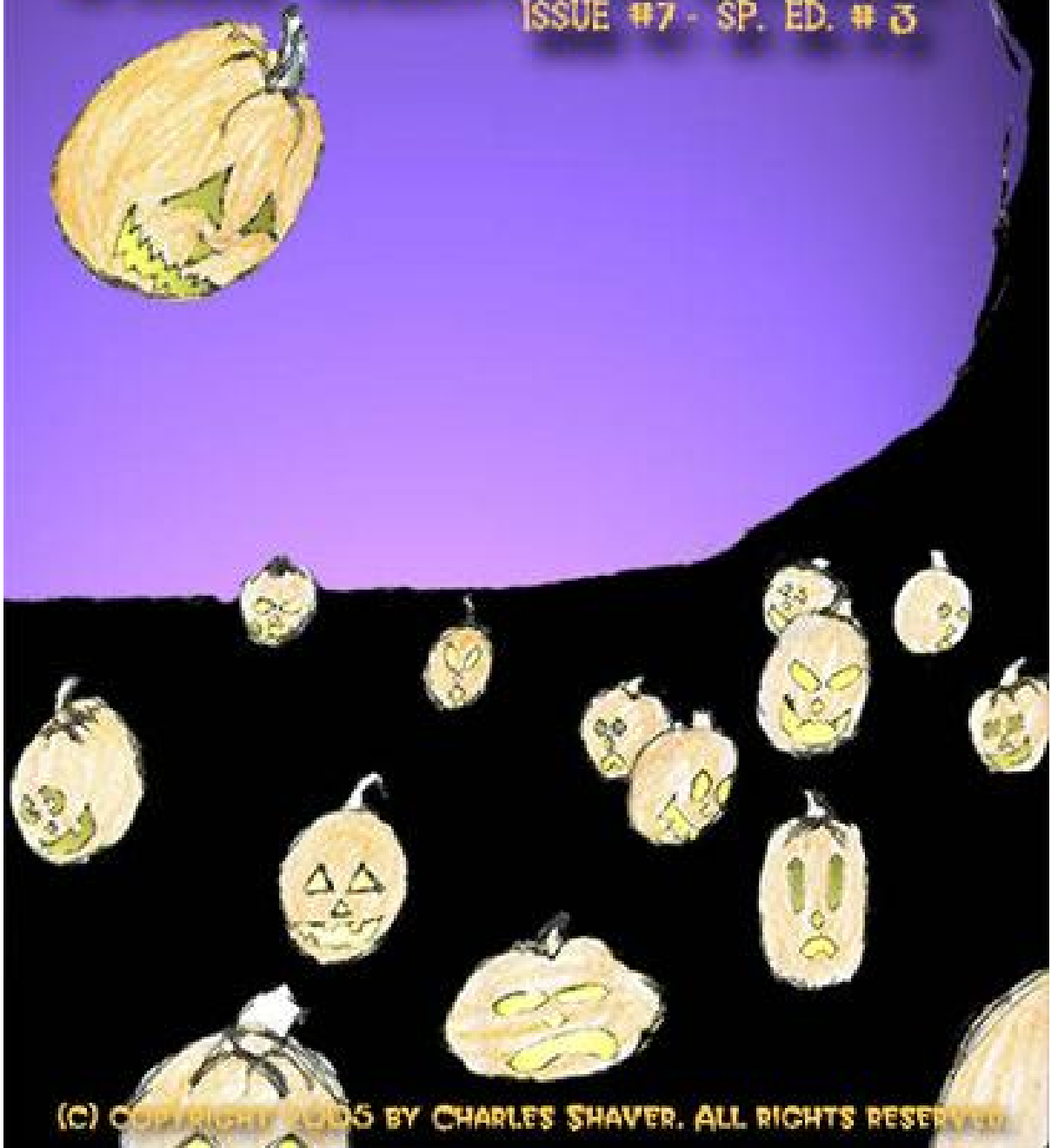


FREE

IF - E - ZINE™

SPECIAL HALLOWEEN EDITION!!!

ISSUE #7 - SP. ED. # 3



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Editorial

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Halloween is a great thing of pulp. For the last two years running the hauntings of the soul that comes with this time of year has blossomed a bit late. Usually the dying time of Fall creeps its fingers into me in late Summer. But I've yet to forget the love and light and laughter and magic of the death and passing of seasons and the old, great Samhain as his mighty scythe bears down upon us, harvesting our souls for his mortal marketing. It is now the Fourteenth of October, two weeks from the wicked night.

At the time that I first began to work on this issue, I was uncertain that If – E – Zine™ Issue # 7 - this year's Halloween issue - would really be out in time. We left Hawai'i on July 4th, landing here in Michigan on the morning of the fifth. Within the first hour of being here, the people around us were already talking about how all the world's problems are derived from the "niggers and chinks" and how we should send them all back to their own countries and nuke the shit out of both the continents of Africa and Asia and that's the only solution to the world's problems. Meanwhile, my mostly Chinese sweetheart sat next to me, the both of us having to hear all this filth. I've changed since then, become a different person. I've reverted to an earlier time of depression and suicide. I've caught myself in the spare room of our rental staring into the closet where our guns are kept, half-hidden, wondering what it must feel like. I've also stopped to look at our Tylenol PM, a wonderful sleeping aid, wondering why I don't consider swallowing a half handful.

But this is meant to be an issue about Halloween and Halloween isn't all sadness and depression and adults-coping-with-reality bullshit. It *is* about death and mourning and the celebration - or at least the reverence - of the past. It's fun and innocent and spooky and safe and a howling good time any which way you cut that pumpkin pie. I could write once again what Halloween means to me, what it should mean to us all, but I won't. I couldn't add anything to the discussion that hasn't already been said, and probably put better, by Bradbury or LeGuin or Bradley or any kid growing up anywhere and at any time here in the United States. Hear what they have to say. Ignore the assholes who'd yell about the ills of Halloween or the evils of Samhain. If a religion restricts the fun of innocence and youth and nostalgia then that religion sucks. Tell them Halloween rules.

Halloween is all I have right now. It's been a great distraction from certain other thoughts about life and death and the reality of my current situation. Although my other usual distraction, which is reading, has been entirely consumed by such things. My mind has revolved around zombies these last few months. I love zombies. Who doesn't? But I think I've been obsessed, if you will, with zombies as of late because the stories they most often tell are so similar to the story of my life now. Zombies are full of death, destruction, and ignorant animal feeding. But that's not the true beauty in most good zombie tales. The true beauty is that zombies make us confront death (let's face it, zombies are *death personified*). But zombies, as important and wonderful and fun and gory as they can be, they are truly much more of the background, the setting, for the main characters of any zombie story: the *survivors*. Zombie tales tell us of the human fear of

death and shows us as we follow the survivors in their fight against the odds, as they defeat death personified, and ultimately these zombie tales give us hope against hope against that most universal of fears. We can beat death. And we, too, can be survivors.

And so Halloween has been my lifeline. It's keeping me alive, giving me a goal to work towards, a festival to look forward to with rituals to perform, a small pilot light of hope. Just like those beloved zombies. I've already purchased 20 plastic pumpkins, the kind kids collect trick-or-treating candy in, and have strung them up in the trees in the yard to make glorious Halloween Trees. Enjoy Halloween. It's a celebration of life. And hope.

~ charles, ed.



ALTERNATE COVER FOR ISSUE #7



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"The Seldom Seen"

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In a little country town, along a dusty road, there stood a lone country store that dripped with dilapidation. Its paint, once a vibrant kelly green, had been chipped here and there by time. Its brown thatched roof was a receding hairline, patches of black paper showing from under. Fronting the store was a long wooden porch on the verge of resigning to its age and falling apart. It slumped in a mimicking way at the elder men, the remaining citizens of Cooperstown, for that was the name of this little spot of country speckled with dying buildings, of the area who would come to sit and play checkers or dominoes or arguing over this thing or that.

Above the porch, slouching like the rest of the store, rested a weather-worn sign. Its hand painting had also been peeled away bit by bit. But it had once, in bold and beautiful ivory whites and glossy blacks, read "Slim's Grocery".

No other store remained along the dirt road, despite the country's citizens' attempt to make the area a grand main avenue of commerce. A few scattered boards, a foundation here and there, a rusted-out old truck, and some long-flattened tires looking more like flower pots now with weeds growing out the center decorated the area. Tall archaic gas pumps that Slim, of "Slim's Grocery", had inherited during the area's Great Demise stood like tombstones across from the country store. And yet another fading sign swung gently in an unseen breeze that had once proclaimed a carefully selected restaurant's name, "Eats". These were the remains of Cooperstown, a skeleton of the dead and buried. Time's unquenchable hunger had consumed them all, much like most of the area's citizens.

All that remained was the little country store, the gas station, Slim and his friends.

Among the men who sat on the porch was James "Slim" Jimkins, proprietor. His face, like his store, had been eaten by age. Long crevices where wind and work had swept over him marked his face. His hands had long ago lost any of the softness of youth. He no longer made much money at his store, but he didn't mind. At least he *had* his store, bought and paid for long ago, unlike his fellow citizens, most of whom had filed for bankruptcy a decade or more back. Slim he also resided at the store, while his friends had nearby homes. He had a small room at the back of his store fixed up for just himself. His friends stayed away from the room, knowing that Slim enjoyed his privacy and, most of all, his quiet. For gatherings of friends, which had taken place almost every day for the last twenty years, Slim had his porch.

Today started like any other day. The other men who took up stake on the porch came by early, just after breakfast time, and joined Slim on the porch. The first to arrive was Benjamin "Ole Breamy" Breamer, soon followed by Augustus "Augy" Clairwell, and Paulie Voight. All of them came in on foot from their nearby homes. There wasn't much use for an automobile for these country gentlemen anymore. They had lived, they had seen, and they were in no rush to get anywhere. So they sat on Slim's porch, every day, and just enjoyed the sun and shade and life.

All four men had grown up together in this country. They can each recall the days when it was all once farmland. They had made ruckuses, mischief, delights and eventually money all right here in their own corner of the world. These four men, like their town, were seldom seen anymore by the rest of the world and had long ago been forgotten.

“I’m gettin’ a pop,” Paulie told Slim. It was an ancient habit, each man telling Slim what they were helping themselves to so he could put it on their store credit. But Slim had stopped keeping records years ago. He simply nodded, which the other men never waited for, and life went on. Paulie swung the screen door to the store wide, hobbling inward to get his soda.

Slim sat in a rocker he had bought from a traveling Quaker some three decades ago. Other than a few dents and scratches from falling soda bottles and the like, the rocker remained untouched and the most sturdy thing on the porch.

Augy and Breamy sat facing each other in high-backed kitchen chairs left over from a wilder time in home decor. The upholstery was cracked at the seams. Squeezed between the two men was a tiny end-table with a round top. Resting on it was a board with some scattered checkers.

The screen door slappity-slapped and banged. The men jumped, as they always did, when someone didn’t close the door properly and quietly. Paulie walked out, a bottle of strawberry soda pop in his hand.

“Christ, careful with my door,” Slim said out of automation more than anger.

“It’s a hot day,” Paulie sat in a plush recliner with faded and molding upholstery.

“That,” Slim nodded while he rocked, “it is.”

And the four men rocked and played and relaxed as the day wore on. Sometime around noon they each got up, one by one, and grabbed a sandwich from Slim’s cooler inside the store. After lunch, they rested and chatted.

“By Lord,” Breamy exclaimed, “What is that?”

Four heads turned at once as though tied together, looking out off the little island of the porch to see, coming down the dusty old road, of all things, a carriage. The wooden boards that made the thing hung together as if some drunken wainwright had ram-shackled it all together. They had been blackened with paint and creaked with every shifting movement, groaning and pressing against each other, pulling desperately but fruitlessly away from the nails that held them all to one another. It rattled with every bump, every stone. The sound made it seem as though the thing were some great, grunting Black Beast set to the field to work. It even moved from side to side like an animal.

The wheels were also made of wood, but reinforced with corroded strips of metal. The thing was topped with an arcing roof, painted black as well. And all around the Black Beast just under the roof was light gray detail work made of simple organic lines curling and twisting, weaving their way around and around, whispers of spectral swirling fog. The whole thing was closed on all sides but the front where a flap of yellow, or perhaps it was once white, cloth that hid the innards of the small carriage.

In front of it, looking as though it had been permanently attached was an old mule beaten by the hands of time. Small, decaying sinewy muscles and a fading gray color showed that the mule had seen quite a bit in life, but was now no more than a drudge. The eyes of the mule were shallow. Empty. They reeked the darkness of any man or beast

who had ever delved into the bowels of the earth or of a factory to spend their life dedicated to work. The old mule was a worker who'd resigned to his fate long ago.

And sitting before the flap of cloth barring all outsiders from viewing the carriage's contents the most spectacular feature of the whole mess. Here, atop a slackened board used for a seat, was a fat old man dressed from head to toe in full festive attire. His shoes were polished in parts, scuffed in other, and were hidden partially by dirty spats. His socks were more like thin stocking, thinner here and there to allow varicose veins that hid beneath, and they were two completely different colors. On his left foot was a brightly yellow sock with vertical red stripes. Upon his right foot he wore a sock of only one color: purple. His pants were black dress pants, but were patch-worked on his left thigh with red scraps of cloth complete with white polka dots. His shirt was an electric lime green, the most vibrantly alive thing of the whole scene. A worn vest, torn at the edges, covered that and was covered in turn by a dirty black tux jacket complete with tails. Atop the fat man's bulging head, which had no neck, was half of a hula skirt of curly gray hair and a black top hat.

"What in Sam Hill?" Augy said.

"Looks like an ole hearse," Paulie said. "Yeah, that's what it is. An old horse-drawn hearse."

"Well," Breamy spoke up, "*He* sure as hell don't look like no undertaker that *I* ever seen."

"Looks more like a clown," Slim finally spoke.

"Or an old tramp," Augy said. "Like them Vaudevillians. Remember when we used to go see them when they came through here?" Augy poked at Breamy, who slapped his hand away, annoyed, and turned his attention back to the Great Clown, the Almost-Dead Stallion and the Great Black Beast.

"Nah," said Paulie. "Vaudeville's like everything else 'round 'chere: it's dead."

"Well, the circus ain't!" Augy exclaimed. "Maybe he's the head of a circus convoy!"

"On a wagon?" Slim asked. "Nah, even the circuses use trucks now."

"Well, whatever he is... he's a weird one." Augy shut up after that.

"He won't need gas," Slim sounded off in annoyance.

"Maybe he'll want a pop." Paulie drank some from his own bottle.

Then the man was there. The Tramp driver of the Great Black Beast was pulling his hearse up in front of Slim's. He took his time getting off, eyes darting from his horse to his carriage to the men upon the porch. When finally he made his way to first of the only two steps of the porch, he stopped and stared at the four men, a big wide grin of friendliness pulling his fat face tightly sideways. Augy and Breamer continued with their game of checkers without really paying attention to the game. Slim's eyes were closed and on the verge of sending him off to a catnap as usual, but he remained awake enough to keep his rocker rocking. Only Paulie, pulling slowly on his soda now and then, paid any direct attention to the dusty, fat Tramp. Paulie, in fact, was staring straight back at him.

"Good day, gentleman," The Tramp finally said, tipping his hat and wiping his brow.

Paulie raised his bottle as if to toast the man, Slim grumbled a "Good day", and Breamer gave a nod while Augy just answered with a look.

The Tramp looked to Slim. “Mind if I get a pop?”

Slim laboriously picked up his head and opened an eye. “Help yerself.”

The Tramp, much like Paulie had minutes before, wandering into the store.

“See, I told ya,” Paulie said with some holier-than-thou excitement.

The Tramp returned, not slamming the screen door. He stopped at the edge of the porch, just inside the shade, and drank long and deep from the bottle.

“That’s good strawberry,” he said.

“The best around!” Paulie said, again raising his bottle in a toast.

The five men enjoyed some quiet for some time while the newcomer cherished every sip and drag of his soda, watching the world from the front porch of that store as if there was a world to be seen from its standpoint. He just eyed the road, up and down, examining every detail.

“We don’t get much of your kind around here.” Augy said. The Tramp shot him a curious glance. “A man with a horse and carriage, that is.” Augy explained.

“Ah, I’ve not come around here in ages,” said the Tramp, continuing to eye the ghost of a town and finishing his soda. With great effort, the Tramp bent down and set the empty bottle onto the porch.

Slim opened and eye. “You’ve been here before then?”

“Oh yeah,” said the Tramp. “A lot, too. But that was a long time ago.”

“Maybe we know you?” Breamy asked.

“Nah. Well, maybe.” The stranger sprawled out his hands towards the town. “This was all once my work.”

The four men stared at him, unsure.

“You one of them that came in an’ invested all that money into our town?” Breamy asked.

“Boy,” Augy replied. “If he did, no wonder he looks like a hobo!”

An displeased look came across the face of the stranger as he shot a glance over to Augy. His arms lowered back to his side.

“Hush up, Augy.” Slim commanded.

“W-well... are you one o’ them fellars?” Paulie asked.

The Tramp shook his head. “No,” he said. “That’s not quite what I meant.”

“So what did you mean?” Paulie raised his bottle to emphasize the question.

“Gentlemen,” said the dusty old Tramp. “My name is Death. My business is the ending of all things.”

The four men stared. Augy and Breamy forgot about their checkers. Slim stopped rocking and opened both eyes. Paulie set the remainder of his soda on the porch beside the over-stuffed chair.

“Mister,” said Slim. “That ain’t no kind of a humor.”

The stranger reached deep into his coat and pulled out a small paper business card as old and tattered as he was. He handed it to Slim, emotion sliding off his face, and said: “Mr. Jimkins, I find little humor in my business.”

Slim took the card, examined it, and handed it back.

“Whassit say, Slim?” Paulie asked, leaning forward.

Slim ignored the question. “How’d you know my name?”

“It’s my business to know my clients.” Said Mr. Death.

“Whassit say, Slim?” Paulie repeated.

“Mr. Death, R.I.P.” Slim answered.

“And?”

“Thas all,” Slim didn’t dare take his eyes off the Tramp. “Anyone kin make up a card like that.”

The stranger nodded, putting his card away in his coat. “Well then, how shall I prove my worth and occupation to you?”

“Make it thunder,” chuckled Ole Breamy, Augy adding his own laughter.

The stranger smiled. “I can’t do that. Not my department. But...” he looked out off the porch at the decrepit town, “no one will miss that patch of grass in them old tires, will they?”

Mr. Death turned his attention back to Slim. He raised his hands out to his sides almost playfully. As the four men looked on, they witnessed the long scraggily weeds shooting out from every abandoned flat tire half-hidden in the grass quickly brown and fold like plants under the noon sun magnified by a giant looking glass.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Breamy swore.

“I-It can’t be,” uttered Augy.

“But it is,” said Mr. Death. “It is my job to bring all things to an end at some time and at some place. I’ve visited here many times. Many times.”

The four men sat motionless and staring.

Mr. Death sighed heavily, as though weary, and leaned heavily against the post of the front porch.

“It’s not always easy, my job. A lot of deaths come unnaturally. Car accidents, explosions... suicides. Them, I never get a chance to see them really. They all go to some,” at this he gave a flourish of his hand, “some Heavenly Waiting Room.

“But, for folks like you, I get to do my job. I mean *really* do my job.”

“And what would that be?” Slim asked.

“Oh God, you’re not some wacko carnie here to kill us, are you?” Augy gasped.

Mr. Death gave a brief smile. “No. Not exactly. You see, my job is to make sure your transition from this world into the Sweet Hereafter is easy as possible. So, one day long ago I decided that the best way to do my job is to let *you*, that is the folks I come for, do the job for me. To do it for yourselves.”

Slim leaned forward, “Mister, you’re not making a helluva lotta sense right now. We don’t want no more of your fanciful troubles, so if you don’t mind removing yourself from my stoop before I go and call someone.”

Eight eyes stared at two while two stared at eight. All five men, including Mr. Death, remained silent for some time. Then finally Mr. Death said, “Gentlemen, I do not joke. My name is Mr. Death and I have come for you. Your time is up. Simple as that. No flourishes. No fanciful troubles. I just do what I have got to do.

“Now, as I was saying, so many deaths occur without me getting a chance to help the people in that transition. They just wind up in that Heavenly Waiting Room I spoke of. But for a few, like you, I get to offer you something that those other do not get. I can offer to place you anywhere you wish in Heaven. It not only gives you a chance to choose where you’ll rest for all eternity, but it also speeds up the process a bit.

“Augy, maybe you’d like to be with your wife? Breamy, maybe you’d like to be with *your* wife? Paulie? You once liked to write stories. Maybe now you’d like to sit in a room and write to your heart’s content?”

“Now listen here!” Augy exploded. “I don’t know who you are and how you’ve come to know our names, but I’m quite sick of it now!” Breamy did all he could do to quite his friend down.

At this Mr. Death sighed. He gazed around at the surroundings, then continued, “I think I’ll take in the sights of your little piece of country here.” Then, while straightening up, “I’ll be back in about an hour. Think about where you’d like to rest for all Eternity. I’ll come back for your answers then.”

The pudgy man took his seat on his dumpy carriage. Without so much as a flick of the reigns the mule began to pull them both, continuing down the road in the same direction he was headed when he first came into sight of the four men. They waited until he was gone, far from sight, before they spoke to each other again.

“Damn him! What the hell is the matter with that man?” Augy erupted again. His eyes were wide, filled with terror and hatred.

“So our old Augy believes in ghosts, does he?” Breamy goaded.

“You better shut your trap!”

“Hush,” replied Slim “Just hush.” He rocked in his rocking chair, his eyes still on the bend in the road where Mr. Death had disappeared from their sight. “I don’t know,” he continued, “what he wants. But if he comes back again I’m gonna call somebody. Just put him outta yer mind.”

Augy groaned, “Easy for you to say.”

The men sat in silence for a while. Slim rocked. Paulie picked up his bottle. Augy and Breamy mindlessly replaced all the checkers on their board for a new game.

“W-Where,” Breamy ventured, “would you like to spend Eternity, Slim?”

“I know where he’d like to go! One o’ them high-rolling fancy casinos full of them fancy dancing girls to be around all the time!” Paulie ribbed his friend. The checker players laughed. Slim closed his eyes and rocked.

“Well,” said Paulie, “that’s where I’d like to go.” He took a sip of his soda.

The four men sat thinking to themselves. Thinking of Eternity. Time snail-crawled in front of them. The sun moved toward the horizon. Shadows shifted and swayed, growing longer with the day, sneaking over the face of the porch. A cool evening breeze began.

The clitter-clatter creaking of the carriage made the four men sit up a little bit straighter in their chairs. Eight eyes made for the road and found Mr. Death riding back towards them. He pulled up in front of the store just as before, hopped, or more *bounced*, off the little carriage and took a deep breath.

“Beautiful country,” he said. “A beautiful piece of country you guys have here.”

The men remained quietly staring.

“Well? Have you boys thought it over?”

No one stirred, until at last Paulie said, “Yeah! I’d like to get me some them purdy dancing girls like at the casinos!” He chuckled and chortled, soon joined by Mr. Death with his own laugh.

“Okay, Paulie. Just step right up here on the carriage with me.”

“No!” Augy cried. “Don’t do it!”

“Meh,” Paulie struggled to get out of the big cushioned chair. “What harm’s it gonna do?” Mr. Death led him to the black, rotten old carriage. He helped Paulie up onto

the front where the driver had sat. “Now,” said Mr. Death, “Just step right on through!” A huge smile graced his lips, making him look like an ugly gargoyle of a clown.

Both Augy and Breamie got to their feet. “Paulie, don’t!” cried Augy.

“Meh,” Paulie waved a hand to shoo away Augy’s comments. He lifted a hand to the curtain, poking and peaking inside with both eye and finger. Nothing but a stygian fog lay beyond inside the carriage. He looked to Mr. Death.

“Go on, Paulie,” cried Mr. Death with uncanny glee. “Ain’t nothing in there that will hurt you! It’s as simple as stepping through a door!” Mr. Death gave a little dance. Paulie looked to his friends. Their eyes were clawing at him with eagles’ talons, hoping to drag him back to the safety of their porch. Paulie’s own eyes steeled over with resolution. He nodded to his friends, turned and stepped through the curtain.

Mr. Death stopped his dance.

Augy lost all the air in his lungs.

Breamy stood straighter than he had in years.

Slim stopped rocking and watched with careful eyes.

The carriage didn’t move.

And the mule just hung his head low.

Ghostly whispers of music came to them, came from behind the curtain. Mr.

Death’s smile grew wider and therefore more gruesome. Slim recognized the big beat of a jazz band. Girls giggled through the air. And somewhere Paulie could be heard to give a raucous “Woohoo!”

Mr. Death’s smile shrank to a satisfied grin. He turned to the men on the porch.

Now only six eyes were staring back at him. “Well,” he said. “Who’s next?”

“By glory, it can’t be!” Augy’s voice went hoarse halfway through his exclamation.

“B-But,” replied Breamy who turned to look at his checkers buddy, “I think it *is*.”

“Well?” said Mr. Death.

Breamy stepped forward, but remained on the porch. “You know...” his voice was low, like a child’s when they first meet Santa Claus and can’t figure out what to say to the Big Guy. “There... there was this fishing hole way up north. Me and my pa used to go there damn near every summer when I was young.” Breamy’s voice trailed off, traveling to another time and place, hoping no joke was about to be played on him.

Mr. Death kept his grin and nodded.

Breamy’s eyes widened. He shot off the porch like he was a ten-year-old chasing after an ice cream truck. He got up on the carriage with some help from Mr. Death. Without looking back, he stepped through the curtain.

A soft watery “plink!” came echoing out of the carriage. The kind of sound that a lure makes when it hits the calm smoothness of a pond.

Augy stumbled, grabbed a hold of a post on the porch. He looked over at Slim who remained staring at the scene set before them.

“S-Slim?” Augy tried to get his attention. “C-Can it be? Can it be our time?”

Slim looked to his friend. “I don’t know,” was all he could muster.

“D-Do you think I should try?”

Slim looked back to the carriage, then back at Augy. “I don’t know what is going on here, Augy.”

“It’s simple, Mr. Jimkins. It’s just the Great Passing into the Great Everlasting. There’s no ifs, ands or buts. There’s no rights or wrongs. There’s no guessing. And, for you four good men, there’s no pain. It just *is*.” Mr. Death took a few steps to approach the porch.

Augy licked his lips, looking from Mr. Death to Slim to the carriage and back to Slim. “You know, Slim. It’s been an awful long time since I saw my wife and my boy. If I gotta chance, I gotta take it.”

Slim looked back at Mr. Death, as did Augy.

“Okay. I’ll do it!” Augy said with gusto. Then slower added, “They are together, aren’t they?”

Mr. Death nodded. “They are.”

“Well,” Augy’s excitement returned, “wherever *they* are, I want to go!” He almost bolted, staggering off balance in his rush. Mr. Death helped him up onto the little black carriage. Augy turned a last time before entering through the curtain to look at Slim. “See ya on the other side!” He smiled and gave a wave.

Sounds of laughter filled the air, the laughter of Augy, a woman and a child.

Slim closed his eyes and rocked nervously as Mr. Death approached. He didn’t exactly want to say what he thought of Mr. Death and his hocus-pocus. But, then, he didn’t really know *what* to say. Three men had stepped into the carriage. No one came out. A little sound, no movement and that was that of the whole ordeal. How was Slim to know it was even real? How was he to know it wasn’t just some elaborate joke, conceived by that wise-ass Paulie and executed by all three, plus one stranger, maybe a relative of Paulie’s that Slim had never met, and his old mule.

“Well, Mr. Jimkins?” said Mr. Death. Slim slowed his rocking to a stop, then opened his eyes. Mr. Death had come to sit on the steps of the porch, sideways, so he could look at Slim. “What’ll it be?” He asked. “Or, should I say, *where* will it be?”

Slim stayed quiet.

“Come now, Mr. Jimkins. We all have to go sometime.”

Slim began to rock again, slowly. “I’m fine right where I am, thank you.” Said Slim.

“Bah! Come now, Mr. Jimkins. While I *do* have an eternity to do my job, I haven’t got all day to spend with you,” said Mr. Death.

“And what exactly *is* your *job*?” Slim demanded, leaning forward in his rocker.

“Oh, come now. I’ve already explained things to you. I’ve even conjure a little miracle for you out there in the field!” Mr. Death let his hand sweep wide, bringing it around to point at the decrepit tire with the centerpiece of dead weeds. “What more do you want?”

“Actually,” Slim said, almost somber as he leaned back and rocked once again, “I don’t want anything.”

“Well, you *have* to have somewhere you want to go. Don’t make me send you to that Waiting Room. That’s such a disappointment for me when I have to do that. Your friends, and you, make my job a happy thing. I get to send you off to the one place that will make you happy forever.” Mr. Death’s smile disappeared.

“Why do you do this?” Slim asked.

“Someone has to.”

“And what if *you* didn’t? Who would?”

Mr. Death though a moment, as though he never pondered the question himself. “I suppose I’d be replaced. I dunno. I never asked about such things. Not that I have anyone to ask. You know, in all my time at this job, which has been forever or damn near it, I have never had a boss. I’ve never reported to anyone. I just do my job, go about things as they are needed, and that’s that. I never think about when or where or if or how or why. I just do.”

“Hmph,” Slim grunted.

“Mr. Jimkins. Dear, dear Mr. Jimkins. Can we please just get you settled?”

Again Slim was quiet.

“Mr. Jimkins, please. Where would you like to spend Eternity? I know it’s not the easiest question to answer, but it’s usually easier than it seems. What is the one place you’d like to be more than any place else?”

Slim rocked a bit. “Well, I ain’t never thought about going anywhere. I never wanted to be much place else other than right here, on my porch, in my store, in my hometown. Even if it is as old and creaky as me and my bones.”

A smile returned to the carrion clown’s face, but this time it wasn’t grotesque. It was actually... charming.

“Mr. Jimkins,” he said, “of all the people I come across, it’s gentlemen like you that makes my job more worthwhile than any other kinda people I come across. You see, men like you... you’ve already found Heaven. Heaven right here on Earth. Do you know how simple that makes my job? Not only that, but it speaks something about a man’s character if he’s just happy right where he’s at. Why wait for Heaven? I always say. Why not make yourself a little piece of Heaven right where you’re at? And that, Mr. Jimkins, is exactly what you’ve done.

“Mr. Jimkins, it’ll be my pleasure.”

Mr. Death raised himself off the porch with some effort. Once up, he brushed himself as if in some ceremony, then gave a grand flourish of his hands. Slim kept his eyes on the man the whole time. But, slowly, his eyes came to be closed. His chest, it’s rising and falling, also stopped.

Mr. Death mounted his carriage, gave a lazy salute, then without so much as a flip of the reigns the mule began to pull him away from the old storefront.

Sitting alone in an old rocker on the porch of a lone country store, along a dusty country road, was the last citizen of a long-forgotten country town. And a new resident of the newest ghost town began his haunts.



What a Weird, Weird Night

Poem by Charles Shaver

August 31, 2005

Written between 3:35 & 4:09 A.M.

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The worst kind of haunting
Is the one that's never there.
It's waking up with distant eyes touching you;
A fear of going to the bathroom at
3 A.M.;
Of one room being about a million degrees different
From the next
And half a million
From another;
The soft touch against your foot
That could have been the remote
Or a remote hand;
The sudden stop in squeaking from
A ceiling fan.
The worst kind of haunting
Is not a door that opens on its own but
The clacking of a door in a faint breeze
When you can't be sure if
There was a breeze;
Two or three far-away gunshots
That could have been footsteps
Outside on the
Wooden front porch.
The worst kind of haunting
Is not shadows dancing on a wall but
Complete darkness staring back at you
When you can feel your eyes strain to adjust
To find
Deep dark shapes
In a room where you know
Deep dark shapes shouldn't be.
It's the feel of an insect crawling across your leg
The creak and moan of a tree;

The rustling of a critter in a bush.
The worst kind of haunting
Is the one that can be explained...
If only the wind were blowing.
The worst kind of haunting
Is a haunting of the mind
When everything in the world seems to gain weight
And presses down
On your chest
In the wee hours
Until you get so overwhelmed
You no longer care
And roll over,
Shutting the world out with your back
Making it convenient for a ghostly hand
To put
A ghostly knife there.
But you don't care
So long as it happens in your sleep.
And as you slip away –
Your closing eyes the drawbridge to the world –
You write everything off
As being
A weird, weird night.



13 Haiku-ween!

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Here's a collection of 13 Halloween haiku for you.

I

Breeze becomes soft, cold
Hands shivering twilight trees.
Kids! It's Halloween!

II

Bells toll, witches laugh;
Screaming, gurgling, growling... wait!
It's just a CD!

III

Cute little pumpkin,
How bright and perfect you are!
Let's rip out your guts!

IV

Small shudders awake
Eyes peer around in darkness
Ghostly visitors

V

Aloft goes the gourd
Cannons echo in mem'ry
Fly little pumpkin!

VI

Drag out the old clothes
Stuff them with dry hay and straw
Conjure the scarecrows!

VII

Cute little firefly
How long before your glow dies?
I feel winter near

VIII

Fat, plump, ugly, round;
Small, skinny, oblong, wacky;
Pumpkins of all shapes!

IX

Dagger teeth, wry smiles,
Eyes staring out from darkness
Jack-o-lantern spies!

X

Ghouls, ghosts, goblins, frights!
All come out Halloween night!
But shadows scare more!

XI

Hoot! Hoot! Ribbit! Growl!
Mooaaan! Groooaan! Creeeaak! SLAM! BOO! KER-THUD!
Halloween music ;)

XII

Graveyard ghouls remind
Revere those we left behind
Holiday of Souls

XII

We must end this here
To let the skeletons dance
On lucky thirteen...

HAPPY HALLOWEEN ALL!!!



Reading & Viewing List

Here's some stuff I've been reading and watching as of late, most of them along the vibe of Halloween. Enjoy.

- 1.) **The Walking Dead** by Robert Kirkman - This is a decent series. I've read the first two collected volumes. It is riddled with clichés - both in dialogue and in caricature - but in the end it's an entertaining series. Check it out. And if you're smart like me, check it out of the library for free!
- 2.) **The Halloween Tree** by Ray Bradbury - It just wouldn't be Halloween for me without a viewing of this classic cartoon. But this year I've also read the book for the very first time! A bit different from the cartoon movie, but an easy and quick and exciting read!
- 3.) **October Dreams** ed. by Richard Chizmar - I honestly cannot suggest this on the basis that I've yet to read anything from it. But the boo definitely intrigues me and seems fitting for the season.
- 4.) **Demon Days** by Gorillaz - This isn't exactly a CD designed for the season, but it's something I've been listening to quite a bit lately and seems to have a connection to All Hollow's Eve in some, round-about way. Sort of. A good CD none-the-less.
- 5.) **The Zombie Survival Guide: Complete Protection from the Living Dead** by Max Brooks - I've read through this book more than once. it's definitely filled with sound advice and is incredibly entertaining.
- 6.) **How Long, Great Pumpkin, How Long?** by Charles Schultz - A great collection of Peanuts comics!
- 7.) **Urban Dead** by Kevan Davis - This is an interesting little MMO (Massively-Multiplayer Online game). It's free and turn-based and text-based, but is surprisingly addictive. Give it a try at: <http://www.urbandead.com/>
- 8.) **Atom Age Vampire & Revolt of the Zombies** - Have you been to Target lately? They have these double-feature horror DVDs on sale in time for Halloween... all of them for \$1. I picked up this double-feature and it's absolutely classic. Absolute musts for people who love cheese. The films are overdubbed with voice acting, so they look more like Godzilla movies. The plots are thin. Music is awesome. But wtf? IT'S ONLY \$1!!! Go check them out.

