

Halloween Howl
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HALLOWEEN in the suburbs I understood, but Halloween in New York City was like this whole other holiday.

I still associated Halloween with packs of small children navigating neighborhoods of vinyl-sided ranch houses, going door to door with decorated pillowcases, heeding their parents' warnings not to eat apples with razor blades in them and generally causing mischief and mayhem.

But things were different in the city. Even in my relatively safe neighborhood, trick-or-treating just wasn't the same. Parents didn't trust their kids to wander the city, and I didn't blame them.

This was only my second Halloween in New York. The previous year, I'd had dinner with a few friends at a restaurant on Twelfth Street, not realizing that the Village's Halloween parade would soon swarm the neighborhood, trapping me there until the hordes of costumed revelers thinned out. Sure, the group of zombies doing the dance from the "Thriller" video was pretty funny, and Halloween in Greenwich Village apparently involved a lot of very attractive people wearing little more than their skivvies and some body paint, but I still found the whole experience daunting and overwhelming.

This year, I planned to just go home. I figured I was safe there. No one would bother me. I was renting out the top floor of a three-story building with a broken intercom system; even if some kids came along and pressed the bell,

I'd never hear it. I hadn't even bought candy.

I took the subway to my Brooklyn neighborhood and decided that, since it was a warm night, I'd walk home the long way. I observed two more odd things about trick-or-treating in the city: 1) a lot of kids went into stores instead of up to houses, and 2) no one actually rang any doorbells; if a house was open to trick-or-treaters, someone was sitting on the stoop handing out candy. I found it surreal.

It all seemed like a bigger symptom of my failure to adjust. I'd been in New York for about a year and a half, and I still didn't feel like I belonged there. I was tired, nervous, frustrated, and so goddamn lonely. It wasn't much different from life back home in Missouri, except that in New York, I also seemed to hemorrhage money just by living there.

The city was supposed to save me. Instead, I felt defeated.

I walked by a row of brownstones around the corner from my block. Roughly half of them had someone standing or sitting on the front stoop, handing out candy. The last one I passed had a guy sitting on one of the steps. I'd seen him around the neighborhood some, most frequently at my regular coffee shop, where he was part of what I thought of as the Over-Thirty Childless Sophisticate crowd, the sorts who sat around gabbing about what theater or gallery openings they'd seen recently. He was terribly cute, with a rectangular face, dark hair, and broad shoulders. I was surprised to see him sitting on his stoop with a big plastic pumpkin full of treats.

"Hey, man," he said as I passed.

I do not know what possessed me to stop. It wasn't in my nature to talk to my neighbors. Any other day, I probably

just would have muttered a “hey” and kept walking. As it was, I was feeling acutely aware of the fact that my own safe apartment was about thirty paces away. I was so close. And yet....

“Hey,” I said, wrapping my hand around a wrought-iron fleur-de-lis that decorated the little fence in front of his house. “Waiting for trick-or-treaters?”

“Yeah. More this year than before. More families in the neighborhood.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I’ve seen you around the neighborhood, yeah? You get your coffee in the morning from that muffin place near the subway.”

“Yeah, I do.”

He smiled. “I’m Chris.” He held out the hand that wasn’t holding the plastic pumpkin.

“Adrian.” I shook his hand and adjusted the strap of my work bag. “This is your house?”

He turned and looked back at it. “Yeah. My ex and I bought it eight years ago. I got it in the break up.”

“That seems like a pretty good deal.”

Chris turned back around and smirked. “He got all the furniture.”

We chuckled about that together. He didn’t seem especially sad or upset.

“So, Adrian. Where’s a guy like you headed off to on a night like this? You got a party or something you’re rushing to?”

“No. I don’t really have any plans. Figured I’d just go find whatever horror flick is on TV and call it a night.”

“This is going to sound creepy, probably, since we don’t know each other at all, but you want to have a seat here? Keep me company for a little while?”

I did want to—he really was a great-looking guy, and I liked the rumble of his deep voice—but I hesitated.

“You can have half of whatever candy I have left over, if that’ll sweeten the pot.” Then he laughed. “Wow, I just keep sounding creepier. I don’t normally stumble socially like this. I just... you stopped to talk to me, which is more than I can say for any of the parents who have walked by tonight, and these lulls between packs of kids get a little boring. I’d like some company. That’s all.”

“All right,” I said. I laid my work bag against the fence and sat next to him on the step. I felt a little awkward, unsure of what to say.

“How long have you been in the neighborhood?” he asked.

“Not long. About a year and a half.”

He nodded. “It’s changed a lot since I moved here. That bodega on the corner, for instance. It’s all swanky now, but when I first moved in, it was gray and dirty and smelled like kitty litter.”

I laughed, though I believed him.

“I like the changes,” he said, “but it gets more expensive every year. That’s how it goes, I guess.”

We chatted for a while about other changes in the neighborhood. That seemed like a safe topic. He quizzed me

about places I'd been. He rattled off restaurant recommendations. We talked about the new ice cream parlor a few blocks away. "Bacon in ice cream seems like one of those so-wrong-it's-right ideas," he said, "but it's kind of gross, actually."

Man, I liked this guy. He was friendly and talkative. He kept sneaking me fun-size candy bars. He was warm and gregarious with the various groups of kids who showed up. He complimented costumes, pretended to be scared at the appropriate times, told jokes.

After about an hour went by, I said, "Wow, you really enjoy this, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Sure. I like kids. I always wanted them, but, well..." He smiled. "My ex did not, so much. And it's not exactly easy for a gay man to have a child, so I still don't have any."

"I like kids too," I said. "Though I don't know about raising them in the city."

"Yeah, there is that."

"I still don't know how I feel about living here, actually." I was surprised when the words tumbled out of my mouth. Chris was basically a stranger, and here I was, saying what was foremost on my mind, the thing I was most ashamed of. I wasn't making it in New York. I was a failure.

But he nodded. "It's tough, especially when you first move here. It grows on you, though. Once you get used to the rhythms of the city, I mean. Once you stop getting lost any time you step out of a subway station. Once you're able to sleep through all the noise. You know?"

"Guess I'm not there yet."

“Why’d you move here, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I sighed. “I was a gay kid in the St. Louis suburbs and felt totally alienated there. New York seemed like a good place to come to.”

Chris smiled. “It is. I love it here. And I’ve been through some shit, you know? This city really tries to bring you down sometimes. But I wouldn’t live anywhere else. It’s nights like tonight, I think, that keep me here. It’s a gorgeous night. There are kids out having fun. Some of these costumes are really creative, so it’s fun for me too. And I found a really nice stranger to talk to for a little while. Would that have happened in your St. Louis suburbs?”

I laughed. “Probably not.”

We stayed outside for another hour, until the sun disappeared completely and it started to get too cold to be out in just my shirtsleeves. Chris looked into the plastic pumpkin. “My candy supplies seem to be dwindling.”

“Do you have more inside?”

“A little. But now that it’s all the way dark, we’re mostly going to get teenagers who feel entitled to free candy.”

“Aw, come on. You never went trick-or-treating as a teenager?”

“Nah.”

“Oh, I did. The last time was when I was sixteen, I think. My friends and I put on clown wigs and zombie makeup. I don’t know who we thought we were, but it was a hell of a lot of fun.”

“I bet.”

I was sad, suddenly, worried that our time together was coming to a close. “This is fun too,” I said, unable to take the next step to ensure we saw each other again but desperately wanting to.

He stood up. “Well, I’m sure there’s still some horror flick on TV, and I do have a little bit of candy upstairs.”

I smiled. “Are you trying to tempt me into your house again?”

“It’s possible.”

I wanted to kiss him. He stood there grinning at me, and his mouth was so hard to look away from, with his lips and all those teeth, and he really was so very cute. I leaned forward, intending to just give him a little peck on the cheek to show my appreciation for the invitation.

He took it the wrong way. He turned his face and closed the distance between us and then we were kissing. His lips tasted sweet and salty, like peanuts and caramel, presumably from the tiny candy bars he’d been munching on for the last few hours. But I wondered if that sweetness was just a part of him too. If maybe he was the antidote to everything I’d been feeling for the last year and a half. Even the saltiness held some promise, like there might be some more flirting and witty banter and sexy times in our future.

I kissed him, and for the first time since I’d moved to New York, I felt hope. Like things might actually get better. Like maybe this city contained what I’d been looking for all along.

We eased apart. Chris grinned at me again. “I’m gonna go out on a limb here and interpret that as a ‘yes’.”

I wasn’t sure what I was agreeing to, exactly, but I

nodded.

He started walking up the stairs to his front door. “Come on up,” he said. “Bad horror movies await us.”

I kind of thought some other things awaited me inside too. I got a good look at his ass as he climbed the stairs. Probably I should have been scared, but I wasn't. Something told me my future lay on the other side of that threshold.

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