



Walking With Spirits

Taral Wayne

I have a deeply abiding love of Halloween, which is why I was saddened when it came around every year and I did absolutely nothing to celebrate it.

When I was a kid, there was nothing to it. Your parents made you a costume, or bought one from the local K-Mart. It was never any good – a sheet with two eye-holes cut in it was par for the course for the home-made ones, and the plastic bags the “store bought” ones came in were more substantial than the shoddy crepe paper outfits. No child was ever so young as to be taken in by an orange and yellow “Zorro” or a purple and day-glow green “Witch.” What made grown-ups think such cheesy “costumes” ever fooled anyone – much less threw a fright into them – was unfathomable to me when I was five, and is no clearer to me today. But Halloween wasn’t about the costume, it was about the candy and the feeling of doing something joyfully naughty because you are out late at night.

Halloween is about atmosphere, too. It’s about autumn leaves rustling in the dark, a chill wind, clouds racing the moon, and the never-too-far-away fear – or hope – that someone or *something* else may be walking the streets with the living.

I remember one year, when I was so young I’m not even sure where we were living at the time, that I couldn’t go out trick-or-treating because of pouring rain. I lay forlorn in my bed, and even over the

rain I could hear through the window the merry racket of other kids having fun, and my heart sank even lower.

Up until about the age of 11 or 12, Halloween made it acceptable for kids to wander around the neighborhood long after dark, ringing the doorbells of people you had never met and demanding they give you candy. Who could resist the audacity of the act ... not to mention a full shopping bag full of free candy? Next day, the kids would gloat over the loot, spilling it out on the floor, sorting and dividing it into “eat now” and “eat later,” and phoning each other to boast about their takings. I only reluctantly gave up the practice at 15, when I noticed that I was six inches taller than the assorted ghouls, pirates and fairy princesses standing on doorsteps around me with their bags open. Also, being out after dark had long ago become a commonplace that had lost its thrill. I no longer sensed the half-believed-in presence of the supernatural lurking in the dark.

You didn't have to go out trick-or-treating when you grew too big for it. Halloween parties were an alternative. But those were for little kids also, and offered little but inane games such as bobbing for apples and pinning the tail on cardboard donkeys. And the refreshments that were offered at such parties were poor compensation for a bag full of candy ... unless you had a taste for bruised apples and Rice Krispie squares, which I, for one, have never been able to choke down.

Halloween simply wasn't much fun anymore. It was self-evidently created for little kids, not big strapping louts in their teens. Halloween parties for adults were unheard of in the 1960s, as far as I knew. When did they become fashionable, and how? They might have existed for years without my knowledge, in fact ... but, if so, no one ever mentioned the possibility to me, or invited me to one.

To this day, I don't think I've been to an adult Halloween party, and often wonder if they would live up to my expectations. Of course, my expectations are probably quite wrong-headed. No 24-year-old fashion models in skimpy demoness costumes are going to sit in my lap to feed me Hungarian salami and Oka cheese on crackers. The best I could expect at my age and in my circles is a woman in late-middle age, as overweight as I am, overflowing a kitchen chair and explaining why men must be banned from holding office for at least 50 years to make up for the lack of women in government. A frightening picture, certainly, but not the stuff *my* dreams are made of...

At one point, Victoria Vayne and I decided to hold a Halloween party of our own. She was living in Willowdale at the time, a relatively short distance from where I lived. I used to go there about three times a week, making a brisk 20-minute walk of it. We invited the Gang over one Halloween, but stipulated that they must dress up. Bob Hadji came costumed as a very convincing Dickensian corpse in authentic winding sheet, his face painted in nauseating realism with glue and lamp black. Bob Wilson came as a bottle of Perrier Water, demonstrating originality if no great boldness. Janet Wilson came as a mother, a disguise made easy by the fact that she had just become the mother, and could claim the newborn Paul as part of her costume. I think Phil Paine appeared to be dressed up as Steven Black ... but since he was imitating Steven in just about everything at the time, this could be discounted as another cheat. No one else who attended paid any attention to the costume rule, either. Not even Victoria herself would unbend, though I had tried to talk her into wearing an honest-to-goodness dress. As the photo shows, only the three of us – Bob, Hadji, and myself – were foolish enough to expose ourselves to ridicule.

I spent nearly half the night in the other room with Victoria, her using the paint sprayer and me trying not to drip on the bedroom rug or furniture.

For a number of years after moving to Parkdale, I simply went out for long walks on Halloween, to watch a much younger generation have all the fun. My immediate neighbors were poor, and having immigrated recently from Syria, The Sudan or Sri Lanka, seemed to have little grasp of the occasion. It wasn't a very long walk to an older, more settled part of the neighborhood, though. The Poles and Germans knew Halloween, and festooned their porches with cobwebs, severed limbs, dangling skeletons and fluttering bats. Some filled the front yard with tombstones and gallows.

Others had fog machines in constant use. The kids trooped to their front doors in phalanxes of 10 or 12, each accepting their tribute and hurrying on barely before the next contingent arrived.

One year, I happened to be with Victoria and Simon on Halloween night in Bahama Key. "Bahama Key" is not the real name of their suburb, of course – Victoria wishes the real name to be a deep, dark secret, so that's about as close to the actual name as I'll go. Simon had borrowed a fog generator from somewhere, and set it up next to a bowl of the usual mix of Halloween treats – lollipops, miniature Tootsie-Rolls, one-bite chocolate bars, generic sugar pills in plastic wrappers that look like knuckle-dusters for the nursery. I thought it would be fun to sit outside with Simon and watch the bowl empty ... not to mention following Simon's example by helping my sweet tooth to whatever it wanted. Even Victoria came out and sat now and then, despite her self-avowed hatred of children from age 21 and down.

But for many years I simply let Halloween go ... It got to be too much trouble to walk up to the livelier part of Parkdale, a good half-mile away. Nobody ever came to the doors in my rent-controlled building. Even looking out from my 21st floor balcony, there was not a ghost of anything happening in the streets below.



The blue paint is too **way** too dark

My rediscovery of Halloween began with a fuzzy, stuffed Jack-o-lantern that I found at the Salvation Army. It only cost only fifty cents, and I thought it would add a little atmosphere the next time October 31st rolled around. A couple of years later, I remembered to dig it out of storage and put it on top of the TV ... but frankly, when I did, I saw right away that a plush Jack-o-lantern was way too cute to do much to spook up the atmos.

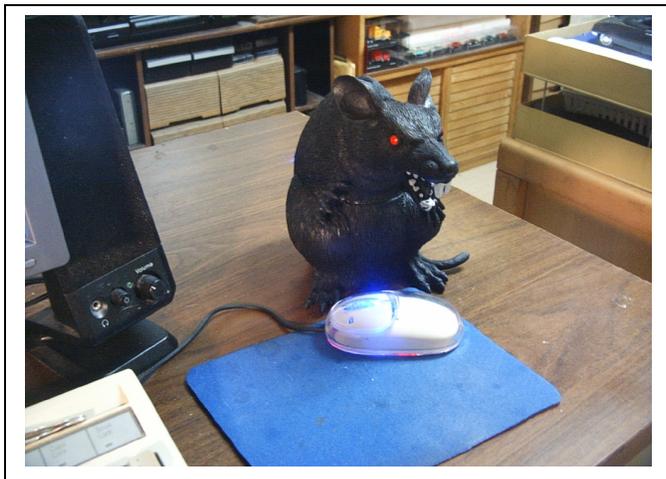
Another year passed, and a few weeks before the 31st, I saw some plastic skulls on batons at the Dollarama store. It was only a dollar – hence “Dollarama” – and didn’t look as bad as you might think. So I bought one. The plastic baton came out easily, and turned out to be handy to beat my cat with.

(The baton didn’t do the cat any harm, but you should see what she did to *it!*)

The year after that, I found myself looking at Jack-o-lanterns made from some kind of fiberglass or epoxy foam. They cost a little more than the plush one had, but had openings for mouth, nose and eyes – not just patches of black felt sewn on – and there was a battery-operated light inside. Now I knew I was serious – I *had* to have one. Once I got it home, I hastily stuck a battery inside ... and when *it* lit up, *I* lit up with it.

For year four, I bought a Styrofoam tombstone from the Dollarama! You cannot beat a tombstone for atmosphere! I had quite a grouping of macabre Halloween accouterments by then, and was beginning to hear the spirits stir again.

I already knew, then, what I wanted to add for this year, and waited anxiously for the months to peel off the calendar and Fall to roll around again. Admittedly, I wasn’t expecting Dollarama to stock up for Halloween so *soon*. September isn’t even over yet, but a whole aisle has been given over to masks, make-up, wigs, fake blood, chains, bats, skulls, witches hats, wands, helmets and shields, amputated arms, leg bones, eyeballs floating in goo, pirates’ hooks, rusty lanterns, and everything else considered vital for a proper celebration of All Hallow’s Eve. Strangely ... no Jack-o-Lanterns did I see. But I already had one of those, thank you. It was a *rubber rat* I was looking for this year.



Meet Oscar Wild. He’s my new rat. He isn’t rubber, just some cheap sort of plastic, and the painted teeth and eyes are pretty sloppy. But to my camera the eyes glow in a most sinister way, somehow. I introduced Oscar to Sailor, my cat. I don’t know how cats know these things aren’t real, but Sailor knew instantly and wasn’t impressed. Nevertheless, I *like* Oscar. He looks evil, vicious, without fear or scruple, like a dentist seeing a new plasma-screen TV in his patient’s mouth. Oscar will fit in well with the rest of the Halloween ensemble.

Whatever will I do for next year, though? I don't want a severed rubber hand or an 18-inch skeleton in a fake metal gibbet. Who ever heard of an 18-inch-tall pirate or highwayman? Nor is a skull with a bloodshot eyeball hanging from one socket in the sort of style I wish to celebrate Halloween. What I'm looking for will be more macabre or occult than morbid: ghostly rather than ghastly.

I might get a plastic raven, I suppose ... and ask it why it is like a plastic writing desk. But quoth the raven, never mind. When the time comes, I'll know what's next – the spirits will guide me to it.