



TRICK

The old man stands by his window and stares out on the close of day. As dusk takes the sleepy neighborhood, twilight shadows line the dead-end street, and the silhouette of leaf-barren branches lends the concrete the appearance of shattered glass. The dusty scent of autumn rides the air through window screens and into the old man's quiet house. It is a scent he knows well and he breathes it deeply into his tired lungs. He has spent his afternoon preparing for visitors. The half-open, inner front door beckons. A bowl of colorfully wrapped chocolates gleams on the low table in the foyer. Dying sunlight streams through the murky glass of the storm door. Twice during the day, the doorbell rang, but the old man, unready, ignored it. Now he seats himself in his worn, familiar chair and waits.

Outside goblin children overrun the darkening block, their wildest energies released in a sugar ecstasy of anonymity and candy-hoarding. Their visages vary wildly — ghost, pirate, princess, witch, pumpkin, hobo, super-hero — but their voices sing the same song. Excitement. Anticipation. The thrill of rare freedom. They flash from house to house, making their way up one side of the road and down the other before moving on to the next block and the next one after, and hopefully home before supper. The bright colors of their outfits flash, and from behind their masks, their high laughter crackles through the clear fall air.

But the old man sees their true faces; he sees them for what they truly are.

Not always did he know their secret. Not in the all long years stretched out behind him when the business of living and making a living provided suitable distractions from the ugliness. Not even in the few peaceful years he shared with Belle after they retired.

Without thinking he drops his forearm across the arm of his recliner so that his hand lies palm up on the arm of Belle's chair beside it, ready for the warm grasp that greeted it so many times before, but which does not come tonight and will never come again.

Now the old man makes no mistake. Now he knows their true nature.
This year he is ready.

It took time to learn the truth, but time he had after Belle went away. More time than he ever cared to spend on his own. And little by little he began to crack their facade, to notice the little oddities in their routines, their comings and goings at strange hours, the way a neighborhood cat disappeared, and the effort they spent to keep their houses so neat and perfectly groomed in order to deflect suspicion. He spent hours watching and noting, observing their rituals and the faint, strange lights that sometimes burned in the windows of the children's rooms at night. One time he watched a group of children squirm their way beneath the chain link fence that ran along the train tracks at the end of the road. God knows what hidden lairs they kept in the tangled weeds beyond the barrier. And one afternoon, a child fell from his bicycle to the hard pavement after bumping into the curb, and as he sat in the street crying and unaware of the old man's desperate gaze, he let the face he showed the world falter and the old man saw the horror that lurked beneath.

Two children run across the edge of his front lawn in their mad door-to-door dash to collect goodies. One wears a wizard's cloak and tall speckled hat; the other the delicate fringes and tight leotards of a dancer. He watches them eagerly, but they ignore his weed-cracked front walk and move on to the next house. *They have been warned by their parents, he thinks, to stay away from the old man who has seen their secret faces.*

Perhaps, he hopes, they fear me?

Across the street paper decorations clutter the front window of his neighbor's home. A jaunty white skeleton. A creeping green witch. Foam tombstones dot the front lawn. At the house next door electric-orange, jack-o-lantern lights trace the edge of the porch roof and false cobwebbing clings at the corners.

The old man sees his other neighbors' homes along the road, all similarly attired in this garish manner with icons of mischief and images of the wild spirits rumored to roam free on nights such as this. Every year they accrue these baubles and ornaments and slowly transform the block to suit *their* tastes. Do they think he doesn't know what the signs and symbols mean? Do they think he doesn't see them, their decorations and parties, their fancy candies and disguised children, mocking him and everything his life has meant? Everything Belle's life meant?

They taunt him for what he knows. Their secrets aren't safe with him. Let them parade their depravity in public once a year, costumed from the unknowing world in the guise of a child's holiday. Let them raise their terrible monsters in plain sight. Let others walk in ignorance. *I will no longer be misled*, he reassures himself.

Two boys and a little girl pause before the path to his front door. He observes and waits, listening to their whispers.

“Ronny, if you go there, I’m telling Mom,” says the girl.

“So?” answers Ronny. “Mom didn’t say not to go here. It’s just Mr. Louis’s house, and you’re just scared cause of what happened with Mrs. Louis last year!”

How brazen, the old man thinks and then, Belle, I should have been here that day.

“Yeah, Kimmie. Don’t be such a baby,” says the older boy. “Besides, Ronny’s too scared to go on his own, aren’t you?”

“Shut up, Billy! I am not,” says Ronny. “I’ll prove it, too.”

With that the young boy’s footsteps move toward his house. He slows as he approaches the door. Something inside tells him he should not be here, but he can’t turn back now. The old man rises and steps into the foyer, a welcoming grin on his face, warm satisfaction welling in his chest as he recognizes Ronny, the boy who found Belle in this very same foyer. *Perhaps this is what my beloved saw, he thinks. Her last vision the sight of an “innocent” child, her last impression a lie.*

Ronny climbs the steps, holds forth his orange bag of treats and delivers his line: “Trick or treat.”

The old man grabs a handful of candy from the dish and pushes the door open. “Oh, it’ll definitely be a treat,” he says. “Enjoy!”

The miniature chocolate bars spill from his hands, plunking heavily among the other sweets gathered in Ronny’s sack.

“Thank you,” the boy says.

As the boy returns to the sidewalk, the old man calls. “Make sure you share those with the others. They may be shy...but I know they want some candy, too.”

He lingers in the doorway as the trio moves off toward the next house. Ronny hops and bounces, rubbing in his victory before his sister and the older boy, even as he pulls the chocolates from his bag and splits them up among their ready grasps. Together they stop by the next-door driveway as the old man’s neighbor, Mrs. Reynolds, backs her car out into the street.

Ronny pulls the wrapper from a piece of chocolate.

Kimmie scolds him, reminding him they’d promised their mother not to eat anything she hadn’t checked for them. Ronny razzes her and holds the candy out of reach above her head, teasing her.

Unable to resist such an easy target, Billy moves in from behind and slaps the candy from Ronny’s hand, yelling, “He shoots! He scores!”

The candy lands under the wheel of Mrs. Reynolds’ moving car. The heavy black tire squashes it flat, ejecting its creamy filling from the wrapper.

Then air pops like a gunshot and hisses a long sigh. The car sags to one side as its tire deflates. Mrs. Reynolds puts it in park and climbs out, moving around to examine the wheel, joining the three children already circled around and pointing at the dull metal gleam protruding from the rubber: the edge of a fresh razor blade.

Ronny turns and stares at the old man in the doorway. The little boy's face is pale and tears pour from his eyes. And then the old man realizes his error. He knew them not at all; he underestimated their power. A clutching tightness seizes his chest, and his pulse throbs louder in his head as its beats slow and then weaken. He falls to the foyer floor, landing in blackness.

An hour later the police officer closes the ambulance door and watches it drive off without lights or sirens. Ronny stands with his mother, clinging to her, his face buried in her side. "Funny," the police officer says. "Mr. Louis dying just like his wife did and Ronny the first to find both bodies." His voice comes laced with suspicion not quite strong enough to make him speak his mind. "Guess it's better this way, though, considering what that old man was up to."

"Yes," Ronny's mother replies. "They never did really fit in on a block with so many young families."

Ronny peers out from behind his mother's shirt, glimpses the officer and then smothers his face again. *If I didn't know better, thinks the cop, I'd swear that kid was smiling.*