blake place. Happy spotted an old horse trough that he wanted to relocate to the front lawn. “Help me move this,” he said to Jim, positioning himself at one end.

Jim dutifully moved to the other side, but he stopped before lifting it, squinting at the Blakes’ old farmhouse. “Happy, I don’t think there’s no point.”

“Why?”

“Cause I think the Blakes are gone.”

Happy turned to look and saw, as Jim had, no lights in the house, no cars or trucks nearby. The windows had been covered in boards, the grass was brown and crispy, a swing hung from a dead tree by one creaking chain.

Straightening up, disappointment evident in his posture, Happy said, “Well, hell’s bells...I didn’t hear nothin’ ‘bout the Blakes pullin’ up stakes.”

Shrugging, Jim said, “Wouldn’t surprise me, though, since Mrs. Blake caught the pneumonia and died last year. Nothin’ to hold ‘em here anymore.”

Happy kicked the trough in frustration, his foot tearing a hole in the ancient metal.

“Let’s just go home,” Jim said. “We done all we can for this Gate Night.”

Happy was about to answer when he looked up as something caught his attention. “What’s that?”

Jim followed his gaze to see a light a short distance down the road. “I don’t know, but don’t nobody live there, so let’s just –”

Cutting him off, Happy hefted the lantern and started walking. “Let’s go see.”

Inwardly sighing, Jim followed.

After a hundred yards they saw a large house clearly before them, fiddle music and warm light issuing from its open front door. Both boys stopped, staring. “That ain’t possible,” Jim said. “There’s never been a house here.”

“Well, there’s one here now,” Happy answered. “I reckon it just got built.”

“Who’d build out here, and *now*?”

Grinning again, Happy said, “A sucker, that’s who!”

He ran forward.

Jim stayed his ground, every cell in his body thrumming with a sense of something *wrong*. He’d been down this road just a month ago, running an errand for his daddy, and he was sure he hadn’t seen this house, not even so much as a foundation or a few piles of lumber. The light issuing from it was inviting, the music cheerful...

None of it should be there.

Happy waved to him from where he crouched at the gate before the front walk. A low picket fence spread along the edges of a lush green lawn; roses lining the path up to the porch steps scented the chilled October air with their rich aroma. The jig played by the fiddle lit Jim’s blood, causing him to involuntarily thump a foot with the rhythm.

“Look on the steps,” Happy whispered.

Jim did, and saw a plate of doughnuts, so fresh they were steaming. Their scent, heady and sweet, reached them, causing Happy’s stomach to gurgle. Jim knew his friend hadn’t had much to eat tonight, with his daddy too sick and his momma too drunk to worry about food for their young ones.

“They’re right there for the taking,” Happy said, starting to rise.

Clutching at his friend, Jim whispered, “*Wait.*”

“For what? Those doughnuts are just gonna get cold...”

“Something’s wrong.” Jim examined the house carefully, looking for clues. “Why can’t we see nobody inside? Who’s playin’ that fiddle?”

Happy looked at the house then shrugged. “So they’re just out of view. So what?”

How could Jim tell him that this was like something out of one of his granddaddy’s stories, that maybe the dust storms had blown in more than just dirt? “This ain’t right,” was all he could muster.

His friend punched his arm. “What, you think this is some house full’a haunts or somethin’? Well, maybe we should check those doughnuts, just to be sure they’re real.”

Happy was gone then, on his feet and stealthily opening the gate. Jim let him go, knowing he’d lost the argument...but he didn’t follow. Instead, he stayed kneeling behind the gate, watching.

Happy crept up the walk, between the tall, thick rose bushes, to the front steps. He looked back once, waved Jim up, and then, without waiting for his friend, began to crawl up the steps, low, like a slinking predator. Just below the top he reached out an arm, his eyes riveted to the open front door. His extended fingers found a doughnut; he turned to face Jim, moving the food to his mouth.

Jim wanted to scream, to run forward and wrench the thing away, tell him they had to go – no, they had to *run* – but instead he froze, paralyzed.

He watched in dread as Happy bit, chewed, swallowed...and his expression blossomed into bliss. He shoved the rest of the treat into his mouth and reached immediately for another. He beckoned again to Jim, who felt the awful temptation to join his friend, to share that joyful experience before they parted forever –

“Well, hello, boys!”

A woman stood in the doorway, looking down at them. Jim couldn’t understand how he hadn’t seen her step forward; one second he was looking at Happy and the doughnuts, and the next she was just *there*.

What’s more, she was beautiful. She had fair skin, hair almost as red as a newly-painted barn, mischievous eyes, full, wide lips, tilted up in a smile. She wore a dress of a green material that Jim couldn’t name, her feet were bare, her neck and wrists glimmered with gold jewelry.

Happy leapt to his feet, so startled he stumbled and landed sprawling at the base of the steps. She laughed lightly, but not in derision. “You don’t have to be scared of *me*,” she said.

She terrified Jim more than anyone or anything ever had.

He stayed frozen, squatting behind the gate, watching as Happy got to his feet while she looked down. “I put those doughnuts out for *you*.”

Happy was plainly in awe of her, his eyes riveted. “That was mighty kind of you, ma’am.”

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Folks call me Happy.”

Her smile widened, she held out a hand. “Happy, I’ve got some warm cider inside.”

Mesmerized, Happy took a step forward.

Jim leapt up. “Happy -!”

The woman’s gaze shifted to Jim; he felt like the live frog he’d once had to dissect at school, before Daddy had taken him out to help around the farm. “And you – what’s your name?”

Jim didn’t answer, but Happy did. “That there’s my friend Jim.”

Something clenched angrily inside Jim; he instinctively knew that Happy had just given away something significant, something that had kept them safe. He stayed silent.

“Well, Jim, I’ve got plenty of cider to go around. And popcorn, and caramel apples.”

Jim didn’t answer, or move.

Behind her, the fiddle ended its last song and started a new one, even sprightlier. She held a graceful, jeweled hand out to Happy. “How would you like to dance?”

Jim couldn’t see his friend’s face, but from the way Happy stammered, Jim knew he’d just blushed. “Oh, ma’am, I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout dancin’.”

“C’mon, it’s easy – I’ll teach you.”

Happy took her hand.

A cry escaped Jim.

The woman squinted at him, and he felt primeval malice there, strengthened by eons of stoking and building. He knew this was nothing he could fight, he could only let it happen, let his friend be pulled forward into the house, into the dance...

The woman took both of Happy’s hands in hers, looked down at their feet, began to move. Happy followed her motions, and within seconds they were both laughing and whirling, the music ever quickening, their steps following faster and faster.

The biggest part of Jim wanted to join them, throw caution to the dust, run up the stairs, fling himself into the mad reel...but the *strongest* part held him in place, fearful yet resolute, determined to hang onto his center.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood there, watching, but at some point the woman separated from Happy, who danced the jig by himself. She applauded as he executed complicated steps, his hands waving in the air. “I didn’t know I could dance!” he shouted.

She laughed and clapped, then she turned away to look at Jim. She walked back into the doorway, leaving Happy to dance alone behind her.

“Why don’t you come on in, Jim?”

Her voice was like hearing rain in a drought; lilting, but with rich, deep undertones. Her eyes were half-lidded as she gazed at him, those lips closed but ready to part.

Jim knew he should run, with or without Happy, but his feet refused to move. He stood there, silent, feeling trapped and stupid.

“Have you ever danced? Wouldn’t you like to dance with me? We could slow the tempo down, do a slow dance, close together...” She swayed slightly, slowly, ignoring the wild pace of the jig behind her. She held a slender hand out to him. “One dance. What could it hurt?”

Jim *did* want to dance with her, to take her hand and let her lead him...anywhere. He could feel the magnetic pull of her, but he fought against it with all of his will. She saw his struggle, lowered her voice to a lower, more urgent register. “What’ve you got here?” She gestured at the dry, dead prairie around them. “Or in California? Do you want a life working fields, sweating all day to feed other people while you’re barely making enough to feed yourself? Is that what you really want?”

“No.” The word escaped him before he could stop it. As soon as it left his mouth she smiled, and he knew he’d given her the first hold on his soul.

“Come in, Jim. If you like it – and we both know you will – you never have to leave. You can stay here, with me, forever. Imagine an eternity of dancing, eating...of love.”

Something stirred in him; it wasn't just physical, although that was part of it. No, this went right to the core of him; he had to admit that she was right. He *didn't* want to be a farmer. He'd never admitted as much to his parents, or even to himself, but the thought filled him with a dull horror. He wasn't sure what he *did* want to do, but he thought if he had time to himself, time when he wasn't helping Daddy around the farm, when he was fighting storms and spitting out the dust he'd breathed into his lungs, he might find out what his real calling was. He thought he might be an artist of some sort, but he still had so many discoveries to make...

Or he could accept her invitation, join her forever on a journey of magic and pleasure.

Behind her, Happy cried out in pain, but he didn't stop his mad jiggling.

Jim realized he *couldn't*, and he also realized that she was a trickster. If he set one foot in that house, accepted *one* bite of food, he saw not a future of bliss, but one of desperation and agony. Happy was already lost for good; he would be next, if he was foolish enough to believe her.

He stood, torn, until Happy shouted, “Don't listen to her.”

“I'm not leaving without you -”

His friend, his childhood best friend who had saved him from bees and bullies at school, who had shown him how to swing out on the old rope over the creek and drop in, who'd laughed so hard the time the cow's milk had shot out of the udder all over him...Happy cut him off to say, “I can't leave, but you can. Run, Jim, get out of here!”

The beautiful woman's eyes glowed fiery red like poked embers. Her lips twisted into an angry grimace, her fingers hooked into claws, and Jim knew she might just kill him if she couldn't have him.

“I'm sorry, Happy,” he said.

He ran, then. He stumbled through the Hallowe'en night, half-blinded by dust and tears, finding his way home by instinct alone.



His daddy found him on the front steps of the house early the next morning, unconscious, covered in grime and sweat. He picked him up, brought him inside, put him in his bed. Jim had a fever that lasted for two days; when it broke, the questions started.

Happy had disappeared. Jim told them they'd been out on Hallowe'en night together, that they'd gotten separated out near the Blake place, that he didn't remember what happened or how he'd made it home.

He was lying, and the police knew it, just as his family did, but nobody questioned him too hard. Not even Granddaddy, who peered at him with a mix of suspicion and pride.

The police scoured the area around the Blake place. Just beyond it, they found a plot of singed earth they couldn't account for, but no trace of Happy.

Jim, though, saw his friend in his dreams every night, saw him sobbing in pain, his flesh wasting away as his feet kept up their lunatic rhythm; meanwhile, *she* stood nearby, satisfied by Happy's doom...but Jim sensed that her satisfaction wasn't complete.

Because she hadn't gotten both of them.

When he was recovered, they loaded up the family truck and started the drive west. Daddy said they'd make it to California in a week, if the old Chevy held out. One night, in their little

camp by the side of a road, Daddy surprised Jim by telling him that once Jim turned 18, he was free to make his way in the world, doing whatever would give him a good life, whether it was farming or something else. At the end of the talk, they hugged, and Daddy mussed Jim's hair, and Jim saw a future before him that he hadn't dared think about before.

That night, Jim dreamed again of Happy, and he saw what would happen: next Hallowe'en, they'd find Happy in that scorched plot of land just down the road from the old Blake house, except he'd be skin and bones, shriveled down to almost nothing. No one would be able to explain it, and a few might wonder if Jim hadn't known more than he'd let on...but he'd be in another state, and there really wouldn't be any point in bothering him, because he couldn't very well bring the dead back to life.

Jim woke up with the feeling that he might meet *her* again someday, the woman who'd stolen his friend, but next time, he wouldn't be a fifteen-year-old kid.

He'd be ready.

ALL TRICKS

Brad stepped out of his house, walked to the sidewalk, clutched his empty pillowcase, and stopped to breathe in the Halloween smells: dead leaves, opened pumpkins, and something else...

Fear. That was his favorite scent.

It was just after eight, and the street still resounded with the shrieks and giggles of kids dressed as monsters, princesses, and superheroes. Brad smiled at a family that passed him; the two kids, dressed as a ninja and a mermaid, didn't even notice him; their parents frowned.

He didn't let that bother him, because tonight was *his* night. He'd always loved Halloween, that one night of the year when he was free to be someone else. When he was little, his mom had gone out with him, accompanying her pint-sized soldier or hobo or vampire as they traipsed from house to house. After his mom left (for good, without even a note or a final kiss), he'd gone out alone. It was still the one night when other kids didn't know who he was behind his mask, when they didn't laugh at his frayed, ill-fitting clothes and call him "Brad the Sad", when teachers didn't invite him to stay after class so they could hear his story about how the latest goose egg was because he was clumsy, he'd tripped, he'd accidentally walked into a door.

On Halloween he could be Brad the *Bad*.

He knew that at 15 he was too old to trick or treat; he also knew that his costume wasn't much – just a hoodie with the hood pulled up, which was how he usually wore it anyway. That made him stop and think: since it was Halloween, maybe he should push it back and let everyone see his bruised face. They'd probably think the black eye and purple nose were really good make-up.

Reaching up, Brad pulled the hoodie back and paused to consider his mission. He was no ordinary trick or treater, no kid out for candy and the praise of adults.

He knew that this night, when the gates between worlds opened, had brought demons to earth. Some of them were here, on his street.

Closing his eyes, Brad let his thoughts drift away as his senses focused, seeking out the nearest unearthly visitor. After a few seconds his eyes popped open; he was staring at the house of Mr. Bohringer, on the other side of the street three houses down.

That was where he'd start, then.

Brad's adrenaline began to ramp up as he crossed the street. Mr. Bohringer – Dean, to his friends – sometimes came over to drink beer with Dad. Since Mrs. Bohringer had died last year (lung cancer, thanks to her three-pack-a-day habit), Dean had hung out a lot more with Brad's father. Just last week they'd sat together in lawn chairs in the backyard, killing two six-packs. When Dad had slugged Brad in front of the neighbor for knocking over a half-full bottle, Mr. Bohringer had just looked away, said nothing.

Ever since Dad had knocked his son out with a piece of two-by-four last year, Brad's life had changed. He'd become aware of things he hadn't known about before; he could glimpse the things that moved in the shadows, he could hear them whisper to each other. He'd listened as they'd made plans for Halloween; now they were *here*, and he was the only one who knew.

Mr. Bohringer's lights were off; there was no cheerful, grimacing pumpkin glowing on his porch steps. The families walked by his house to the next, but Brad strode right up the front walk, pulled the tattered screen door back, and knocked loudly on the door. When there was no response, he pounded again.

The door was flung open and Mr. Bohringer stood framed there, his face twisted in rage. "What the fuck's wrong with –" He broke off as he saw Brad standing there. "Oh, it's you. What do you want, kid? Everything okay with your dad?"

Brad nodded, but when he tried to answer he found his throat suddenly too dry to form sounds, because he saw the demon hiding inside Mr. Bohringer's skin, wearing it like a cheap store-bought Halloween costume.

It was now or never.

Reaching into his pillowcase, Brad pulled out the kitchen knife he'd brought from home and drove it into the demon's chest.

The thing that was disguised as Mr. Bohringer gasped and fell back, clutching at the knife. As it tumbled to the floor, Brad watched, his heart beating so hard he thought his own chest might explode. He waited, stepping away from the blood that fountained up, feeling satisfaction as the demon convulsed and finally died. It was only then that he reached down, yanked the knife free and wiped the blood on Mr. Bohringer's shirt before returning the blade to his pillowcase. He hadn't done a very good job with the first demon of the night – some of his demon-Dad's blood had gotten on the white pillowcase – so he'd learned from that.

He walked away from Mr. Bohringer's house but paused in the street to watch two young pranksters hurl eggs at the dark windows before fleeing. Apparently Brad wasn't the only who knew about Mr. Bohringer. He wondered if any of the eggs might have hit the demon corpse, his second of the night, cooling in a pool of its own blood just inside the open front door.

The night is all tricks, Brad thought, smiling. Then he turned to the left, heading for the next demon. The night was young, and he had so much to do.

THE ULTIMATE HALLOWEEN PARTY APP

Marcus watched as his friend Jet dissolved, head first, skin and hair turning into a blood-colored liquid that burned away his clothing as it gushed down his body. Within seconds Jet was little more than dripping bones, the jaws still clacking up and down although his voice now sounded hollow.

“...if you think *this* is freq, then you don’t want to miss the party. Fuck the terrorists with Halloween horrors! Halloween night, my place, with apps that may literally destroy your head.”

The skull laughed and blew up.

Marcus flinched to avoid flying chips then had to laugh at himself. “Pretty good, Jet,” he said, as the image in his oculars was replaced with date (October 31st), time (9 p.m.), and address. “End,” Marcus muttered. The invitation left his field of vision, replaced by a transparent screen showing the usual status alerts for parts of the city currently under attack.

Marcus envied Jet’s ability to always be a step ahead of everyone else, although as a team leader in development at WhApp, he of course had an unfair advantage. Two years ago at a Christmas party Jet had let his guests sample the first feelie three months before the release; although of course they had become common since, the idea that an app downloaded into your implant could make you experience physical sensations had been revolutionary. Whatever he had for Halloween would be special.

Special... just what Marcus had been waiting for, the thing he needed to invite Olivia out.

Two months ago she’d arrived in the accounting department of the implant manufacturing company Marcus worked for; she’d had to leave her last company when the headquarters were bombed by the UWF. Marcus was smitten immediately. The way her glossy, black hair fell across the dark skin of her back, the way she moved, her smile, her soft voice...he knew he wasn’t the only one at the company taken with the new arrival – he’d already watched two crash-and-burn attempts from co-workers asking her out – so he waited. It had to be right. It had to be special. It had to be mind-blowing.

To his (happy) surprise, she accepted immediately. She said she really liked Halloween, and was a fan of the stuff WhApp put out, had even already purchased a pre-order download of their next release, The Ultimate Halloween Party App. She wanted a night of magic, she said; her brother had been injured fighting the Alabaster Militia recently, and she needed a distraction. Marcus preferred to think it had more to do with the way she looked back at *him*.

Plans were made, the date set. Halloween was still weeks away.

But Marcus had a feeling that it would be worth the wait.



On the evening of the 31st, Marcus picked her up just before 9 p.m. The evite had specified that costumes weren’t necessary, but Olivia had dressed in a deliciously bold orange-and-black one-piece that suggested “costume” without actually being one. Marcus regretted his simple light shirt and dark slacks.

As his car took them to Jet's address, they talked about meaningless things: co-workers, a new restaurant near work that served only synthfood, the gossip about Hamid Malouf, governor of Sagantown on Mars. When the car abruptly chose a new route to avoid fighting taking place on Broadway, they barely noticed; when the sky to their left lit with an orange glow, Marcus felt a small stab of concern, but mainly because he wanted to protect her. They talked about how The Ultimate Halloween Party App had been brilliantly marketed and broke pre-order records, even though WhApp had been enigmatic in saying what it actually was. It was easy talking to her; Marcus never felt uncomfortable, at a loss for words, as he sometimes had on other first dates. He'd had one date with a coding star that had been so uncomfortable he'd actually been searching the web for conversation topics and clever lines while they were talking, and had been glad when they'd been ordered to clear the restaurant.

After the car parked, they left and walked from the garage to the front door of Jet's home, an old three-story office building he'd bought after nailing his first big contract with WhApp. Marcus was slightly surprised to see that Jet hadn't decorated the exterior of the building, but he thought maybe Jet had chosen not to draw attention to it on a night many security experts had predicted would offer "elevated risk levels". After they reached the front door and were scanned, a message notification popped up in their oculars.

Marcus and Olivia both directed, "Open."

Jet appeared in the message, speaking to them. "Welcome, foolish mortals, to my first annual Halloween party! However, before you may enter my humble abode, you must make a choice. Tonight, you will participate in the unveiling of WhApp's latest and greatest release – The Ultimate Halloween Party App. At the end of this message, you'll be given a choice between three themes, but choose carefully, because your selection will dictate what you'll experience for the rest of the evening. So, without further delay, I herewith present to you The Ultimate Halloween Party App from WhApp!"

The door before them opened, and at first Marcus wasn't sure if he was seeing something in his oculars or if the door had really opened, but then he heard voices and laughter and music. A menu appeared, hanging in the air before the door, as a voice in his head intoned: "Before you can experience The Ultimate Halloween Party App, you must choose between three themes. Number one: Classic Monsters."

The Frankenstein Monster and Dracula both burst out of the house. Marcus laughed at his own involuntary step back before the creatures dissolved into pixels.

"Number two: Haunted House."

A startling shriek filled Marcus's hearing as translucent, skull-faced specters rushed through the doorway and out into the night before vanishing.

"Or number three: Gore Factory."

A hockey-masked maniac with a machete in one hand and a dripping, freshly-severed head in the other thrust out of the house and disappeared.

"Whoa," Olivia said softly, beside Marcus. "That is *intense*."

Marcus grinned when he saw her astonishment and delight. "So which one are you going to pick? I've always been a fan of the old movies myself, so I think I'll go with Classic Monsters."

Olivia gave him a playful shove, a touch that, even small, left him buzzing. "That's for kids. I'm going with Gore Factory."

Staring at her in surprise, Marcus said, "Really?"

"Yeah. That's more like what *I* grew up with."

They made their choices. Bela Lugosi as Dracula appeared before Marcus, framed in Jet's doorway. "Welcome to my castle. Enter freely and of your own will." He held a candelabrum in his left hand while his right gestured elegantly toward the interior.

"Oh my God," Olivia said, with a nervous giggle. Marcus had been about to step into the house when he realized she was holding back. "What?"

"Oh, I forgot – you're not seeing what I am. There's a guy standing in the doorway cradling his own guts in his hands."

"Do you want to try to end the app?"

"No. It's fun when you know it's not real." She grabbed his hand and headed up the steps.

A short hallway brought them to a huge central space; the bottom floor had once held offices and storerooms, but Jet had knocked down the walls. It was filled now with partygoers, some chatting, some eating, some dancing. The lights – which Marcus knew were real – flickered in carefully-programmed shades of blue and green. Marcus heard a loud shriek, and then laughter.

"Do you see your friend?" Olivia asked.

Marcus scanned the crowd – there had to be 200 people present – and wondered how he'd find Jet. He was about to shake his head when he noticed a man pushing through the crowd toward them. He was tall, wearing an antiquated suit and cape, with a black skull cap and a featureless white mask. He strode purposefully toward Marcus and Olivia, who waited, intrigued.

"What do you see coming toward us?" Marcus asked.

"A killer in overalls and a pig's head. The resolution is *amazing*."

The figure stopped a few feet away, and abruptly tore away the mask, revealing a grimacing face with jutting cheekbones, wide eyes, irregular teeth, and a few strands of hair draped over skin the color of a toxic fungus.

Marcus couldn't restrain a gasp, followed by an exclamation. "The Phantom!"

The Phantom executed a courtly bow, but when he rose again Marcus saw his friend Jet. Marcus put out a hand to shake or bump, but put it back at his side when he realized Jet wasn't doing the same. "Good to see you, man," Jet said, grinning. "Thanks for coming out in all the chaos."

"Wouldn't miss it. Jet, this is Olivia."

Jet turned to her and asked, "Which option did you choose?"

"Gore Factory."

"So you just met the Pig Man, right?"

She laughed. "I did. This app is *freq*! You worked on it?"

"It's kind of my baby."

"It's so *real*! I mean, even the best feelies still have that sort of translucent look..."

Jet nodded, obviously pleased. "We found some interesting new ways to make your 'plant stimulate the retinal ganglion cells. Of course that's not what I do – I'm more of a design guy than a neurotech."

"Well, whatever you do, it's brilliant."

Marcus didn't need an app to know that the grin Jet turned on him said, "You got a winner here, brother."

Jet looked up sharply. "More guests arriving. Catch you two later. Forget the outside world and dive in!"

He rushed off. Marcus turned to Olivia. "Hey, I could use some food."

She nodded. "Let's go."

They pushed through the crowd. Marcus saw a few faces he knew, offered some waves and greetings. He paused to chat with a friend, Cho, who he hadn't seen in a year, and whose face was now badly scarred from a bomb explosion ("Hey, I got lucky – the dude next to me lost both eyes and an arm"). They spotted tables arrayed along a wall with more food than Marcus had ever seen in one place, including slices of what he guessed were real meat, not the usual vat-grown synthfood. He wondered how Jet had gotten so much of it; even with serious black market connections, it'd been hard to come by since the Animal Liberation Army had disrupted so many of the transport lines out of agricultural areas.

"Wow," Olivia muttered.

Marcus agreed. "Jet knows how to throw parties. And he's made enough money to do it right."

Olivia picked up a narrow cracker spread with a creamy cheese. "I'm betting this doesn't look like a severed finger to you."

"No –" Marcus broke off as the food array shimmered, changing into heavy wooden banquet tables of long-decayed rot covered in thick, dust-sprinkled cobwebs and crawling with rats. "Oh, wait – I got Dracula's banquet hall, I think."

The food changed back, leaving Marcus smiling.

They took plates of exotic fruits, hors d'oeuvres that were each miniature works of art, imported cheeses, beef and (real) smoked salmon, macarons and tiny crême brulees. They made their way through the party, juggling the plates, until they came to a less-cramped area where they could chat as they ate. At one point the nearby walls transformed into the shadowy, hieroglyph-scrawled interior of an Egyptian tomb. Olivia saw Marcus react, asking, "What?"

"The walls just turned into a set from *The Mummy*."

"Oh. Maybe I should've picked 'Classic Monsters', because I'm looking at walls that are gushing blood."

The building rocked, causing the lights to dim. Marcus knew this wasn't part of the app.

He and Olivia stopped eating to look at each other. In the wavering light, they held each other's gaze. In that moment Marcus knew that if he died here – if his luck finally ran out tonight, on Halloween, if fate determined that he'd sidestepped one too many attacks – he would die with Olivia, and that thought brought peace.

But then the shaking stopped, the power stabilized, and they both looked away, nervously, not because of the explosion outside but because of what had happened *here*, between them.

They didn't speak for a few seconds. Both set their half-eaten plates down, and they reached out, clasping hands. Marcus leaned in and kissed her, gently. When they separated, he was relieved to see her smiling.

She uttered a small cry and leapt back. At first Marcus feared something had gone terribly wrong, but she was looking past him. "What?"

"A deformed man with a chainsaw just popped up behind you. It's okay, he's gone now."

Marcus didn't like the shadow he saw on her face. "Are you sure you don't want to delete the app?"

"I'm not sure we can. Does yours have a delete or even a pause function? I can't find one in mine."

Scanning across his visual field, Marcus realized there were no function keys or icons at all. "That's weird – it's got to have them." He thought for a second, then said, "Pause app."

Olivia turned into Frankenstein's bride and shrieked at him.

Marcus pushed down a rising alarm – his friend had designed this thing, of *course* there had to be a way to disable it, turn it off. “Return to main menu.”

Nothing happened.

The Bride asked, “Remember what it said when we first loaded the apps? Something about how we wouldn’t be able to change for the rest of the evening?”

“Yeah, but that was just about which theme we chose...” Marcus broke off, realizing he wasn’t sure at *all* what that had meant. “Jet will know. Let’s ask him.”

Olivia nodded. Marcus led her through the party.

They didn’t find Jet in the main room. Marcus walked her toward the rear of the main floor, where Jet had installed an indoor pool. There were fewer people here; occasionally one would glance at the pool and point or cry out.

Marcus was about to walk around the side of the pool when Olivia resisted. “I don’t want to go this way.”

“Why not?”

“Because the pool is full of rotting bodies.”

Marcus glanced down – and stumbled back as the Creature from the Black Lagoon leapt out of the pool, reaching for his ankle. He knew it wasn’t real – that it was just a collection of pixels projected into his retina from the app – but knowing that didn’t quell his unease. “Yeah, let’s go another way.” He deliberately turned his back on the green monster hauling itself up at the murky waters of the pool, although he heard its clawed web feet slapping the floor behind him, its labored breath as gills struggled with air –

The building shook again. The sounds of the Creature behind Marcus vanished. Jet’s voice replaced the music over the speakers.

“Hey, everybody, we’ve got some action going on in the street right outside. Don’t worry – the building’s protected with half-inch reinforced plasteel – but I have to ask everyone to stay where you are until it’s safe. Shouldn’t be long. Thanks, and party on!”

The music came back, but the mood of those around them was considerably less festive. Now the revelers chatted together in hushed, fearful tones, glancing around anxiously. Marcus turned to Olivia. “Looks like we’re stuck here for a while.”

“Just not near that pool, please.”

They found an empty couch in the main room and claimed it. After sitting quietly together for a few seconds, Olivia said, “Marcus, I hate to ask you this, but...how well do you know your friend Jet?”

“What do you mean?”

She leaned toward him. “I mean...this guy’s supposed to be a top app designer, right? So what designer designs an app you can’t easily remove? Or even turn off?”

“Are you suggesting it’s deliberate?”

Olivia just looked at him.

Marcus turned away, considering. He’d met Jet three years ago when his company had contracted to work with WhApp on implants modified for gaming. They’d hit it off, spent several nights bar-hopping around battle zones. What *did* he know about his friend beyond that, and his fame as an app creator? He realized he didn’t know Jet’s views on politics, religion, or any of the other things that fired up recruits to terrorist organizations (although he guessed that extreme veganism was out, given the amount of meat laid out with the party food).

Olivia stroked his shoulder. “Hey,” she said, softly, “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make him sound like the villain, but...”

“No, you’re right – I *don’t* know him that well.”

After that, they spent an hour together, mostly not talking, finding comfort in just being together, in knowing that whatever happened they might go forward...*together*. The party picked back up, surging around them like some great, amorphous beast. Occasionally a monster popped into Marcus’s view, and when he saw Olivia flinch or grimace, he knew her app had haunted her as well.

They were sharing glasses of wine and laughing at the conversation of a nearby man who was clumsily hitting on a much younger man when a huge, gong-like sound silenced everything. At first Marcus thought it was only in his app, but when he saw the looks on all the other faces, saw their heads tilt up as chatter ceased, he knew it was something played over the speakers.

DONG...DONG...DONG...

“Oh,” Olivia said, “it’s midnight.”

Dread blossomed in Marcus’s gut.

He found himself counting the sounds – *six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven...*

At twelve, a handsome man in a tuxedo appeared before Marcus. It took Marcus a few minutes to identify him: he couldn’t remember the actor’s name, but he knew the character was Dr. Jekyll, from an old black and white movie.

“Midnight has arrived, dear friends,” Dr. Jekyll said, “and so it’s time to reveal the secret behind The Ultimate Halloween Party App. Some of you have wondered how to turn the app off or remove it. The truth is: *You can’t*. The app is now coded permanently into your ‘plants.’”

Marcus heard two-hundred gasps, cries, and mutters. Beside him, he felt Olivia tense.

Dr. Jekyll continued. “Over thirty million of you downloaded and installed the app. We hope you’re enjoying it, because you’ll be living with it now for the rest of your lives. Victory to the Walden Movement!”

Dr. Jekyll shook, shimmied, doubled over – and rose up as the animalistic Mr. Hyde, who lunged at Marcus. Marcus drew back, and saw that the app had transformed everyone in the party into a monster. Nearby, Olivia cried softly, her eyes closed tightly. “No...no...no...” she murmured.

Marcus sat by her, taking her hands. “Olivia, just remember: it’s not real. None of it is real.”

She didn’t open her eyes, or stop crying. “I know, but – *I still see them even with my eyes closed.*”

Marcus shut his own eyes. The room went away, but the monsters were still there, clawing and hissing and snarling at him. “Oh my God,” he said. There would be no shutting them out.

Screams sounded around them; he knew everyone else had discovered the app’s real abilities as well. Somebody shouted, “Maybe it’ll stop when we’re away from this house.” The partygoers rushed for the front entrance.

Marcus turned to Olivia. “That could be right – surely you can’t write an app that takes complete control of vision. Maybe he’s beaming something through the party. Once we get out of here –”

Olivia didn’t answer, but she did open her eyes and allow Marcus to pull her along with the crowd.

It took five minutes of pushing and elbowing, but the front door was open, the street outside was clear, and they were free of the house.

But the monsters were still there. A glowing red blob slid down over the side of the building across the street; Marcus could see half-digested bodies within it. He heard a gigantic scream

resonate through the night sky, and knew that any second a giant reptilian foot might smash down beside him.

“Let’s get to the car,” he said.

They made it to the garage. Marcus found that he could at least access his other apps, so he called the car. It arrived and they fell in, numb, drained.

On the ride home, they talked. “I wonder how long your friend’s been part of the Walden Movement. I think they usually recruit pretty young.”

Marcus felt shame, as if *he* had committed the act of terrorism tonight. “Probably the whole time I knew him.” He reminded himself that Olivia had already pre-ordered the app anyway, but he still felt guilty.

“Do you think he was even at the party tonight?”

Marcus started to protest, but then remembered: Jet had refused their usual handshake when they’d arrived. “God. Probably not. He’s somewhere safe, where they can’t get to him.”

Olivia stayed with Marcus that night, but they clutched at each other out of horror, not desire. The last thing Marcus said to her just before dawn was, “Don’t forget who we work for – a ‘plant company. By twelve noon we can have these ‘plants out of our heads.”

She gave him a half-nod, but then flinched at another gruesome offering from The Ultimate Halloween Party App.



Fuck this shit.

They told me to try writing about all this in third person, that it would help me “gain distance” and “separate truth from fantasy.” They said it would help me “process Olivia’s death” and prepare me for the next step.

It didn’t. All it did was make me remember it all over again.

After that Halloween, people all over the world tried to have their ‘plants replaced. Most neuroclinics were reporting six-month-long wait times.

I did manage to pull strings at my company so that Olivia and I were among the first to get our ‘plants pulled.

It didn’t work.

Jet and his team had taken the next step forward with apps: they’d figured out a way to use one to permanently rewire the brain. It was theoretical...until Halloween, when thirty million people thought they were installing an innocent party game, but the trick was that the treat was permanent.

A lot of them couldn’t take a life of monsters, or ghosts. The ones who chose Gore Factory had it the worst. Suicide rates skyrocketed.

It was ironic that Halloween became the source of so much real terror, wasn’t it?

On November 15th, Olivia drove a steak knife through each of her eyes. She bled to death alone on the floor of my apartment while I was at work. I found her when I got home. Now, thanks to my new brain, I see her as a shroud-draped vampire, or a tattered, shuffling zombie. They tell me it’s not real, but it grabs my heart and hurts every time.

I don’t even know for sure who “they” are. Government, or a rival terrorist gang, it seems all the same to me.

They came a week after Olivia's self-mercy-killing. They said they couldn't reverse the damage the Halloween app had done to my brain, but they could put it to use. Did I want to fight terrorists?

No, not really, I told them.

Then they asked me the better question: Did I want to fight *monsters*?

Yes. God, yes.

So I let them give me a new 'plant. It at least lets me know if a monster is real or not, and who it is. I can now identify friend from foe, flesh from phantom. They taught me how to use weapons. They're ready now to send me out into the field.

I may not be able to get to Jet for what he's done, but I can take out some of his friends.

I'm coming for you, monsters. I've got a stake sharpened for you, Count. Igor, I'll take that tiki torch and douse it in gasoline. Im-ho-tep, what will rockets do to your wrappings?

Let's find out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Morton is a screenwriter, author of non-fiction books, and award-winning prose writer whose work was described by the American Library Association's *Readers' Advisory Guide to Horror* as "consistently dark, unsettling, and frightening". She is the author of four novels and more than 150 short stories, a six-time winner of the Bram Stoker Award®, and a world-class Halloween expert. Her most recent books are the anthology *Weird Women 2: Classic Supernatural Fiction by Groundbreaking Female Writers 1840-1925* (co-edited with Leslie S. Klinger) and the fiction collection *Night Terrors & Other Tales*. As a Halloween expert, she has been interviewed on The History Channel, The Discovery Channel, the Blu-Ray edition of *Trick 'r Treat*, in the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, Real Simple Magazine, and many more. For the past two years she has provided the weekly "Ghost Report" for the popular podcast *Ghost Magnet With Bridget Marquardt*, and 2021 also saw the debut of her weekly original fiction podcast *Spine Tinglers*. Lisa lives in the San Fernando Valley and online at www.lisamorton.com.

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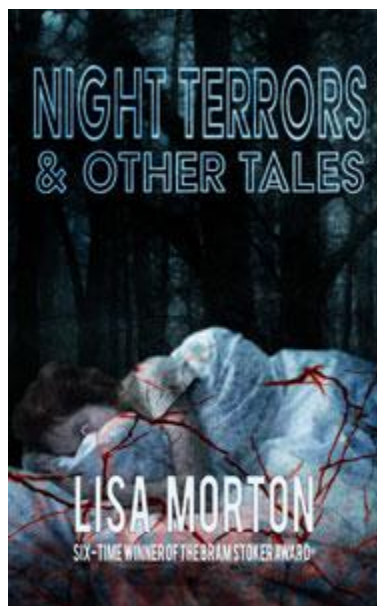
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