

Halloween

Kentucky Style

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To my late wife, Suzanne Suddeth

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Halloween Morning

Eleven-year-old Mike had a problem. Having problems was normal for him. However, this was not one of his usual problems. Halloween 1959 came on Saturday so the school kids had the entire day off to celebrate, planning for trick-or-treating or for pranks and mischief. Because of the warm, dry weather, the old folks called it *Indian Summer*. It was a perfect day to be outdoors and doing “stuff”, which is all the kids ever told their parents no matter how much they were quizzed or threatened. It should have been a good day for Mike.

Timmy was Mike’s neighbor, the same age, and best friend. Mike had dark brown, curly hair and nervous blue eyes. Red haired Timmy was thin but a shade taller. They wandered around their small Kentucky town mulling over their predicament. They were too old for trick-or-treating. They refused to go elbow to elbow with whiney toddlers, crying babies, and runny-nosed little brats. Besides, they felt silly putting on a Donald Duck costume, being a cute little elf, or posing as the one-millionth skeleton in town.

Mike and Timmy would have died for a chance to attend a Halloween party, but they were told that they were still too young. Sunday, they would hear about the cool fun and exciting party they missed again this year. The teenagers would exaggerate the story, making Mike and Timmy miserable.

One alternative was Halloween pranks and mischief, but they were not the sort for such things. Hoisting pasture gates on top of barns, tipping outhouses, or teepeeing your neighbor's house angered folks. If they caught you, things could get downright mean and ugly. This was precisely the predicament—there was nothing to do on what should be an extra fun Halloween.

Mike was unhappy. He refused to sit home on Halloween night and watch TV with his grandma. If he stayed home, she would serve him graham crackers and milk. He nudged Timmy with his elbow as Timmy slowed down. “There must be something fun we can do. We’ll just keep marching around town until we find it.”

They ambled by the town cemetery and Timmy stopped. “Let’s look at this old graveyard—this might be something different for Halloween. We have plenty of time.”

The rundown cemetery backed up to the Daniel Boone National Forest with thick woods and tall hills as far as the eye could see. A creek ran through part of the property. They gazed at the cemetery with gloomy curiosity. The forest was scenic but boring. Just trees and more trees.

“Look how old it is. Is this creepy, or what?” It gave Mike a case of the willies just looking at it.

An ancient, wrought iron fence thick with rust encircling it surrounded the cemetery. The matching gate was hanging on for dear life by one decrepit hinge. Between the forest and the oaks planted by the cemetery caretaker many years earlier, lofty trees surrounded at least half the fence. They were so thick that the cemetery was in the shade most of the day. The darkness undeniably added to the sinister

atmosphere.

“Well...let’s look around some more.” Timmy was always more cautious and less adventurous than Mike, but he did not get in as much trouble.

On the inside, most of the tombstones were tall, thin, and fragile. Half of them were broken in two and crumbling. Tall weeds and overgrown grass covered both the names on the tombstones and the broken pieces of tombstone embedded in the mud and gunk. Most of the names were too worn to read.

Mike viewed this location as just perfect for Halloween fun. There were no houses or businesses nearby. No one would dare build near this weird place.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Mike had already made up his mind.

“Yes! This is ideal for Halloween. When it gets dark, we can bring Rose and Alice here. It will be scary and fun.” Timmy had discarded his usual caution. He had known Mike since kindergarten and he should have known better. Rose was Mike’s cousin, and Alice was Timmy’s cousin. They were also eleven years old.

“Yes, I don’t think we’ll need gags or tricks or pranks. This place is already spooky— perfect for Halloween.” Mike was feeling better now that he was confident that he would not be staying home to watch TV with grandma. Even watching something scary like *Frankenstein* with her just was not the same as seeing it with your friends. Anyway, she would want to watch the news and go to bed before it was dark. Whoopee.

“Okay, what else can we do? And, where else can we go?” asked

Timmy.

“We could always steal pumpkins out of Old Man Martin’s garden. He has a million pumpkins.” Old Man Martin’s garden was near Mike’s house.

Timmy laughed. “You’re not a thief, and we already have pumpkins at home.”

“Lousy idea,” said Mike as they strolled away from the cemetery. He happened to glance to his left. Across the street and at the top of a hill was an old house dating back to long before the Civil War. He pointed to it. “Let’s visit the Ratterson Mansion.”

Timmy glanced at it, “what for? It’s just a cruddy old house that’s ready to fall down.”

“A haunted house,” Mike announced as if he had just won a race. “It will be haunted when we’re through with it,” he added in a sly tone. He always thought his plans were brilliant, even if no one else did.

“Well...” Timmy stared at the ruins for a few seconds and shrugged. “Let’s go have a closer look.” They climbed the weed-covered hill to the old house.

“Remember this may be the Ratterson Mansion, but when we’re done, it will be a real haunted house with bloodcurdling ghosts. I’ll explain later.” Mike was still working out the details in his mind, but he figured this was just too good an opportunity to pass up.

The two boys hiked up the unpaved, circular front drive designed for horses. People who drove cars had never lived there. Timmy pointed to the left front of the two-story house at a wooden watering trough and a wrought iron hitching post for horses. Once, an elegant white picket fence had surrounded the property, but only a few flakes of white paint

remained on the fence, which was broken or missing in most places. There was still a front gate, but it stood cockeyed, making it a diamond instead of a square.

Timmy merely touched the front gate, causing it to clatter noisily onto the mossy brick sidewalk. “Oops.”

They both laughed and gazed up in wonder at this building built long before anyone they had ever met was born. It surprised Mike that it had not already crumbled to dust. The glass windows had been missing for many years. Most of the wooden shutters, which had once been able to cover the windows completely, lay on the ground in pieces. The massive solid oak front door, still on its hinges, was slightly open.

Mike hesitated and wondered what had happened to the families that lived there. Plague, murder, madness, robbers? He did not want to scare Timmy away. Mike would be even more afraid if he were alone. He slapped Timmy on the back. “Let’s just go in.”

“Why not?” Timmy hadn’t heard Mike’s plan or his fears. Without Mike’s warped imagination, Timmy saw only a house ready to collapse into worthless rubble.

Mike pushed the door, but the rusted hinges would not move. They combined their strength to heave it open and warily entered. The huge house had impossibly high ceilings, which differed from Mike’s house where his dad could touch the ceiling. They both stared up in amazement.

“It’s high enough to play basketball in here.” Mike pretended to make a free throw.

They stood in the hallway, which Mike’s parents called a foyer. Directly in front of them was an elaborate mahogany staircase leading to

the second floor. A gigantic kitchen occupied the entire left side of the downstairs. An entire crew of farm workers probably once chowed on fried chicken, biscuits, and corn on the cob at a long kitchen table. At the far end of the room was a gigantic stone fireplace.

The parlor occupied the right half of the downstairs with another stone fireplace at the far end. This room was big enough to have hosted a society ball or a cotillion. It smelled of mold and dust, with cobwebs and spider webs fighting for the corners.

“Let’s go upstairs,” whispered Mike.

“Why are you whispering?” Timmy bit his tongue to keep from laughing.

“Are we alone? You’re right; anyway I think the stairs are okay.” Mike had a creepy feeling they were not alone, but it was probably his imagination.

They tiptoed up the stairs and admired the handcrafted but filthy woodwork. Afraid to move quickly, they slowly made their way up. “Creak, creak, creak,” complained the ancient wood.

The upstairs was similar to the downstairs with an immense bedroom and the same incredibly high ceilings on each end of the second floor. On the far end of each room were more huge stone fireplaces. Blocking the doorways were pieces of broken furniture.

“Nothing to see up here, let’s go back downstairs,” said Timmy. “So far, I haven’t seen anything scary at all.” He grabbed Mike’s arm. “Boo.”

“Ha ha,” said Mike. They descended the rickety steps. “Later, I’ll show you what scary really is,” he said in an attempt to be mysterious.

“I’m going to check out the fireplace,” said Timmy. “I’ve never

seen one this size before.”

“I’ll look behind the house and see what’s there,” said Mike as he went out the back way. The door was long gone, but the doorway was directly opposite the front door.

Mike quickly surveyed the area behind the house. He hoped to find a family cemetery, but disappointment struck—he found only a rundown barn and a weedy gazebo. Since the gazebo was closest, he examined it first.

It was constructed of plain wood without fancy woodwork. Any paint had peeled away years before Mike was born. The wooden shingle roof was still halfway intact, but on the floor was a pile of sawdust and rubble. Mike figured little old ladies sat in the gazebo and sipped spiced tea out of little painted teacups as they nibbled on dainty butter cookies. They would have died before spilling their tea or dropping a crumb on the gazebo’s wooden floor. He looked down at the pile of junk and saw a vague glint of something shining through the rubbish. He bent over to investigate. Who knew what treasure might be down there?

Treasure?

Timmy carefully inspected every inch of the fireplace with respect bordering on reverence for the artisans who had constructed it a hundred and some odd years before he was born. An entire tree could almost fit inside it. Fieldstones or creek stones meticulously fit together by hand without the use of mortar. In Timmy's eyes, it was a work of art, Rembrandt in stone.

There is only so much time you can spend marveling at a fireplace, no matter how fantastic, so Timmy went to find Mike. Timmy could not see him from the doorway and decided to go inside the barn to look for him. The unpainted wooden barn was big enough for a small herd of horses. Although it looked to be as old as the house, barns like it were still common in Kentucky. Like the house, it was ramshackle. On the right, against the inside wall, was an old horse drawn wagon that was unusable and too big for anyone to cart off or steal. Everything else was indescribable junk and broken tools.

After a vain exploration of the barn, Timmy called out, "Mike. Mike. Mike." Mike must be either in the house or in front of the house. It is not like him to wander off, thought Timmy.

Walking past the ruined gazebo and back inside, Timmy checked upstairs and downstairs and then in front of the house. There was absolutely no sign of Mike. Dodging splinters, he found a place to sit on

the steps of the back porch. Although he was easygoing, this rubbed him the wrong way. Mike was impulsive, but he would not just disappear. Besides, Mike had plans for this old house, and he would not have left without saying something. This was a genuine mystery. Mike might have been kidnapped or murdered or there were a thousand other possibilities. Since Timmy was not a detective, he had no idea where to start.

He found a stray stone and absentmindedly hurled it toward the barn. The stone smashed into a fence post with a distinct clunk. He automatically turned toward the sound. Then, he heard another noise that was closer but fainter, which was probably a small bird or a noisy chipmunk. He stood up. Perhaps the noise was farther away than it seemed, such as the barn, but he had already thoroughly searched it. He took a few steps away from the house to satisfy his curiosity.

He heard the noise a second time, only louder, but it was not coming from the barn. His imagination was going out of control. He imagined noises were coming from the gazebo, but it was nothing but a pile of junk. Nevertheless, he decided to check it out. He carefully listened and heard the noise again. It seemed to be coming from the trash. Was he losing his mind?

Thinking that he might be hearing a wounded bird trapped under the rubble, he knelt to get a better look. Listening again, it seemed like Mike was yelling something unintelligible. That was impossible. Timmy was alone, but he cautiously began moving pieces of wood and debris. There was no floor visible.

“Timmy,” someone yelled. It had to be Mike, but where was he? Timmy continued to move bits of wood out of the way.

“Timmy!” It was Mike’s voice coming from beneath the floor.

“Mike, where are you?” he yelled.

“Down here. I’m at the bottom of the well,” screamed Mike.

“Well?” thought Timmy. He shifted more wood until he could see that there was no bottom. This gazebo really was a well. He yelled, “Mike, hold on. I’ll get you a rope and pull you out.” At least, he hoped there was a rope in the barn.

Racing to the barn, Timmy quickly looked around and found a coil of rope hanging on a wooden peg on a wall inside the barn. It was short and ratty, so he crossed his fingers and hoped it would do the trick.

He sprinted to the gazebo and tossed the rope down to Mike, screaming, “Mike, grab the rope.”

There was silence for several seconds. “It’s way too short,” Mike hollered back.

“I’ll be back,” shouted Timmy, but he did not know how or when. He had to explore the barn again. Rushing to the barn, he frantically searched for another rope or chains, but found nothing. Timmy considered going to the sheriff or the volunteer fire department. He knew it would take more time, and more important, it would humiliate Mike who would never speak to him again.

Lost in thought, Timmy leaned against the barn wall and stared at the old horse-drawn farm wagon that was the only thing in the barn in one piece. Something on the wall was sandwiched between him and the wall that he had not noticed. He turned around to examine it.

“Of course,” he said aloud. He was leaning against a large leather harness. Although it was extremely old, two big horses had used it when they pulled the massive wagon. Since it had been sewn so that two

thousand-pound horses could pull the wagon, it should be strong enough to pull Mike, who could not weigh more than seventy or eighty pounds. The only worry for Timmy was that after sitting in the barn for a bazillion years, it was in a pitiful shape, as he was just before a math test.

Although the thick, black harness was heavier than Timmy had figured, he was able to lift it off the wall. It was a struggle, but he slowly dragged it to the well with his shoulders aching and his legs cramping. Throwing one end down the well, he shouted, “Catch.” It looked like a giant spider web as he slung it down the well’s dark, slimy shaft.

He waited a few seconds for Mike to grab hold. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Mike called back.

Timmy tugged and pulled. Nothing happened. He took a deep breath and heaved. Nothing again. He dug in with the heels of his sneakers, but he began sliding toward the well. It would never do for him to plunge in too. “Stop,” he hollered.

Timmy had to think quickly. This was not going to work without assistance. Then he saw that he was standing under the roof of the well. Holding the remains of the roof up were four thick wooden posts. He tied one end of the harness to a post. Now, it could not slide.

“Now the harness is tied up. Just climb up it,” yelled Timmy.

Mike crawled up the harness, moving one arm or leg at a time. He was overjoyed to get out of this muddy, mucky hole in the ground, but he was grateful that it was such a shallow well, or he would have been in real trouble. Like permanent trouble—dead.

The ancient leather stretched and stretched. The harness was

several strips and pieces of leather sewn together to make one huge harness, so Mike and Timmy did not worry about the stretching. Unfortunately, they did not realize that the leather was stitched together with hundreds of individual seams that were decayed, rotten, and slowly popping out, one at a time like popcorn tossed in a campfire.

Mike was the first to notice that the stitches were self-destructing. “Oh no,” he groaned aloud.

Mike’s cry caused Timmy to notice the disappearing seams. “Hold on,” said Timmy as if Mike had any choice.

Mike threw up his hands when his handholds disappeared. “Hurry,” he cried as he watched and listened to the leather disintegrating.

Timmy backed away and stepped on the rope. He tossed it to Mike, “Catch.”

Most of the stitches ripped as Mike desperately lunged for the rope and grabbed onto it with both hands.

“Just hold on,” yelled Timmy.

With Timmy pulling and Mike pushing with his feet, Mike slowly rose up out of his watery jail.

Timmy laughed. “You look like a giant, hairy spider crawling up its web.”

Mike was too disgusted to reply. A minute later, he had risen out of the well. He collapsed onto his back beside it, feeling tired, dirty, and ill tempered. “Go ahead and ask what happened, but don’t you dare laugh...or else.” He wanted to throw something at the treacherous well.

“Well, uhhh...what did happen?” Timmy was not trying too hard to hide his amusement. “As long as you don’t bite like a spider.”

“Very funny. First of all, I thought that this was a gazebo, not a

well.” Mike waited to catch his breath before continuing, “I saw something shiny, and I stepped on a board to pick it up. The wood busted in two and down I went. I’m lucky it was muddy at the bottom, or I might have broken my neck. I get all the luck.”

“Listen.” Timmy paused to think. “We could always tell Rose and Alice that a ghost pushed you in.” He was trying to be funny and lighten Mike up.

“It’s not funny.” Mike would rather forget it had ever happened. “And why do they have to know?” He closed his eyes and had a burst of inspiration. “I have an idea for a haunted house...Danny. I’ll explain while we go look at the barn.”

Danny was their nine-year-old neighbor who was much shorter than Mike and so skinny he seemed to be all bones. His hair was long and brown with dark eyes that worshiped his older friends.

Timmy thought for a moment. “You mean like dressing Danny with a white sheet over his head. Would he do it?”

“Not exactly,” answered Mike who was trying to be mysterious again. “But something else good and scary. Do you remember my old Barlow pocketknife? Danny keeps asking me for it. When I promise him the Barlow, he’ll gladly haunt the house for us. According to my Dad, it’s a collector’s item.”

“Okay.” Timmy trusted him to finalize the details. “The four of us will go out right after supper. We’ll visit the graveyard first.” He was always ready for a good laugh.

“Yes, while we’re at the graveyard, Danny will go to the old house. He won’t be seen, but a very scary ghost will be heard. Alice and Rose will scream until it hurts. This will be the best Halloween in history.”

Mike was becoming excited. Grandma would have to watch the news alone.

As Timmy hurried home, Mike visited Danny, who was sitting on his back porch, looking bored. He waved as Mike appeared. Mike told Danny all about their Halloween preparations. He shrugged. He knew how boring Mike's Halloween plans usually were.

Mike knew it too. "I have a deal for you. I want you to go to the Ratterman Mansion after Timmy and I leave with the girls. I want you to take some chains with you. Go upstairs over the parlor and rattle the chains and moan like a ghost."

He looked at Mike suspiciously. "What's going on? Are you playing a trick on me?"

"No, after the girls scream nice and loud, you can show your face. Everyone will have a laugh, and we can all go home. It'll be fun." Mike remembered all the tricks he and Timmy had played on Danny. They shouldn't have, but Mike couldn't undo them.

Danny made a sour face. "I don't know. It's dark and it's just not a good idea. The mansion is really scary."

Mike dangled the Barlow in front of Danny's eyes as bait. "Haunt the old house tonight, and this is yours. It belonged to my grandpa; it's got a sharp blade, and it's worth gobs of money."

Danny beamed. "I'll haunt the house all night for a Barlow."

"I'll see you tonight. Leave some unlit candles near the front door." Mike was delighted. His Halloween plans were falling into place. He would brag to the teenagers about the cool time he had on Halloween. For once, they would be jealous.

"Just don't forget to change your grubby clothes." Danny was

trying too hard to be cute, since he never fretted over his own dirty clothes and face. “You are hilarious, my Mom won’t be happy. I’ll be lucky if I’m not grounded for Halloween.”

Mike knew he had to sneak home, change his clothes on the sly, and hide them so his mother wouldn’t discover his muddy, muddy clothes until the morning. Then, it was time to prepare for a super Halloween with his foolproof plans. How could anything go wrong?

Dusk in the Graveyard

After supper, when the sun had almost disappeared, Mike, Alice, Rose, and Timmy gathered to visit the old cemetery. Danny hid behind an oak tree down the street and waited for them to leave. The girls would never suspect that he was involved. Rose was a blonde almost as tall as the two boys, but her freckled face and delicate hands were ladylike. Alice was almost as short as Danny, with a tanned complexion and hair bordering on black. She always smiled and had an athletic, tomboy's body.

Timmy gave the introduction for the evening's activities. "First, we visit the haunted graveyard. Then we explore the spooky barn. Last, we tour the house inhabited by a family of ghosts. Unless you two girls are too scared?" He laughed a fake wicked laugh.

"Listen buster, we don't scare that easily, any silly tricks out of you two, and there won't be any treats tonight," said Alice with mock anger.

"Treats?" Timmy had not expected goodies.

Mike was afraid to open his mouth.

"Alice and I made fudge and fresh apple cider," answered Rose.

Mike wondered if he should cancel the haunting by Danny at the old house. Either fudge or pranks, but not both. Life is just not fair—you can never have a good time. Of course, Mike did not dare say this aloud to the girls. He simply nodded to whatever the girls said. Even at his

age, he knew better than to argue with females.

“No problem,” said Timmy.

“Let’s get going,” said Mike, which was his way of avoiding the question.

After everyone was out of sight, Danny dashed for the old house. He had borrowed a short length of heavy chain from his grandfather’s farm and slung it over his shoulder.

A creek, North Station Run, flowed directly behind the cemetery. Fog rolled off the creek and shrouded the back of the cemetery. The fog grew thicker by the minute, until the visibility around the cemetery was restricted to just a few feet.

The four youngsters chattered merrily as they hiked down the dirt road that led to the cemetery. Mike stopped and whirled around. Alice, Rose, and Timmy continued to walk.

“Wait,” hollered Mike, “we’re here.”

The other three stopped and peered into the ever-thickening haze. The only object actually visible was the rusty gate and fence. All four children automatically looked up. The arch over the entrance had a sign, which once read “Riverside Cemetery.” Most of the paint had peeled off and the sign read “R v rs de Cem t ry.” They all stared past the fence, trying to see into the cemetery. A few of the ancient tombstones poked up through the fog.

Rose shivered. “This place is almost too creepy for Halloween. “

“Rose is right. This place is just plain scary.” Alice scooted over until her shoulder nudged Rose’s shoulder, “it’s giving me goose bumps.”

“We can go inside the graveyard, just be careful where you step.”

Mike was trying to be helpful, because he held out faint hopes for fudge later.

Mike and Timmy walked in the entrance on a brick walkway, although it was weed-covered and half-pulverized. Some of the bricks were covered with mud and other bricks were under water. It was not a very inviting prospect, especially for young ladies who did not appreciate getting dirty. Neither Alice nor Rose moved a muscle. Timmy turned around and motioned with his right hand. They both shook their heads.

“If you stay on the bricks, you won’t walk on any graves.” Mike was still trying to be reassuring to the girls, but they did not appreciate his efforts after he mentioned graves. Without showing any inclination to budge, they continued to stand their ground.

“Mike and me are going to explore the graveyard, even if you two girls are chicken.” Timmy’s words sounded nasty, but he was just being humorous, as Timmy was never nasty.

Mike and Timmy walked into the desolate burial ground. After a few feet, the brick sidewalk began to sink beneath their feet. A few steps farther and it gradually disappeared under the murky water. Not wanting to get their shoes too muddy, they stopped with their backs to the girls.

“Aaaaaaaaeceeeaa,” came a noise from somewhere. With the fog, the sound seemed to come from everywhere or anywhere. All four children froze in place as they listened to the outlandish sound. “Ahhhhhuuuuuu,” came a similar but slightly different sound.

“Mike and Timmy, think again. That’s not going to frighten us.” Alice was not amused.

Mike and Timmy turned around and headed toward the girls.

“It wasn’t me,” replied Timmy.

“And it wasn’t me,” said Mike. He was supposed to do the scaring, but the racket was unnerving him.

Before the boys could return to the girls, they all heard, “Waaahhh.”

“Okay boys, what’s going on?” Although Alice was a teensy bit amused, she assumed with good reason that Mike and Timmy were involved, since they always got in trouble.

“Alice, I’ll give you three guesses—Danny, Joey, or Ricky. I can smell one of Mike’s stupid tricks a million miles away.” Rose was certainly not amused. Ricky and Joey were cousins of both Rose and Mike.

“Hooooooooooooo,” went the mysterious noise again.

“Come on Rose, we warned them. They’ll get tricks from us but no treats.” Alice was becoming aggravated, and she just never lost her temper.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two girls marched off into the gloom toward home. Both Timmy and Mike were surprised to watch the two girls saunter off in a huff. Even Timmy was tongue-tied. They could only stare in disbelief as the two enraged females gradually disappeared into the thick fog.

After a space of time, when he was fairly certain that the girls would not overhear him, Timmy asked, “Did you tell Danny to haunt the graveyard?”

Mike replied, “As far as I know, he’s at the haunted house. Did you?”

Timmy looked behind him. “No, but who did?”

“Ruff, arf, ruff,” sounded very close to their ears.

“Barking?” asked Mike, as they both tried to see who or what was making the mysterious sounds.

Then they saw the “haunter.” An owl was perched in the branches of a weeping willow tree, staring at them with bright yellow eyes that shone in their flashlight beam. “Yoowaah,” it called, as it glided off into the fog in search of mice.

“Wow,” said Mike, “of all the luck. The girls will never believe this.”

Meanwhile, Danny hurried to the soon-to-be haunted house. He had gotten slightly turned around and had come in the back way. He cruised past the barn without bothering to look inside. After seeing a thousand such barns, he was not interested in barn number one thousand and one.

Had he glanced in the barn, he might have glimpsed a sinister figure lurking in the shadows. Jimmy Wooten’s clothes were ragged and torn, with skin so dirty he might have been tanned, but there was really no way to tell. He was thin but very tall with long, dark hair and a coarse, black beard.

Jimmy Wooten was the town loner. He was in his forties, fifties, or sixties, but no one knew for sure about his age or anything else. He was homeless, to everyone’s knowledge. Nobody could actually recall talking to him or of knowing anyone who had occasion to speak to him. Neither could anyone remember him having friends or family. As far as

anyone could recollect, he had never bathed, shaved, changed clothes, or washed clothes.

Everyone always said that Jimmy was addled or touched from the war. What exactly addled or touched was, nobody really knew. What the war was, was anybody's guess—anywhere from the War of 1898 to the Korean War, or some small skirmish in between. On the other hand, Jimmy never bothered anybody or pilfered anything, so everyone left him alone.

Although Jimmy certainly never spoke to anyone to tell him or her how he felt, he always believed that the old family mansion, as he called the old house, was built by his great-grandfather. Even though he sometimes spent the night in there, he preferred to live in the barn for some strange reason that even baffled him.

Jimmy was suspicious, so he observed Danny pass the barn and enter the old house. He did not know Danny's name, but he could see that the boy was hauling something over his shoulder. He wondered what the little kid was carrying. Was he up to some Halloween mischief or pranks? Jimmy would not let him trash the family mansion. He would take care of him soon, but first he decided to leave a little present for anyone foolish enough to invade his barn. After it was ready for uninvited guests, Jimmy slipped something in his pocket and headed inside behind Danny.

Mike and Timmy raced to catch Alice and Rose. Alice glanced at them and scowled, “you two—just go away.”

“Yeah, we warned you two about tricks.” Rose turned and glared at

them.

Timmy darted in front of them so they had to stop and listen. “Please listen to what we have to say.”

Mike caught up with Timmy and held his right hand up as if he were being sworn in to testify. “It wasn’t us. I swear we’re not lying.”

“An owl made the weird noises,” Timmy said with a grin that usually disarmed the girls.

“He’s telling the truth.” Mike could just see the two girls eating Halloween treats without him. He would have to go to Grandma’s house, munch on soggy graham crackers and drink warm milk. It hurt to think about it.

Alice stopped. “Owl?” she asked skeptically.

“Why didn’t we see the owl?” Rose was not about to accept another unbelievable whopper told by either of the boys.

“Because of the fog. We didn’t see the owl until after you girls left. Then we realized it was making the noises.” For once, Timmy did not smile so the girls would know he was sincere.

“Now, will you please go with us to the haunted house?” Mike’s voice was whiney but he did not care. His night was being ruined. Grandma might even serve cornbread and buttermilk, which was her favorite.

Alice looked at the two earnest boys for a moment. “Okay...but no tricks.”

“Or you get no treats,” Rose told Mike and Timmy. She really did not need to remind them. Mike led the way down the road. He had to juggle having fun with Danny scaring the girls, with not making them angry. Crossing his fingers, Mike headed toward the dark barn that was

barely visible, since there were no lights or houses around. A sinister full moon was visible over the house, but he did not notice it.

Haunted Barn?

While the other four children were leaving the graveyard, Danny had gone into the old house and left two candles near the front door. Then he climbed the stairs and turned to the right. He hid next to the fireplace, so that if anyone happened to come into the room, they would not discover him. Jimmy Wooten had slipped in the back door of the old house, just moments before the four children arrived at the barn. Peeping out from the doorway, he spied them. I'll take care of those kids later, he told himself. The idea was so delicious that he laughed right out loud and almost gave himself away.

Jimmy slowly crept up the old stairway. Every two or three steps, he paused to peer into the darkness and listen. Halfway up, he stopped when he heard a scurrying, scratching sound. Despite the darkness, he tried to scan the stairs ahead of him but saw nothing. Then he spied two beady, evil eyes glowing at him. He blinked so he could see through the blackness and tell if some critter was ready to attack him. Gradually his eyes adjusted to the darkness, something enormous and grey was staring back at him. He thought at first that he was looking at a possum. They have lots of sharp, nasty teeth. They aren't vicious unless they are cornered, but did this one think he was cornered?

He started to back up, but his eyes cooperated, and he saw a little better. It was a giant rat as long as a housecat. He relaxed, since rats

never bothered him, even though their long, yellow teeth were disgusting. He had even eaten rats during lean periods. This one would back away from him, rather than risk being trampled by his size twelve leather boots.

Jimmy continued up the stairs. The rat disappeared into the depths of the house, probably going behind the walls. He halted again at the head of the stairs and listened intently but heard nothing. Taking a deep breath, he held it for several seconds. Just when his lungs were beginning to burn, he detected a faint sound of breathing. The noise came from the right; therefore, the boy carrying something on his shoulder was to the right. Jimmy went to the left. In a few minutes, he would give the youngster the scare of his life.

While Jimmy was sneaking up the stairs, the other children were looking at the old barn, which was barely visible in the dark.

“This is really an old barn—it must be at least a hundred years old.” Rose was the only one in the group who actually stayed awake during history class. She was also the only one who could find pleasure in an old building full of odors coming from decaying and rotting things best not thought about or sniffed.

“Mike and Timmy, you all have the flashlights. Go in first. No funny stuff,” Alice said in a no-nonsense voice. Since Danny was stationed in the haunted house, Mike and Timmy entered the barn without hesitation. It was windowless with smells of hay and animals from long ago still thick in the air. Their flashlights bored and burned tube-like holes in the velvety blackness.

“You’ll never believe what I—” Timmy’s voice disappeared in mid-sentence. His flashlight clattered to the floor, with the beam briefly

jerking spasmodically all over the barn, before it came to a rest, pointing at Alice's right penny loafer.

Mike had been a step or two ahead of Timmy, so he neither saw nor heard anything. He was busy exploring the ancient barn with the beam of his flashlight poking around the mysterious place, which was breathtakingly different at night. The dark corners and shadows seemed as if they were hiding long-forgotten secrets of things best not discussed or recalled.

"Timmy," screamed Alice, "what happened?"

When Alice screamed, Rose noticed the rogue flashlight and grabbed Alice's hand as if she were drowning. It was hard to tell if Rose the one who was afraid, or if she was just reassuring Alice.

At the same time, Mike turned around and aimed his flashlight in the direction of the yell. The beam accidentally burned into Alice's eyes. If she was blind in the dark before, that made her doubly blind. Unable to see, Alice pivoted and collided with Rose, then accidentally stomped on Rose's big toe.

Mike saw the abandoned flashlight lying on the floor and snatched it up, so that he had twin beams piercing the darkness. As he searched for Timmy, his flashlights focused on something bizarre, causing him to hesitate for a moment.

While Mike had gathered up the other flashlight, Rose hollered, "Ouch!" as her big toe complained about being squashed.

Recognizing Rose's voice, Alice said, "Sorry, Rose. Where's Timmy?"

"What's that?" asked Mike, but Alice and Rose were not listening, since they were searching for Timmy.

“Mike, shine your flashlight around. Timmy’s missing.” Alice’s voice was urgent without sounding panicked.

“I have his flashlight,” said Mike as if volunteering that information would help.

“Ohhhh,” groaned someone on the floor.

“It must be Timmy. Shine your light on the floor,” said Rose in an extra high-pitched voice.

Brandishing his dual beams, Mike caught a glimpse of red, which had to be Timmy, since he was the only redhead. Mike focused his eyes on the red. “I found him,” shouted Mike triumphantly. “He’s on the floor,” he added as if the girls could not figure that out.

Mike knelt down on the straw-covered dirt floor to examine Timmy, who was on his back. What had happened to him? He was lying too still. Was he hurt? “Timmy, can you hear me?” Mike was scared.

“Yes,” said Timmy.

Mike realized he had asked the wrong question.

“Are you injured?” Alice had knelt down beside Mike.

“I...don’t...know.” Timmy’s words were slurred.

“Timmy, we’re trying to help you,” said Rose who had just knelt on the other side of Alice.

“Caught my neck on something...slipped on something else...fell down,” answered Timmy. He was too woozy to tell his story.

“Timmy, you must be stunned. But I think I know what happened. I saw something right above our heads, be careful when you stand up,” said Mike, who was seldom that helpful.

“Listen, this is important. I think someone else may be in this barn besides us.” Timmy tried to lift his head and peer into the darkness.

Alice and Rose helped Timmy get to his feet as Mike aimed his flashlights on the object. It was so slender Mike had trouble keeping focused on it.

“Before you all move, look where my flashlights are pointing.” Mike carefully trained his beams.

Alice stared up. “It looks like—”

Rose tried to finish the sentence. “A hangman’s—”

“Noose?” Timmy asked. “Why? Who? Is this a joke?”

Timmy’s questions echoed the thoughts of the other three.

“It wasn’t here earlier today, and no, we didn’t put it there,” said Mike before they could accuse him, since he got blamed for everything.

“Mike’s right. If we had put it here, I wouldn’t have caught my neck. That really hurt,” said Timmy. “That reminds me, Mike hand me a flashlight. You all haven’t seen anything yet.” Taking his flashlight, Timmy zeroed in to his right. “Can you see it now?”

A straw man, looking much like a scarecrow in a cornfield, was propped up on the seat of the old wagon. It was dressed in a formal costume that might have been the uniform for the carriage man many years earlier when the old mansion was a part of high society. All of the clothes were stuffed with straw, including the black leather gloves and boots.

“Timmy, do you notice something strange about the straw man?” Mike had to turn his head away. “And no, we didn’t put it there,” he told Alice and Rose. It was too much even for him.

The straw man held his head under his right arm. It was realistic, too realistic for the children as they held their flashlights on the gruesome scene that made them sick to their stomachs.

“It’s just wax,” whispered Alice for Rose, because Rose had her eyes closed.

“If Mike and Timmy are telling the truth, then somebody doesn’t want us here, and they’re going to a whole lot of trouble to frighten us off.” Alice stuck her tongue out and closed her eyes.

“Let’s just leave. This is too scary even for Halloween.” Rose opened her eyes just long enough to retch.

Then, something flew in the barn, throwing off two brief shadows as it crossed the flashlight beams. It called out, “Hoooooeeee hoooooeeee.”

“We’re out of here,” cried Alice and Rose in unison.

All four children bolted from the barn. Something flew out of the barn and zoomed past them as they made their panicked escape.

“It’s after us,” screamed Mike.

“Let’s just keep running,” bellowed Timmy.

They all stopped twenty feet from the barn and heard the peculiar noise again, “Eeeeho eeeeho.” Looking toward the noise, they saw an owl gliding past them.

“That’s the same owl that we saw at the graveyard.” Mike pointed to the feathered haunter.

“Now do you believe us?” asked Timmy.

“Yes, I guess we have to,” admitted Rose.

Alice the Bird Watcher lectured, “That’s an *Otus asio*, also known as the Eastern Screech Owl. I should have recognized its sounds. Let’s go visit the haunted house.”

“Remember, no tricks,” warned Rose.

“Or no treats,” added Alice.

“No problem at all,” lied Mike with his fingers crossed.

“The haunted house is scary enough all by itself,” said Timmy, who should also have crossed his fingers.

Avoiding the well, Mike and Timmy led the girls around to the front of the house where Danny had deliberately left candles to conveniently, but accidentally find. Mike was excited. This was going to be so much fun, if nothing went wrong. And what could go wrong?

Haunted House!

Danny peered around the shards of glass in the front window, so he would know exactly when the other children arrived. Jimmy was still upstairs and on the other side of the house from Danny. Jimmy patiently waited, so that five children would experience a Halloween they would never forget, even if they tried.

Alice, Rose, Mike, and Timmy stopped in front of the old house.

“You’re right, Timmy, this old mansion is plenty creepy in the dark.” Alice shuddered.

“It’s eerie but very historical,” said Rose, always the group historian. She added, “Boys, you’ve got the flashlights, we’ll follow right behind you.”

“I’ve got matches if we happen to find lanterns or candles,” said Mike, who certainly did know candles were at his disposal.

“Danny brought candles?” whispered Timmy to Mike.

Mike whispered back, “Yes, we’d better talk loud so he hears us in time to be spooky.”

“Come on in, ladies,” thundered Timmy. Both Danny and Jimmy would have heard Timmy’s loud voice if they had been asleep. Danny prepared to drag his chains, while Jimmy readied his own surprise.

As Mike entered the house, he said, “Look what I found.” He held up the candle so they could see his find. “I wonder if it still lights.”

Easily lighting the new candle, he stepped forward to the stairway. “Look, there’s another candle.” He quickly lit the second one and wondered if he could grow up to be an actor.

“Let’s go to the right, I want to show the girls the huge, magnificent fireplace.” Timmy neglected to mention that they would be directly under a young ghost named Danny.

The four entered the parlor. Mike and Timmy obligingly trained their flashlights on the old stone fireplace for the girls. The flashlight beamed bounced off the uneven rocks in a hundred directions, giving the fireplace a rainbow effect.

Impressed by the show, Rose said, “This is incredible workmanship. I’d love to come back here in the daylight and take pictures of it.”

Hearing voices directly under him was Danny’s cue to leap into action. He slowly dragged the chain over the old hardwood floor. “Clink, clink, clank,” went the rusty old chains.

“Did you guys hear something?” asked Alice innocently.

“No,” said Mike and Timmy simultaneously but much too quickly and forcefully.

“Alice is right. I heard something too. Maybe it’s rats,” suggested Rose.

After a few seconds, Danny started the vocal sound effects. “Woooo, Woooooo,” he said but not much louder than a conversational level.

“I hear another sound now,” said Alice, whose ears were sharp from listening to birdcalls.

“No,” replied the two boys, who were trying too hard to be sneaky.

Rose looked up at the ceiling. “Alice is right, but maybe it’s the wind or a bird.”

Jimmy Wooten had also heard Danny’s efforts. He moved closer to the center of the upstairs, near the stairway. If that boy thought he was frightening the others, Jimmy had a big, scary surprise for that little fellow. All five children would soon learn what scared really was. Yes!

Danny cranked up the scary sounds a couple of notches. He dragged, clanked, and wiggled the chains until it would sound like thunder downstairs. “Clink, clank, cluuunnk,” went the chains until the dry floor literally shook with dust rising up in a miniature cloud.

“Tell me you boys didn’t hear that?” Alice sounded suspicious.

“I know I heard something.” Rose sounded distrustful.

“Well...yes, I did hear something,” Mike reluctantly admitted.

“But what is it?” asked Timmy diplomatically. He was trying to heighten Danny’s efforts without mentioning the “ghost” word.

Just then, Danny let loose with a first class wail, “Oooooooooo, ohhhhhh!”

“That’s downright scary,” whispered Alice. She scooted closer to Mike and his flashlight.

“Wait...is this another of your tricks, boys?” Rose knew them too well.

“No,” said both boys. They would never be used car salesmen; they were so obvious they’d have to give the cars away.

Time to scare the girls and make them run out of the house screaming their heads off, thought Danny gleefully. He almost felt guilty about taking Mike’s knife. He started dragging and shaking the chain across the floor, as he headed toward the stairs.

“It’s moving towards the stairs,” cried Alice.

“Boys, check out the stairs,” Rose barked as she backed away from it.

If the girls could have seen the two boys’ faces, they would have seen two silly grins.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Danny opened his mouth up for a real scream. “Eeeeeeeee—”

Danny’s latest vocal production came to a screeching halt as he gazed upon something that was certainly not in the plans. A huge, horrible figure loomed over him, reminding him of King Kong. It was wearing a mask; at least Danny hoped and prayed it was a mask. If this was not a disguise, he was looking at a real live...gorilla. Danny had no interest in waiting around to discover the truth, since he was frozen with fright. He was not much over four feet tall, but this monster staring down on him was well over six feet. After several seconds, Danny came out of shock, bolting and jumping down the stairs.

Hearing the pounding of footsteps on the stairs, Alice screamed, “Boys, please come right back in here. Don’t you dare leave me by myself, especially without a flashlight.”

Rose sidled up against Alice. “Yes, let’s stick together.”

Mike and Timmy simultaneously put their hands over their mouths to stifle their snickers.

Mike couldn’t believe how well his plan was unfolding. He was brilliant! Still not wanting to be discovered by the other children, Danny vaulted down the stairs and out the back way without looking back. When he was safely out of the house, he calmed down. He realized he needed to warn the others, so he decided to run around to the front of the

house, hoping to warn them before they encountered the monstrous ape. Although no zoos were around, a creature that big might have traveled for miles. Didn't they swing through trees from limb to limb?

As Danny descended the stairs in complete panic, Jimmy thought, This is easier than I expected. I just stood there and the boy was scared speechless. I didn't have to growl or anything. Time to go downstairs and have fun and finish the job. This was his best Halloween ever.

The four children deserted the parlor as a group, although Mike and Timmy just pretended to be afraid. Alice hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. "Unless you two admit the noises are part of your pranks, we're leaving." "And then you can say goodbye to your fudge and cider," Rose told them.

"No pranks, that must have been either a harmless ghost or hungry squirrels," lied Timmy who had been around Mike too long.

Mike's tummy was growling at him for losing the goodies, but he wasn't ready to tell the girls the truth. They were still at the bottom of the staircase. Hearing more footsteps on the stairs, they looked up. Despite the feeble gleam of the candle, they could plainly see the face of a gorilla. In shock, the girls stared at the huge form with its evil, sharp teeth. The eyes and fierce expression were so realistic no one questioned its authenticity.

Meanwhile, Danny had circled the house, until he was just outside the front door. He didn't want to yell if the monster was still on the stairs, but they needed to get away while they could. Maybe it had already come down.

Alice and Rose had both reacted to it just as Danny had—scared speechless and frozen in their tracks. They couldn't even think. Timmy

wondered what was going on. Mike had never mentioned Danny wearing a gorilla mask, but Mike hadn't told him all of the details.

Slowly, the gorilla descended the stairs, one ponderous step at a time, holding its long arms up and outwards in a menacing manner in imitation of the old *Frankenstein* movies. It was one-hundred percent intentional; Jimmy remembered seeing all those old movies.

Mike thought it was hilarious. Danny was giving him his money's worth, or rather, his knife's worth. Mike laughed aloud. "Guys, I have a secret to tell you. That's Danny with a gorilla mask on."

Alice and Rose had already backed out of the house and were just past the door, although they were still too spooked to speak.

"Too tall," muttered Timmy to Mike.

"What?" said Mike.

Then Timmy turned around to see that Danny was on the outside already. He was looking at Timmy but pointing at something.

Jimmy saw Mike's mirth. That one little boy is laughing at me, thought Jimmy, who was peeved by a boy snotty enough to ignore a scary gorilla. He thought, He'll be afraid when I get through with him.

"Uhhh, Mike, look behind you," suggested Timmy, who now was almost as afraid as the girls were, although he was still standing beside Mike.

Mike glanced behind him. There was Alice, Rose, and....Danny? "Awoh," said Mike.

Then the gorilla growled mightily. "Yooooohhh. Yaaawww!" A deep, inhuman sound vibrated in Mike's chest.

Five children screamed in unison and stereo, "Eeeeeee," as they ran away from the haunted house in complete horror. Danny, being the

farthest away, was the first to reach the road. Although he was the youngest, he had enough sense to go to the left, which was the way home.

Still hysterical, Alice and Rose were the next to reach the road. They went to the right, in the opposite direction of home. Without thinking, Mike and Timmy followed the girls. Thus, the other four children were heading the wrong way.

Jimmy grinned and rubbed his hands together as all five children fled in utter fright. Excellent. I have the mansion and my barn all to myself. Just might need this again, he told himself as he stuck the mask back in his pocket.

Danny could not understand why he didn't hear the other children behind him. Hoping nothing was wrong, he turned around to see where the others were. He could see nothing, no one, or no monsters, but it was dark. Cautiously, he headed back toward the old house, but he wasn't certain it was at all safe to go past it again. Too much like sticking your tongue out at fate.

As Danny passed the old mansion, he looked in that direction, but there was nothing to see or hear. He went past it before hearing the unmistakable sound of children's chatter ahead of him. They were going the wrong way. They were either lost or were going somewhere else, but Mike had not mentioned any other plans. Danny felt slighted and left out, so it hurt his feelings. Since he had nothing else to do anyway, he decided to follow them and find out where they were going. He would be very quiet and stay in the shadows, but Mike would get his ears singed later.

After a block or so, the four children finished their panicked rout

and stopped in the middle of the road to catch their breaths. Looking back toward the house, Mike said, “At least nothing is following us yet.”

“Listen boys, what was that back there? You two were just as scared as we were. I’ll believe you—just tell me the truth,” Alice asked without sounding angry or skeptical.

Still wary of being followed, Mike glanced back. “I don’t know, and for once, I don’t want to know. From now on, that old place is out of bounds.”

Timmy had a silly grin on his freckled face. “I hate to tell you all, but we’re going the wrong way. Home is the other direction, and Danny is the only one who went the right way.”

“Hey, we’re close to the old mill, Winston’s Mill,” said Rose the walking, talking, and sometimes, running-for-her-life history book.

“So what?” Timmy hated history worse than anybody.

“Well, first of all, it’s been abandoned for many years, but the old wooden waterwheel is still there. The old mill is really scenic and spooky.” Rose was trying to entice the other children into going there because she had never visited it herself.

Alice shook her head. “I’ve had enough scares for one night.”

“Wait, the first one doesn’t even count, it was just an owl,” protested Timmy, who was innocent, at least in the cemetery.

“How about the gorilla or whatever it was?” asked Alice in an I-already-know-the-answer tone.

Mike did not want to talk about that.

“When we get to the mill, I know a real, neat scary tale to tell. It’s supposed to be a true story,” said Rose in her best saleslady voice.

“Rose’s right. Group, follow me,” ordered fearless Mike, who lived by the rule—pull the trigger and ask questions later.

Rose and Timmy followed Mike, but Alice hesitated for a moment. After the gorilla incident, she had no desire to be alone in the dark. There were no houses and no lights around, and she would feel better if she were safe at home or in a group. She reluctantly jogged down the narrow road until she caught up with the others. Didn’t they have enough sense to go home?

We Won't Believe a Haunted Mill

The four children yakked and laughed merrily as they hiked down the middle of the unlit, deserted road to Winston's Mill. Danny had no difficulty at all with following the rowdy bunch without being discovered. They never suspected he was only a few feet behind them.

The mill lay less than a quarter mile from the road. Rose pointed to her right at a vague shadow outlined by the bright moon. "That's the old mill."

They veered off the road and walked through a grassy field toward the mill. The road crossed the North Station Run downstream from the mill—the same creek ran behind the cemetery. Spanning the creek was an ancient, wooden covered bridge, one of the few in the state still open to traffic.

The other four children stopped in front of the deserted, long-closed mill. A wooden waterwheel turned huge grindstones that ground wheat and corn into flour and cornmeal for local farmers. Although the wheel no longer moved, the water still gurgled over and around it, causing a gentle churning, hissing sound to break the silence of the isolated mill that was surrounded by woods and fields. The wooden roof was gone except for scattered patches of rotted timber. The stone walls had been sturdy enough to withstand years of neglect. The massive wooden front door was lying off to one side on the ground.

Danny had thought it would be better for him to stay on the road, because there was less chance for the others to see him. He had heard them mention the old mill. Although he was only nine, he knew more than anyone gave him credit for, and he had visited it with his dad. He was confident that he would find a way to sneak up on them and give them an a-number-one scare. They would think twice before they snubbed him again.

While the four children investigated the old mill, Danny continued down the road until he reached the covered bridge. Beside the historic bridge, where the asphalt road met the bridge's wooden floor, he saw a glimmer of light. "Hmm," he said, as he knelt to examine the mysterious light.

Meanwhile, the four children were prepared to enter the old mill.

"Wait." Alice held her right hand in the air. "Let's hear Rose's story first."

"Okay, here's the story grandpa told me." Rose was in Heaven, she was telling a historical tale—and someone was actually listening.

"Way back before the Civil War, a man named Bill Winston built this mill, and he ran it all by his self. This was so long ago that it was the only mill for miles around, so he had lots of business and made a bunch of money.

The trouble was that Bill didn't trust banks. He hid his money all around the mill and inside it, so that thieves couldn't steal his loot. There were silver dollars and gold coins called double eagles stashed everywhere. But that didn't keep the bad guys from trying to get his coins. Several times, they broke into his mill in the middle of the night, but they never could find his treasure, no matter how hard they tried.

You might imagine what comes next—three robbers kidnapped him and threatened to kill him, if he didn't tell them where he hid his fortune. He refused to talk to them, so they beat and tortured him, but he was a stubborn old coot. He would not say one word, not even a hint. Finally, they tortured him so much he dropped dead right at their feet. They threw his body into the mill. When the waterwheel hit his body, it knocked his head clean off. The sheriff found his body the next day, but the head was never found. Till this very day, it's never been found.

Some say that the killers were never captures and that neither they nor anyone else has ever found the money. Now here's the real creepy part.

People swear that his spirit is restless. They say he's still looking for his head. Many people believe he's guarding his gold. Others think he's searching for his killers. I know one thing for sure—everyone who has tried to find his money has come up empty handed, and they've been taken to the State Lunatic House.”

“Gee whiz.” The ever-believing Mike was impressed. “His head, his money, and his killers were never found?”

“That's right.” Rose was always thrilled to answer a history question, but no one ever asked.

“This is supposed to be a true story?” said Alice, “I feel sick.”

“Well...Mister Winston was killed for sure.” Rose never, never lied.

In the meantime, Danny had knelt beside the bridge while he investigated the weird light. Someone had pilfered a jack-o-lantern and sat it beside the bridge after it had gotten too heavy to carry. Although it was lying on its side, it had not busted. The candle was burning feebly,

but the two slit eyes, the round nose, and the huge, pointed teeth were clearly visible. He turned the pumpkin until it was right side up. The candle inside began to burn more brightly, making the lurid face frightening. Seconds later, the entire pumpkin was glowing, the face taking on a demonic grin perfect for Halloween.

“Why not?” said Danny to no one in particular as he lifted it. He really wasn’t stealing it, and he didn’t want it to go to waste, so there must be some use for it on Halloween. He carried it toward home, but it was heavier than he realized, and it was a little warm to lug a long distance. It hadn’t occurred to him to blow the candle out. After traveling just a few feet, he sat it on the top of a tall tree stump. He might or might not take it home with him later, but right then he wanted to explore the other side of the bridge a little bit. His Halloween mischief was not through yet. He wandered back to the bridge.

As Danny was crossing the bridge, Mike said to his three friends, “Let’s go on inside the mill, the last one in is a yellow chicken.”

No one in their right mind wants to be a yellow chicken, so all four children rushed in the mill at the same time. After squeezing through the narrow doorway and almost ripping their clothes, they examined the interior with the flashlights. Any furniture, tools, or glass had disappeared long ago. Although a wooden second story loft was over their heads, the wooden steps were broken and crumbling. No one dared to go up the stairs or even touch them, lest they collapse on their head like a giant mousetrap.

“Boys, shine the light on the floor. If there’s a hiding place for his money, it’ll be there.” Rose knelt on the grimy floor of grayish-black paving stones with a nineteenth-century version of cement bonding

them to each other.

“Why don’t we search for the head?” Timmy was attempting to be humorous.

“Yuck, Timmy, you’re disgusting.” Alice stuck her tongue out at him.

“What if Mister Winston’s ghost shows up?” Mike was not trying to be funny.

“Double or triple yuck.” Timmy laughed.

While they discussed the whereabouts of Mister Winston’s head and his money, Danny had crossed to the other side of the bridge. Although the moon was shining, it was still difficult to see past his outstretched hands. Standing on the side of the road, he could hear someone or something approaching him, but he was unable to see it or them. It was either an animal or a big fat man.

For a nine-year-old boy, Danny was as level headed as could be, but there was no way he could deny it—he was afraid. He hoped that whatever it was could not see or hear him. If he tried to run, it would surely attract attention. He decided to move slowly away from the road without making any noise. In an emergency, he could always jump into the creek, which was only ten or fifteen feet away.

Danny stepped into some high grass, but he could no longer hear whatever it was. Either it had gone another direction, or it had stopped to listen for him. Was he being hunted? Were mountain lions in this part of Kentucky? Bears were for sure, and they were just as dangerous as huge cats.

Danny felt something icy on his back. He froze for a moment, not from the cold but from naked fear. First the gorilla and now this. He

should have walked home when he had the opportunity. Then the wind shifted; something had a strong musky odor.

Horse? As Danny turned around, he heard a friendly “neigh.” It was probably his imagination playing tricks on him, but the voice (if there is such a thing for horses) sounded vaguely familiar. He cautiously turned his head to find a horse literally in his face. Was he about to be bitten by an aggressive equine? Then in the pale moonlight, he noticed something. This particular horse had some streaks of white on its flanks, sort of like lightning bolts. He just might know its owner.

In any case, he was not being attacked. On the contrary, it was nuzzling his cheek in a display of affection. Old Man Martin owned an unusually colored mare just like this one that was chestnut with streaks of white, which the children called racing stripes, because the high school boys customized their hot rods with racing stripes.

Danny smiled. He had ridden her several times. “Hi, Molly, good girl,” he cooed.

Molly became excited and shook her head up and down. She had definitely recognized him. She had a short length of rope around her neck but no halter. As a cruel Halloween prank, somebody had opened her stall door and the barn door, so she was likely lost.

Taking the rope Danny led her to the bridge. Although she was not saddled, he could climb up the side of the bridge and mount her. He had never ridden bareback before, but she was gentle and cooperative. It would be an easy, quick way to get home. Then he had another, more interesting idea. This was supposed to be a fun night, so he would have to make his own fun. And his own revenge.

Meanwhile, Alice had quickly wearied of the mill. She did not like

history, and she'd had enough spooky stuff for one night. "Let's go out and see the waterwheel," she told the others as she stood in the doorway, which was her diplomatic way of tempting them out of the dreary place.

Everyone followed her outside to inspect the huge wooden wheel. It was damaged or missing in so many places, that it scarcely resembled a wheel anymore, but it was nonetheless picturesque despite the darkness. Water gargled, gurgled, and flowed noisily over the remnants of it, so Mike and Timmy both obligingly trained their flashlights on the sound.

"Maybe the money is hidden or buried around the waterwheel." Mike attempted to peer under the cascading water.

"Where should we start looking?" asked Rose, the only one to take Mike seriously.

"We'd have a better chance of finding Winston's head." Timmy sounded sarcastic, but he was trying to get everyone to laugh, which is always a tough job on Halloween.

Alice turned her back on the picturesque ruins. "Listen gang, it's getting late. Let's just go home."

As soon as Danny rode Molly across the bridge, he stopped. He was wearing an oversize black leather jacket with metal snaps, which he jerked up until it covered his head. He unsnapped one snap, so that he could peer out of the jacket and see where he was going. He was now headless. Then he remembered the pumpkin, since the candle was still burning energetically. He had another idea. Riding over to the tree stump, he grabbed the pumpkin and placed it under his right arm, on his hip. He slowly rode toward the other children.

Meanwhile, Rose, Mike, and Timmy appeared reluctant to leave the mill. Alice huffed in exasperation and marched away from them.

Timmy shrugged. “Guys, we might as well follow her. Once she makes up her mind, it’s all over.” He was being polite as he was really tired of the mill too.

“Wait up, Alice. We’ll all go home together, it’s safer that way,” said Rose, realizing they had wearied of historical stuff.

Still on his horse, Danny headed straight for the others. He did not want to pass too closely, or they might recognize him even with the jacket covering his head. On the other hand, he wanted them to see that he was a headless rider just like the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow.

Eagle-eyed Mike was the first to spot the Headless Horseman. “Look! Something is coming straight at us.”

It was then that Danny realized that Molly was moving much too slowly. “Go Molly, go,” he whispered. She obeyed him, but she was in no mood for a fast gallop, so she broke into a trot. Since Danny was not an experienced rider, he was bouncing up and down so much that he was afraid he might fall off and bust his head, although he forgot that he was a headless horseman. He had planned to take his pumpkin head home, but he was just barely holding on to it. He realized he needed to make some other plans, fast. Like a giant hot potato, it was beginning to burn his arm.

“A horse, someone’s riding a horse in the dark,” said Alice, “I’m afraid I’m going to get trampled.” She paused to let the other three join her.

“But where’s the head?” Timmy had lost his skepticism and was

just as surprised as anyone else.

Four shocked children stared at the sight.

“Timmy’s right. There’s no head.” Mike’s voice quivered as if he were standing in front of a large floor fan.

“Winston,” yelled Rose. She was ready to cry.

“Next Halloween, I’m staying home,” complained Alice, who was not kidding. They continued to stare at the headless rider bearing down on them. A bizarre light was emanating from an area underneath the rider’s right arm, but they didn’t realize what they were looking at.

“I’m not afraid to admit it. This makes me want to barf,” said Timmy who for once was not kidding.

Right then, Danny had decided that everyone had seen enough of the Headless Horseman. Besides, he needed to get rid of the pumpkin, before he lost his hold on his bouncing mount.

Although Danny could not hear him, Mike said, “Winston is galloping away, that’s a relief.”

Danny came to the point, where he could not hold the pumpkin any longer. He flung it away, with it falling like a water balloon. As it plunged to the ground, the candle went out when the pumpkin flattened.

“He’s tossing something,” yelled Rose.

“Eeeeeee, it’s a head,” screamed Alice.

“Eeeeeee,” screamed Rose to match Alice.

The headless Mister Winston disappeared into the dark of night. Even Mike and Timmy were stifling their urge to shout as if they were crazy. All four children sprinted away from the haunted mill. It never occurred to them that the headless horseman was also going away from the mill. The four near-hysterical children wanted to be anywhere but

there.

Mike silently promised that if he was given a chance to live through this Halloween, he would never complain about a dull Halloween again. If he survived, he would be content to party with grandma. If he survived.

Halloween Homecoming

Danny and Molly headed straight for home, but he was worried about passing the haunted house again. In accordance with Murphy's Law—What can go wrong will go wrong—she tired out just as they were passing the haunted house, slowing down to a turtle walk.

“Molly, don't do this, keep going,” said Danny, but her English was bad and she ignored him. He stared at the old house, just waiting for the gorilla to make another guest appearance, but luckily, the monster ape was a no show.

Meanwhile, the other four children were still stampeding when they reached the road. Even when Molly was tired, she was still faster than the kids, so they were behind Danny. Halfway to the haunted house, they stopped to catch their breath, huffing and trying not to get dizzy.

His chest still jerking from lack of air, Timmy said, “In a couple of minutes we're going to have to pass the haunted house again.”

“You mean the gorilla again?” asked Mike.

“You got it,” said both Alice and Rose. Terrified, they hugged each other. When the four children were almost in front of the haunted house, they stopped.

“Okay group, what next?” asked Timmy.

“Can't we just go around it?” asked Alice who would rather not deal with unpleasant things.

“If we go to the left, we go by the barn and the cemetery...and the fog,” answered Rose.

Nobody asked about the right. On the right side of the road was a knob, a huge hill that went almost straight up. In the dark, it was impossible to go that way, unless you were a champion mountain climber or an experienced mountain goat.

Feeling brave, Mike said, “I’ll go first, if I make it okay, I’ll whistle. You all can then run past this old house.”

“Yay Mike!” cheered Alice as she patted him on the back.

Mike dashed as fast as his young legs could pump up and down. Afraid that the gorilla was still there, he tried not to look at the haunted house. When he was past it, he whistled, “Tweet.”

In fact, Jimmy Wooten was sitting in front of the old mansion again, savoring the delicious experience of scaring the children. Although he really would not have hurt them, they did not need to know that. He had put his gorilla mask back on, just in case the children were foolish enough to return.

Mike may not have seen the gorilla, but Jimmy certainly did see him, even if he had managed to miss a horse and rider just minutes earlier. “If I scared them once, I can scare ‘em again. I want them so terrified they’ll never come back,” he said to himself since no one else ever talked to him.

Alice, Rose, and Timmy raced their little hearts out. At the same time, Jimmy was steadily moving toward the road stiff legged, just like the Mummy in an old black and white horror movie, which was not a coincidence.

Timmy was on the inside, closest to the house. He saw the gorilla

first and began to run faster than fast.

Seeing why Timmy was flying down the street, Alice and Rose screamed, “Eeeeeee!”

Since Jimmy just loved hearing the girls scream, he went, “Rooarr!” Mike saw the three children running. He naturally assumed that they were in a hot hurry to get past the haunted house, but why were they screaming? When the three children reached Mike, they ignored him and continued to run. Then Mike saw the gorilla, and Mike sprinted to catch up with them.

Four badly frightened children ran and ran, even when they were out of breath. When one of the kids could not go any farther and paused to take a breath, the others ignored them, forcing that one to run even faster and catch up. Fear is heartless.

Jimmy’s job was complete, so he went back to his mansion, which he now had all to himself. He was happier than happy. Their screams were now a delicious part of his memory. He had never dreamed that Halloweens could be so much fun.

During all of this, Danny had ridden Molly back to Old Man Martin’s barn. He then hustled back to Alice’s house. Although he had a hankering for fudge, he especially wanted to be there when the others arrived.

He raced so he would be on Alice’s front porch when the kids came home. He could hear voices and footsteps, so he leaped onto the front porch, stretching out on his left side, and propping his head up with his left arm. He did his best to look calm and bored from waiting on them, even though he was out of breath.

When the other children ran into Alice’s front yard, they slowed

down to a crawl. Mike and Timmy shined their flashlights on the front porch. Danny waved at them.

“What took you guys so long? I’ve been here forever.” Danny sounded irritated, but if there had been more light, they would have noticed his silly grin.

Mike sighed. “Don’t ask, it’s a long story.”

“You wouldn’t believe it,” added Timmy.

“Speaking of not believing,” said Rose ominously.

“Let me tell them,” said Alice, “two words—no treats.”

“Listen girls, I just happened to be at the house,” Danny insisted, loyal to the very end.

Rose stuck her index finger in Danny’s face. “Tell the truth.”

Danny sat up. “Listen, it was all in fun. We were all going to have a good laugh afterwards.”

Timmy lost his grin. “Believe me girls, Mike and me got just as scared as anybody did.”

Mike hung his head down. “Yes, and we’ve learned our lesson. No more tricks, ever. Even in fun.” It was a first for him. He never admitted anything, especially about learning something or being wrong.

Alice grabbed Mike’s arm. “If Mike is willing to admit he’s wrong, and he’s willing to change, it’s good enough for me.” She escorted him into her kitchen. Rose was speechless.

“Come on Rose, we might as well go in too,” said Timmy, taking her by the arm.

“Hey, how about me?” asked Danny.

“You too, short stuff,” replied Rose without a hint of anger.

Five hungry children gathered around the dining room table. In a

glass jug was a gallon of fresh squeezed apple cider still bubbly on top with five frosted mugs beside it. On the other side of the table was an aluminum covered cake pan. Alice removed the cover to show off a huge mound of fudge. One side was chocolate fudge and the other side was peanut butter fudge. Mike and Timmy stared at the spectacle. Danny pushed his way between them and beamed when he saw the treasure.

“Golly, were you expecting an army tonight?” asked Timmy with delight.

“Don’t worry, we can kill it off,” replied Mike as he licked his lips.

“Mike’s not kidding,” said Rose.

“That’s fine,” said Alice, “but next year, we’re not going out for Halloween. We’ll stay here and chug apple cider till we’re water logged and scarf fudge till we’re sick.”

Mike had chocolate fudge in one hand and peanut butter fudge in the other. “That’s okay, because we’ll never top this Halloween, not in a million years.”

All three boys sighed with joy.