

HALLOWEEN TREATS

By Douglas E Wright

The heart of Dixie wasn't as luscious as Sally-Anne's. At least that's how eleven-year-old Jeffery Krammer figured it. With every chew, the meat crumbled in his mouth like stale bread, as if it had been stored at the bottom of a freezer since the last Halloween.

He surveyed the burial ground and wiped his hands off onto the pillowcase, smearing chocolate over its daisy printed fabric. After jamming the heart-shaped chocolate box back into his candy sack, he dropped it to the ground, and climbed atop the oldest gravestone in Wexford Creek's cemetery and studied the flickering porch lights from there.

The subdivision's bright orange street lamps lit up the neighborhood's crowded road, allowing him to watch the older kids, like his brother Bruce, as they trick and treated all the while he waited for his friend in the dark.

"What did you get?" Ricky asked as he crept up the hill. Jeffery looked to the orange bucket dangling from his friend's hand. It was filled to the brim with bits and drabs of candy that spilled onto the dewy grass with every swing and step.

"God. Did ya get enough?" Jeffery asked.

His friend halted his slow climb. "Why?"

Jeffery inhaled a deep breath of Halloween air. The cold scent of forest rot drifted from the nearby brush. The darkened hillside beside him hadn't been bulldozed yet. It'd be another year before the woods would be entirely plowed under, and the oncoming of million dollar homes and luxurious suites would be built and bought.

Jeffery tipped his vintage Planet of the Apes mask to the top of his head. Sweat beaded over his rouge cheeks. The night air refreshed his face. He looked to where neighborhood teens scurried about the development like mice, hurrying from jack-o-lantern-lit stoops to soulless adult condominiums, each kid vanishing into night shadows that occupied the lawns between each home.

"Oh I dunno," he said. "Might have something to do with you losing candy all over the place."

"It has keep me goin' 'til Christmas ya know," Ricky answered.

"Might wanna try a diet fat boy. Talk your mom into not buying Mickey Ds for at least one night a week."

"Screw you."

Jeffery slipped off the gravestone and scooped up his flowered cloth bag. A slight chuckle came as his friend collapsed, out of breath, in front of a white wooden grave marker.

"Told you before, diet, diet, die!" Jeffery said. Yeah, yeah, go find a turd was what he heard back.

A bright light swept up the hill from the dirt roadway below. Jeffery scrambled behind the tombstone. Ricky dropped his fat belly flat to the ground. The beam dimmed significantly by the time its triangular ray swept over them. Jeffery came to his knees and peered from behind the small stone for whoever was responsible for the light.

Ricky's voice came across as a hoarse whisper. "Who is it?" He scrambled, still on his belly when the light passed over him and lit the forest shadows dotting the next hill. Within seconds, he reached the plot where Jeffery had stationed himself.

"Dunno yet." Jeffery cautiously grabbed the top corner of the weathered stone with one hand and raised his eyes level with its curved marble summit. The light caressed the hillside. At one point it landed on a partially exposed grave. The side of the silver cement coffin peeked out of a crumbling cliff. It was almost the only thing that held the ground together knotted by an old cedar tree and its protruding roots. It was the first cliff his brother had taken him to jump their toboggan off when Jeffery was five-years-old.

The beam swept back over to them and halted, its pinnacle hovered in the pines on the hill next to them. Jeffery turned to where a dark dot was encased inside a starry orange blast. It looked as if it had been drilled into the bush, the same woods that would be gone by this time next year. Snapping limbs echoed from behind the trees. Wisps of campfire smoke drifted in the air. Jeffery ran his fingers around the smooth round edge of the oldest gravestone in the cemetery.

Ricky pulled himself flush to the marker and sat up beside Jeffery. He craned his neck around the stone until his awkwardly tipped candy pail came into view. Lying by itself, it spilled its sweet contents over the brown grass.

The white light beam switched off. All that was visible now from the roadway was the beam's ghostly afterlife.

"Do you think it's the monster?" Ricky asked.

Jeffery eyed his half-filled pillowcase. "If we're lucky, we'll give it candy and satisfy the spirits, then we're outta here. That'll make them happy for another year. That's what Gary said, right? He said he heard it's happened every year since his grandfather's day."

Ricky scoured their surroundings. "Yeah, sure that's what he said. But I have to ask why he told us that in the first place. Look around. We're the only grade fivers here. He said all grade fivers in town were supposed to feed candy to the Halloween monster. It happens every year. But know what? I've never heard anyone say that before. You'd think we would've heard about it before hitting grade five. Gawd, even your brother was in grade five three years ago. Did he ever mention it to you?"

Fidgeting with his pillowcase, Jeffery thought to the day that Bruce's best friend ended up with Jeffery and Ricky. Jeffery thought it was weird at the time. Gary was in Bruce's class, three grades ahead of him and his friends. How he ended up in Jeffery's circle after the last bell of the day, he couldn't even begin to explain. The kid came out of the blue and just ended up there. "No. I don't ever remember Bruce ever saying anything about it. He just told me to grow up when I mentioned it to him the other night."

"That figures," Ricky said. "We were cheated into coming here tonight."

"But why?"

Ricky took Jeffery's bag of candy. "For this," he said lifting the flower-printed sack off the ground and into the air. "They're too old to get their own candy, so they're gonna steal ours."

Jeffery looked down to where the light had come off the roadway. He thought about the day after school. Gary was adamant spouting about a graveyard creature that roamed the burial grounds every thirty-first of October. He said all it wanted was its own Halloween treats. And if part human skeleton and part goat creature didn't get what was due, it would live on for the rest

of the year and torment every living soul in town. Maybe even bring up dead people to help it out. "Then we better go to the road and see if Gary's down there flashing lights."

"Yeah, if we catch him red handed, the other kids will come out of the woods cuz they were caught in the act." He pumped his fat fist in the air as if in victory, as if they had already won the war.

A rock collided with the ground ahead of them. It bounced toward Ricky's candy and came to a stop just before it hit the bucket. A roar of breaking branches and heavy footfalls rolled through the hillside forest.

"Now what?" Ricky grabbed the marble marker, yanked himself up and looked to the woods. "Think that's a deer?"

Jeffery first glanced to the woods. He saw nothing other than the night. "Probably." He returned his sights to the cemetery's wire fence behind a line of strategically placed apple trees dividing the subdivision from the graveyard. Three strings of barbed wire guarded its summit. The trees' branchy silhouettes glowed orange, soaking in the subdivision streetlights. He squinted. Older kids were still hitting well-lit homes for chocolates and candied fruit. He checked his digital watch. It was close to nine. *We hafta get home before nine-thirty. Only in a half hour.* He pulled out a wind-up flashlight from his coat and cranked it until a narrow white beam crystallized behind its tiny oblong glass face.

He shone it into Ricky's face.

Ricky threw up his hand and knocked Jeffery's flashlight sideways. "Do you mind?"

"Jeeze . . . Don't be so cranky."

"What do you expect? You drag me out here to find some monster and all I've seen so far is glaring flashlights."

Jeffery didn't say another word. Yet, he kept thinking about what Gary had said the day before. Especially the monster's description and what it would probably do to them Halloween night if they didn't act on his advice.

The unknown footfalls echoed throughout the forest. The moonlight slid over the woods and elongated across the cemetery. Faint snuffling noises followed the breaking branches. Goose pimples trekked up Jeffery's spine. His eyes watered and his soul shivered.

A cool breeze blew across the back of his head. It came from inside the woods. The whole graveyard scene felt surreal, the noises, the cold forest air, the layers of fog that floated in from nowhere, it all made Jeffery flesh feel jittery as it snaked over his bones. He had enough. There was no reason to stay. "I'm outta here," he said quietly and eased down the hillside to where Ricky's bucket lay. He scooped it up and swung back. When he took his first return step, the hole in the forest still glowed and it had retained its orange spikes, only much dimmer, but they still rotated around the tunneling black hole. Jeffery looked to bottom of the hill. The light was completely gone. He returned his gaze to disembodied colors floating far behind Ricky.

"What's with you?" Ricky shouted.

Jeffery didn't answer. He just kept an eye on an emerging pinhole of green light. It leaked out of the forest's center, worked into a thin white mist and weaved between rows of leafless trees.

Ricky quietly turned around. After seeing what Jeffery saw, he inched away from his friend. Fingers of shifting fog slithered along the cold earth to the tombstone they had just left. A gentle whistle accompanied the strings of translucent mist.

Jeffery skimmed some candy out of Ricky's pail and tossed them to the old grave. The mist embraced the weathered stone and then yawned until a black rip materialized from within

its slow swirling mass. The handful of candy entered its pulsating black maw and vanished into the pitch.

"Let's get outta here," Ricky said.

"I was sure the monster would settle once we gave it candy," Jeffery said, his voice agitated and rough.

Ricky tightened his pudgy fingers around the neck of his friend's pillow case. "I'm not staying."

A child's scream erupted from within the tombstones. Every grave marker in the burial ground sang in off-key unison.

Ricky glimpsed the roadway. After a quick second, he began a rapid descent. "See ya," he said.

Jeffery licked sweat off his upper lip. The taste briefly reminded him of salty tears he had tasted after that bedtime argument with Bruce the night before. An argument that had nothing to do with them, but with a tale Jeffery had been told at school that day. Bruce said he was acting like a kid. It was time to grow up. Then, for no reason, his older brother swatted him across the back of the head.

Jeffery continued to stare, his feet frozen to the earth, at the swirling black maw. It possessed fat squishy lips. They appeared to be made of beige rubber as they slurped and chewed the Halloween candy Jeffery had thrown. And then three green pinpoints of light splatted against the face of the ancient tombstone. They bored backwards in a triangular shape. The stone's pockmarked surface softened, it now resembled an India ink sketch. Within seconds, each pinhole slid like used car oil and formed watery yellow eyes that shifted from side to side. The

image brought back the memory of a Cyclops Jeffery had after watching an old-time fantasy movie on late-late night television.

"Holy crap." Ricky ran toward his friend.

Jeffery spun around toward the grave Ricky had just ran from. Another light had ignited, only this was brighter and more direct than the last ones. It flashed from behind the trees like a gunrunner light from America. Only this wasn't the St. Lawrence River where drugs and weapons came across on moonless nights. This was the local burial ground. A landscape that kept the dead from the living, and unlike international smugglers, they usually came together only one night a year.

A skeletal oddity tramped out of the bushes. Its skull wore a flat dirt color. The thing dripped mud and water; its clothes were virtually nonexistent. Jeffery was sure it was the monster Gary had described the day before, having risen from its muddy grave beneath the Wexford Creek, the same creek that was to disappear along with the hilly forest across, from him. His mind flitted to Bruce. It was strange that his brother never spoke about this aspect of Halloween. Jeffery thought he would've at least warned him. They were, at the worst of times, still made of the same flesh, bone and blood. And the idea of feeding some unknown entity candy was too much like offering a virgin to the dead.

The creature pushed toward Jeffery and Ricky. When it hobbled in the moonlight, the monster indeed did possess crooked furry legs and big beige hooves. The six-foot form swayed like someone who couldn't wear high-heeled shoes. Its eyes were drilled holes recessed in a sea of thick muck and cracked bone. A black grin haunted its face. It swiveled about, as if taking in the surroundings for the first time. The thing screamed, raising goose flesh on Jeffery's arms he wanted to go to the bathroom so bad after the shriek, he almost dirtied himself right there on the

spot. He crouched to the ground, grabbed a few treats from Ricky's bucket and fired them at the creature. The monster raised its skeleton arms and hands as if for protection. The candy bounced off it and scattered over the ground. The creature began to laugh. Its howls turned into an uncontrollable fit of giggles. It moved forward and fell to the ground. The mist and the Halloween creature rolled downhill.

Jeffery and Ricky had just started to run toward the roadway when Jeffery realized he had heard that laugh before. He stopped and grabbed Ricky's sleeve about halfway down the hill. "Don't you recognize that?"

Ricky swung to the creature that now was tearing off its fake head. Its high-pitched laugh broke through the faint trick and treating yells from the subdivision. It fell to the ground, ripping its furry legs off and threw them at Jeffery. Ricky jumped out of the way and returned to the crooked leg closest him and crouched to the ground. He dropped the pillowcase of candy and slowly reached for the limb and its attached hoof. "Hey," he said turning to Jeffery. "Check this out."

Jeffery hesitantly left the laughing creature on the side of the hill and jogged to Ricky. "What?"

Ricky had a short branch in his hand that he had inserted into a long furry boot. They looked like platform boots from the seventies. "Look. They're boots. Right from the crooked knee down, they're furry boots. Somebody's glued that white fur and plastic hooves on them."

Jeffery returned his gaze to the guy lying on his back on the hill. The kid sat up and wrenched off part of his skeleton outfit as he laughed himself silly. He rose off the grass and stood in a pool of moonlight. He wavered between two long fingers of shifting mist. "Man the

look on your faces," the creature said as he walked the few feet that separated them all. "You guys scared, or what?"

Ricky stood with Jeffery's pillowcase on the ground beside his foot and Satan's fake leg dangling off a dead branch. "You're an ass!" he said. "Who else is in on this?"

Gary pointed to the roadway. He couldn't stop chuckling. A tiny flame flickered for a moment in the dark and then a cherry red beak smoldered from along the *Frost* fence in its absence. "Bruce," he said with a laugh. "Who'd you think? A monster?"

"Ricky's right, both you guys are asses." Jeffery marched to Ricky's plastic candy container. He tightened his fingers around its bent steel handle, and after a moment, he glanced back to the tombstones and the forest beyond. The light he saw earlier still hovered, though faintly, inside the maples and pines. It came outside of the dark shadows and appeared to get brighter as it floated further out of the forest. Then came the noise of decayed terry cloth or Velcro ripping, Jeffery squinted and regarded the distant hillside. One by one the grave plots before it erupted like rabid anthills. Boney hands crawled out of the breaking earth; their flesh-stripped fingers gripping the dead grass under exploded clumps of moist earth.

"What the hell is that?" Gary said. His eyes were wide and his cheeks pale. He turned to where Jeffery and Ricky had their eyes pinned.

Skeletons crawled from the earth and rose high into the mist. Their grimy skulls reflected the starry night, while disintegrated clothes dragged over the ground. Slowly, their jangling bones gathered in front of the oldest grave in the neighborhood. There were at least a half dozen? Each stood, their gristle meatless legs spread apart, rocking from side to side on boney uneven feet. Jeffery silently came to the conclusion that these were not children of the damned, nor Keene's worms or Romero's zombies. They were not from comics, movies or television. They

were a skeletal brigade that had more in common with Jason and the Argonauts saber-rattling enemies than they did with King's Creepshow. Each looked as if they were wearing streams of wet clay, preparing to create a new world order, one that Jeffery guessed would last from sunset to sunrise for only one night a year, just like Gary had said the day before.

Jeffery lifted Ricky's pail of candy and fired it straight into the black maw that surrounded the oldest gravestone. Candy kisses splattered everywhere, sprayed across the grass and thudded lightly over the burial ground.

The trio raced down the hill toward the road. Even Gary no longer laughed at the situation. The remnants of the crimson fire smoldered from sight, its light now dissolving into darkness. The apple trees looked like rows of skeletons, their limbs pointing every which way, as if to ensnare some unknowing fifth grader. The skeletons chased them, ducking as they went, to scoop a kiss or two off the ground, popping them into their flapping jaws. When the trio reached the road, they found a ten-speed bike and a heavy waterproof flashlight fastened to the handlebars with black electrical tape, but no one was in sight.

The rattle of skeletons, whining in their windy howling gasps, continued their journey after Jeffery, Ricky and Gary. The noise of dead dry leaves rustled ahead. Gary skidded and stumbled halfway down the slope. The noise caught Jeffery's attention. He swung around. Gary had fallen while the skeletons were still awkwardly rumbling down the hill, not having quite made it to where Gary fell. Jeffery grabbed Ricky by the shoulder and stopped him dead. He looked to where he thought his brother was hiding, but saw nothing other than the outline of bare lilac bushes. "Let's get him."

He moved up the hill.

Ricky shouted, "Let him stay, he'd never help us."

Jeffery kept the move on, cautiously and rapidly working his way up the hill. He ignored Ricky's screams and kept an eye on the rambling, charging skeletons. He jumped to where Gary was struggling to get to his feet. "What's the matter for you?"

"I think I've sprained an ankle," he said gripping his right ankle. He rolled down his thick wool sock and let a puffy black bruise stare at Jeffery. For a moment the pair gawked at each other. "Okay, no time. Grab my shoulder," Jeffery said.

"I'm too heavy."

"Let's do it. If you're too much, then you'll have to run and keep up with me."

One of the bigger skeletons tripped over a ground level headstone and smashed into the earth, its bones unhitched and scattered over the frosted ground just short of Gary and Jeffery. They raced to the roadway. Bruce sat in the bushes toking on a joint.

"What's up?" he said with a wide grin.

"Look back there, dick-face," Ricky said, slobber dripping from his lips and heavy breathing exhaling loudly from within his chest.

Bruce jumped up. "Who are they?"

"They're not Halloween monsters, that's for sure," Gary said.

A chewed orange gob zipped across the heavens. Jeffery immediately recognized Ricky's pail. Though it had melted and now resembled a steaming blob ripping through the dwarf apple trees, it leaked out wads of sticky candy as it zipped over the tall mesh fence, and crash-landed somewhere into the neighborhood shadows.

Bruce grabbed his little brother by the arm. "Over the fence. I bet those creatures can't get over the barbed wire. Right . . . Gary?" They headed for the apple trees. It would be easier climbing there because the barbed wire had been bent out of shape over the years.

Gary stumbled behind them. "I don't know. I made up the story. My grandpa said almost the same thing to my dad just to scare him on Halloween."

Jeffery said, out of breath from running down the road, "This was all made up?"

"We'll sorta," Bruce said. He pointed to the fence. "Let's hop it."

Ricky jumped onto the mesh links. He glanced behind. "They're getting closer," he screamed.

Jeffery spun about. He and his brother hadn't quite reached the line of apple trees. The skeletons were closing in. In the distance behind them, he thought he saw the creature Gary had made himself up to be. It lopped along, heavy and awkward. Then Gary tripped over a burial mound; he kicked the dirt and flowers away, sending them through the air. Suddenly, blue hands popped from the soft earth and grabbed Gary's legs. He fell to the ground and tried to roll away. When he stopped moving, the dead hands gripped his socked feet and yanked him backwards into the open ground. It had happened so fast Jeffery didn't have the time to shout. He returned his sights to the trees ahead of them. They brushed under the tree limbs as they picked up their pace. Just as they hopped onto the fence below Ricky, skeletons hopped above them and grabbed Ricky's thighs as he started to flip over the saggy strings of barbed wire. Bruce released the fence first. Jeffery stayed for a second and then fell away to the ground. He landed on his back. From there he watched two skeletons and two freshly dead pull on Ricky. They jerked and yanked, pulling Ricky's fat frame over the barbed wires. Blood spurted from the slices in the kid's gut. Jeffery could see Ricky trying to escape. But, there was no way. The dead pulled him over the wires until the steel strings reached his pudgy face. Within seconds the kid's face scrapped over the steel knots until he bled more than fluid, he bled meaty chunks of ripped flesh.

Bruce grabbed Jeffery by the hair and yanked him off the ground. He pointed down the length of fence to where it ended. He started to run, pulling Jeffery by his coat collar.

"My candy," Jeffery yelled. "I forgot my candy."

"Never mind that," Bruce said. "We'll be back tomorrow, in the daylight, when its safe."

The pair rushed along the fence line until they reached the creek. They each hooked an arm around the final post and swung over the water to the other side of the fence, the safe side where the graveyard had no influence. As the trotted through the bushes that led to a backyard, Jeffery kept peeking through the mesh wire to the creatures on the other side. In the distance, he watched his friend Ricky being quartered by the monster, two skeletons and two fresh cadavers. He followed his brother with tears gathering in his eyes, blurring his way home. He felt sick to his stomach. "What am I gonna tell Ricky's mom?" he asked.

Bruce stopped and grabbed him by the coat. "Nothing," he whispered hoarsely. "We've been together all night. Ricky left you while trick and treating. Nothing of this gets out. It's you and me forever on this. We didn't see Gary and Ricky left you on the run or something. Got it?"

Jeffery began to snuffle. He had no idea why. The tears kept coming no matter how much he wanted them to stop. He wiped his eyes and nodded. "What about my candy? Mom' gonna ask."

"We'll tell her some big kids took it and threw it into the graveyard. And you were too scared to go inside. Then I'll tell her I went and couldn't find it, that way I can say we'll look for it together tomorrow in the daylight."

Jeffery nodded again. What else could he do, it sounded logical to him.

They made their way into the shadows that ran between two houses. Jeffery saw the melted candy bucket. He wanted to kick it but decided not to. The melted plastic housed more than candy apples and chocolate, it contained tonight's memories.

They stopped in a bush that screened the street. The neighborhood appeared as empty and desolate as a daytime graveyard. The pair stepped out onto the street and glimpsed the bushes across from them.

A pleasant faced man pushed out from a column of ragged cedar limbs. He inched away from the trees when a stray limb ripped off his rubber mask and revealed three oily eyes in the middle of his face. They shifted in deep crimson sockets, while its white cheekbones moved over its face like earthquake plates. A hyena laugh exploded from between its saw-tooth teeth and filled the deserted neighborhood streets.

"Gary was wr-wrong," Jeffery hesitantly whispered. "We weren't suppose to feed the monsters candy tonight; we're the ones being fed, we're the Halloween treats!"

THE END