

Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

First Prize The Princess and the Jack o'Lantern

By Don Ellenberger of Stahlstown, PA

My wife and I are blessed with two grown princesses and a prince. This is my first story. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

The cute little girl in the puffy pink princess costume smiled up at me. "I said two candy bars, or else I'll stick this wand up your ass."

I guess they don't make princesses like they used to.

"Hey! Whatta you say to that lard-ass, pumpkin? Huh?" slurred her father as he chugged the rest of his beer and dropped the can on my front porch.

"Pleeeeeeease," she said, but I could tell she didn't mean it when she gave me the finger.

"That's better," said her father, turning around and peeing on my rhododendrons.

Moving cautiously, I handed her another chocolate bar, making sure to keep my ass away from her wand hand.

"Thank you." The girl turned and walked away, clutching her plastic supermarket bag of treats with one hand and with the other whacking her wand against the smaller of two jack o'lanterns perched on my railing.

It tottered, and I thought for a moment it would settle down, but one nasty glare from the little princess and the pumpkin seemed to leap to its death, exploding on the frosted ground.

"Good one!" her father chuckled.

I picked up the can, shrugged, and drank down the dregs. I went back inside to the warm embrace of peeling wallpaper and the wet-sock smell of mold. I flung the can at the garbage bin, but it came up short. A metaphor for my life? I dropped into the armchair. A startled cockroach looked up, his final vision my plump ass filling the sky like a meteor hurtling toward his little world.

Back in the day, when I was a kid and this neighborhood was mostly working class instead of a war zone, Halloween rocked. My buddies and I raced around the streets, loading our pillowcases with candy until the last porch lights blinked off.

That's why I still like to give out candy to the kids, so they can feel some of that same magic, to know that you don't have to wake up every morning afraid of what craziness may rain down on you that day.

The doorbell screeched. My first mistake was opening the door to a snuffling teenager who sputtered, "Treat or treat." He wasn't dressed up, just wearing ripped jeans, a fake white beard, and a dirty Dollywood sweatshirt. One glance and I could see the trademarks of the tweaker: blackened teeth, bony limbs, acne oozing puss, incessant scratching.

"Who are you supposed to be, anyway?" I asked, backstepping out of range of his breath.

"See the beard? I'm Rick van Winkle, bro."

My second mistake was feeling sorry for the kid. I put down the bowl of candy and reached into my back pocket for a couple of bucks I couldn't afford to give away.

When I looked up there was a six-inch bowie knife so close to my face I could see the condensation from my breath fogging up the rusty blade.

“Whoa, everything’s chill, Rip, I mean Rick,” I stammered, my voice an octave higher than usual. I instinctively backed away from the knife, and the skinny kid used my momentum to shove me backward into the house, slamming the door behind us.

“Give me your wallet, you fat, smelly bastard!” he shouted, trying to sound tougher than his eyes betrayed.

“Sure, here, take it,” I said as calmly as possible. My experience with meth heads was that any sudden movement, any wrong word, could ignite a firestorm of violence. I slowly handed over my wallet.

“You got any weed? What you got in your medicine cabinet?” he spat out as he rummaged through my wallet, grabbing the remains of my disability check and a couple of canceled credit cards.

I felt the tip of his knife against my spine as he spun me around and steered me through the hallway into the downstairs bathroom. The kid opened the medicine cabinet and a grin stretched across his scabby face. Thanks to my side hustle, I was stocked with crank, dexies, X, oxy, vike, and other junk.

It was love at first sight for the kid, who seemed to forget I was there as he began ripping open bottles and dry swallowing a menagerie of pills.

That was all the distraction I needed. I reached behind the brown-stained toilet, pulled out one of my Glocks, and aimed it at his chest. The gun thundered, and I blinked drops of blood out of my eyes.

“This is this is ... this is some serious good shit,” said the kid, smiling as he pitched into my bathtub.

I washed up, changed clothes, and went back and handed out more candy. Around ten the street finally emptied. I grabbed a shovel and lugged the tweaker onto the porch.

Just as I stopped to rearrange my grip, the little princess and her dad rounded the street corner, heading my way. I looked around, snatched the surviving jack-o-lantern off the railing, turned it upside down, and mashed it over Rick’s head, propping him against the door.

“Yo, lard-ass. My kid lost her ring somewheres. We’re retracing our steps. You seen it?” They stepped onto the porch. “That wasn’t here before, was it?” He pointed at my tweaker o’lantern.

Just as I was about to mumble something, Rick’s arm shot out and grabbed the dad.

The dad shrieked. “That’s real blood. What did you—”

The bullet ripped through the dad’s right eye and exploded out the back of his head.

The princess stood silently, open-mouthed. I figured she was in shock and gently said, “You’re not going to say anything, right? You’ll tell the cops your old man wandered off and you don’t know where he is?”

The princess’s eyes jitterbugged back and forth, the wheels turning. “OK,” she said. “But it’s gonna cost you five candy bars.”

“Deal, sweetheart.” I lowered the gun, glad they don’t make princesses like they used to.