



Halloween Eve

-by Mitch Babcock

She was running with the wind to her back, running from the people that she could no longer tolerate. She had decided that morning that she would no longer abide by her parents rules. And since her parents always said that if she wouldn't obey their rules she could not live under their roof, she left. So, she dressed for the day, packed a few things in her small red suitcase, and ran out the door before her parents even expected her to be up.

She had no idea where she was heading, or where she would go, but for the time being, anyplace would do as long as she was far from home. She slowed to a walk and surveyed the houses as she passed. The jack o' lanterns lined the streets with their smiles of evil. They seemed to laugh at her as she passed, and she began to cry as she felt so alone. She did nothing but look at the ground and walk for what seemed like hours.

The sun was peeking over the summit of the hills, but to Darla, the skies were clouded over, and she could feel the first drops of October rains. By this time she was headed out of the town and into the country side that reached for miles beyond.

She paused on the side of the stone road and looked around her. There were wooded areas to her sides and ahead, and behind her was the clearing where the town was planted. She headed for the woods in the east and found a large rock to sit on and rest. She could hear the water rushing down a stream somewhere ahead. Above she could hear the shrill cries of the black birds as they soared overhead in search of the dead. The wind was rustling the leaves that remained in the trees, and they seemed to be clapping as if to reward her for her freedom.

She rose to her feet and even though they still ached a little, she forced herself to walk. The sky was clouding over and the shadows seemed to be embracing her with clod hands. She stopped and opened her suitcase and took out a navy blue sweatshirt that she brought along and slipped it over the t-shirt that she was wearing.

Darla came to the stream that she had heard earlier, and on her knees, she cupped her hands into the water. The numbing cold didn't bother her as thirsty as she was. She continued to drink of the cold water as she glanced around. In the wooded area ahead, she caught a glimpse of a small cabin. If it weren't for her keen eyes, the cabin wouldn't appear to be anything but another clump of trees.

Out of curiosity and need for a place to rest, she looked up and down the stream for a way to cross, there was none. Deciding that it wasn't very deep, she stepped into the water and the cold fingers clawed at her legs. She carefully stepped one foot in front of the other to prevent from slipping and being swallowed by a cold blanket of water. She came up on the other side and looked to the cabin ahead. Here the cabin was more visible and even more haunting to her. She debated on if she should go in or just continue on her way. It looked as if nobody lived in the shack, and that was what she wanted, was to be alone.

She paused at the foot of the door and placed her hand on the rusty knob. It gave easily as she pushed it open. The ancient smell of decay made her step back as she looked around from outside the door. She decided not to let her imagination get the best of her, so she willed herself to enter, leaving the door open behind.

After taking a few steps forward, she noticed the flicker of a candle in one of the rooms adjoining the main room where she stood. "Hello," she called, half expecting an answer. There was none. She

headed for the door that was ajar, and with a shaking hand, she pushed the door open so she could see what was inside. There was a small dresser on the far wall in front of a window. The window was covered with plastic instead of glass. The cool air was licking the flame of the single candle that burned on the dresser. Then her eyes caught a figure lying in the old beat up bed on the side wall, but she couldn't see who or what was sleeping there. She was about to leave when a voice called out, "Is that you Heather?" She stopped in her tracks as her heart beat in her head. She wanted to bolt for the door, but a part of her wanted to know who it was that called out for someone named Heather.

The blanket on the bed moved and the figure sat up. Darla was about to let out a scream, she caught it in her throat. It was hard to swallow, but in her nervous state, she just stood there and peered into the cold gray eyes that followed her every movement. "Sorry miss," she said, "I was just walking through the woods and saw your cabin and thought that nobody lived here, so I came inside to find a place to rest for a while."

"Heather, what are you talking about?"

"I'm not Heather, my name is Darla and I live in town."

"For heavens sake, Heather, cut the crap and get your brothers and tell them to come here and help me out of bed so I can get something to drink. My throat is as dry as the devil's ass."

Not knowing what to do, Darla just stood there wondering who this woman was and why she kept calling her Heather. She started to insist again that she was not Heather, but the woman sat up even more erect and the crooked grin with few remaining teeth seemed to bid her to leave. She turned around and left the room and looked around the cabin at the dusty old sofa with holes the size of fists here and there, and at the torn painting of some countryside that hung on the wall.

On the other side of the room was another door, but this one was not open at all, and there was no light flowing from the cracks under and around it. She headed for the door and knocked, half expecting to hear the voice of a little boy

since the lady said she had sons that lived with her. Nothing came from the other side, but there was a more acrid smell here that reminded her of the time when her dog was hit by a car and a few days later they found her a pulp of blood and bones. She felt her stomach turn and for a moment she thought that she might throw up.

She tried the knob and the door wouldn't open, so she gave it a push and flung it open. It hit the wall and the sound echoed through the room. A wave of air filled her head with a sickening scent and she choked back her own vomit. She stepped inside the room and since the light of day was shining through the window she could see the faces on the floor only seconds before she let out a shrill scream. Before her were two boys about the same age as her, lying on the floor. Their mouths agape in an expression of sheer terror. Their blood had seeped into the floorboards, and the buzzing of insects everywhere. Their eyes stared at the heavens, only glazed over and unseeing. There were cuts all over their naked bodies, one of the boys had a hand missing, which was on the floor beside his brothers head. The blood was dried, but she could see where it had flowed from the stump of his wrist. She couldn't hold it back any longer. She loosened her gut and spilled its contents onto the floor where it mixed with the decaying flesh. She could hear laughter coming from the old woman's room, but she thought that it might be in her head too.

Darla turned from the sight and bolted for the front door, and just as she was about to leave, it slammed in her face. She pulled at the knob and sank to her knees screaming. There was laughter all around her, in her head and filling her ears.

She crawled around the dirty floor just to look into the face of the lady standing in the doorway looking at her with a crooked grin on her face. The woman's hair flowed like a dirty gray wave of wool down her shoulders and to her feet. Her face was pale and wrinkled with age. Her gray eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own.

"My dear child," she said in a weak pathetic tone, "do you know that Halloween is almost here? That means we need a jack o' lantern to

carve and set on the table like we do every year, you know, the ones with a candle inside, the eyes that light up with fire. Yes, that is what we need. Wait right here while mama gets a pumpkin for us to carve."

The lady moved her form towards the door where the carcasses of the boys lay and the rags that she wore around her body dragged on the floor behind her like a ghost following her every move.

Darla sat on the floor clutching her arms around her knees and sobbing uncontrollably. She didn't know what to do and she tried to think of a way to get out of that hell hole. She was tired and scared and she no longer wanted to be away from home. She looked to the window to the left and thought that she could reach it and push the plastic from its frame and climb out before the lady came back.

Just as she rose to her feet, the lady appeared in the doorway with a head clutched by the hair in her hand, the other holding the wall to keep her steady as she walked. The hair pulled loose and the head thumped to the floor. The lady looked at the lock of hair still clutched in her hand and said, "dear me, looks like this thing is getting old." She bent to pick up the head and winced in pain as she up righted herself. She walked with a crooked gait to the table in the center of the room and placed the head there. It stared at Darla with that grotesque expression of shock.

She stood there as the lady crossed the room and searched the drawers in the cabinet for a knife. Satisfied with what she found, the lady returned to the table and sat in the single chair that was there. She turned to Darla and asked, "Are you going to help me with this or do I have to do it myself? I remember a time when you loved to do this, every year."

"I have to go home now," was all that Darla could find herself to say. "I have to get out of here before my parents find out that I am not at school."

"You are not going anywhere Heather. No, come over here and help mama carve the pumpkin."

Darla just stood there in tears as the lady

beckoned her forward. "Ok, stand there and cry if you want to, but don't you leave this house young lady or you will be sorry when you do come back."

Darla thought to herself that she would never come back to this place, but she stood in her shoes and watched. The lady tipped the head so the gap where the neck was, faced her. She stabbed the knife into the head and began to cut the flesh open. Blood poured over her hands as she cut. She sat the knife on the table, reached her hand inside the head, and tugged at the flesh. Darla could hear the blood oozing through the lady's fingers and the crunch of the decayed flesh as it gave way and was thrown on the table. It was like a child would take the seeds from a pumpkin on halloween, only this made her sick and she felt her stomach turn once again, but she swallowed the acid as it made its way to her mouth.

Now the lady was carving the eyes from their sockets and placing them on the table with the other chunks of meat. Darla looked to the window once again and wondered if she could get out before the lady had the chance to stop her. She decided that she could, but for some reason, her feet stayed glued to the spot as this woman laughed at the creation on the table before her. She was pulling at the hair that remained on the skull and mumbling something to herself that Darla couldn't hear.

With the lady's back to her, Darla crept towards the window and as soon as she pushed the old plastic from the frame, the lady spun around and cursed her. "What do you think your doing, get away from that window. You know how many times I had your brothers fix that damn thing?"

Ignoring the lady, Darla pulled herself up to the sill and started to climb out. The moment her feet hit the ground, she felt the grip of death on her hands. She looked up to see the lady in the window holding her hands tight. She struggled to get loose, but a nail protruding from the sill sliced into her wrist, drawing warm blood. It seemed to flow down her arm in a warm stream of life. The cold air caused the blood to steam as if letting her ghost escape her body.

She began to grow limp and dizzy as if the world were spinning around her and she was standing still. She had no idea how long the woman had been holding her there in the window, but her body began to give out from under her and she felt herself falling to the cold damp earth, then darkness.

She woke in darkness, not really sure where she was, or what she had been doing before she fell asleep, but the ceiling above her, with its paint peeling, was not familiar to her. She turned her head to the side and at once noticed the head on the table, only now with a single candle burning from inside. The scent of burning flesh filled the room as did the smoke that was slowly seeping out the eyeholes in the skull. A wave of fear struck her as she realized where she was. She tried to sit up, only to discover that she was tied down. She wanted to scream, wanted her parents to come and help her, wanted someone, anyone.

Regretting her wish, the lady entered the room and Darla closed her eyes as to pretend to still be asleep. She could hear the lady, but couldn't figure out what it was that she was doing. She wanted to open her eyes, but didn't know if the lady was watching or not. Something of a gut feeling told her to stay as she was and not do anything stupid. She heard the drawers in the cabinet open again, so she dared to peek because the lady was on the other side of the room.

The first thing she noticed was the painting above her head, the one she saw earlier. How long have I been here? She wondered to herself. She noticed that the sun was still high in the sky and the clouds had cleared as she gazed out the window with the still torn plastic and the blood stains on the window sill. She turned her head to look at the lady in the shadows, she could see that the lady had taken a knife out of the drawer and was about to close it. She was about to turn her head back, but before she could, she found herself looking once again into those cold gray eyes.

"So, you are awake my dear," the lady said in a sing song voice. "It's much better that wa. Oh the fun we will have. The pain, you will suffer will be such a treat. I want you to scream for me when I cut your flesh, will you do that for mama?"

"Stay away from me you bitch," Darla shouted. "Let me go."

"Yes," the lady said followed by laughter, "that's what I want you to do, just do it a little louder. Ha Ha Ha Ha..."

The lady approached the beat up couch as Darla tried to free herself from this hideous woman. She screamed curses at the lady, only to get more of that insane laughter. As the lady reached the couch, Darla looked into her eyes and pleaded, "Please..." The lady stopped and stared, enjoying the vision of the helpless girl strapped to the sofa, so innocent, so frightened. The look in the girl's eyes was enough to give the lady sheer joy. The lady stood in her tracks with her eyes fixed on Darla's, the minutes faded one by one and the girl was beginning to become paranoid by the silence. She thought that maybe the lady was considering her plea to be released, she hoped.

With the knife still clutched in her hand, and the fading daylight flowing through the window, the lady sank to her knees and she began to crawl towards the couch. Her evil grin seemed to whisper, "I'm coming for you dear, I'm coming..."

Darla let out another scream from her already sand dry throat as the bony fingers wrapped around her arm. The hand with the knife inches above her forehead, shaking to the rhythm of the lady's unsteady posture. She closed her eyes and willed herself to scream one last time before the blade penetrated her flesh. Like a ghost from her soul, a loud, shrill scream pierced the dusk, echoing in the wind to the distant town where the jack o' lanterns lined the streets, their evil grins, their fiery eyes, insane laughter, combined with the laughter of the children masquerading on the devil's night.