

# BEFORE WINTER

*by* Dennis Hiatt

On the morning of the last Halloween he would trick or treat, John Jr. ate his oatmeal slowly and tried not to look at the broken kitchen chair. The night before, his dad had stumbled in drunk and beat his mother. John had covered his ears with his pillow to block out their screams. It hadn't worked. It never did, and he'd wished that he was still little so he could get up and ask for a drink. He would have stepped into the blinding light of the kitchen blinking and squeaked for a glass of water. They'd have crossed their arms over their chest and glared at each other while he drank. Their rage would have soaked the air, but for a moment, they would have quit tearing each other apart.

John's father always left for work before he got out of bed. John Senior would stop off at Barb's Blue Bird Cafe for breakfast and coffee, and talk to the men that hung out there in the morning.

"The oatmeal okay, Honey?" His mother rested a hand on the back of Junior's slim neck.

John smiled up at this mother and nodded. He couldn't see any bruises, nor did she look hurt or angry. He thought that she must have started her morning with a pill. She hadn't done that in a long time.

The warm, pretty woman mussed his hair. "Okay, eat your breakfast before it gets cold."

John dug into the oatmeal and as he chewed he asked, "Mom, can I have a dollar and ninety-nine cents for a Halloween mask."

"Oh, Honey ...." She sighed and shook her head. "Your

dad doesn't get paid until Friday."

John stared at the milk and brown sugar surface of his oatmeal. "Mom, do you believe in demons, like in the Bible?"

She poured herself a cup of coffee. Steam rose from the white mug. "Well..." She sipped the coffee. "...I don't know about that, Honey. Was it a devil mask you wanted?"

John nodded. "I was thinking I could make one. But," he stared at his oatmeal, "I'd have to skip school."

His mother's smile warmed the morning air. Her soft, brown hair hung over one sly blue eye like an old time movie star. Her eyes crinkled at the corners. She smiled, "None of that now." As she lit a cigarette, her green housecoat fell open a little, and John saw a purple bruise spiderwebbing away from the heavy, white curve of her left breast.

Outside, the morning was bright and still. The sun cut through the pines and elms that bordered the little farm at a low angle. John saw the dead cat on the edge of the long porch and grinned. The black and white cat had been struck by a car, but not run over. This was much neater than usual. John's dog, Lady, often brought home parts of animals that had been killed on the highway.

Cat by the tail, John started toward the garbage burner and then stopped. The cat had long, lovely hair flecked with blood. For a long second John stared at the hair. Then, like a startled quail, he broke and ran to the barn.

In the barn it took John Junior twenty minutes to cut the mask from a dusty burlap sack and linoleum glue some fine, long hair to it. All he needed was a rubber band and he had a bloodstained demon mask. No, better yet, he could get his mother to sew an elastic band on the mask after it dried. John laid the demon face on a tackle box to dry and closed the barn door.

Outside the barn, Lady limped up, wagging her tail and bouncing her odd, off-center bounces. Then John remembered the dead cat, petted Lady, and retrieved the cat from the

barn. This time, when he left the barn, he didn't close the door.

The school Halloween party was low keyed and sweet. John flirted with Reba Hanson while they waited to bob for apples, and she ate her cake with him. Reba was a small girl, smaller and thinner than John, and she couldn't seem to keep her long, straight hair out of her face. John couldn't keep his eyes from smiling at her. Reba wouldn't look him in the face, but her knees brushed his, and she smiled as she looked at her cake.

Here, in the sunlight that made its way through the school window, as Reba ate black and orange jelly beans from a paper cup, she looked like a lady. Her mother was on Welfare, and once or twice a month, would end up downtown drunk and screaming at people on the street. The older boys at school said Reba's mother was a whore.

"Are you going Trick or Treating?" he asked, looking down at the smear of frosting on his paper plate.

"No." He saw her shadow shaking it's head. "Mom wants me to stay home."

"Oh." Out in the schoolyard the younger fourth grade children raised dust as they ran and played. "How come?"

Reba shrugged and tossed her hair back. John, surprised and taken by this womanly gesture, said, "Tonight's my last time...I'm," he grinned and leaned toward her ear, "Going as a Dead Cat."

"No!" Reba giggled and slapped at his knee.

"No," he agreed, looking down at the red stitching in his offbrand jeans, "I'm going as a kind of a monster."

Reba poured a few jelly beans from her cup into John's empty cup. "A monster?"

"Well...maybe more of a Devil." He looked at the black and orange jelly beans, rattled them in his cup and looked out at the children in the play ground. John said, "My dog's crippled," smiled at Reba and ate the beans.

"Yeah?" She poured him two more jelly beans. They were both black.

John nodded. "Dad ran over her foot so she can't hunt, so you know what she does?"

Reba shook her small head. Spider webs of wispy hair covered her brown eyes. John's grin flickered. His eyes lost their smile. "I take her hunting."

"Oh," Reba said as their teacher called the class to order and told them to clean up. They'd missed the apple bobbing.

Walking home, John decided not to eat more than half of the candy he would get tonight. Tomorrow, he would surprise Reba with the best of his candy. Tomorrow, he would be a hunter bringing her a deer or a bear. Tomorrow, he would see her smile and toss her hair back.

From the highway, John saw the smoke of the garbage fire. He wondered if his mother had covered the dead cat or had left it on top of the newspaper, leaves and food scraps. The smoke drifted through the pines and elms like streamers of bleak paper caught in a soft wind. He turned down the dirt road wondering if his father would come home drunk again. As the small farm house came into view, John saw that the fire was dying out. He laid his books and lunch pail on the porch and picked up a long stick before he went to the garbage fire with its stinking, stinging smoke.

John churned the layers of thick, black newspaper ash. Up came a scorched can, then a cracked ketchup bottle. Something round, grey and charred bobbed out of the black ash and sank back. John stirred the can and the bottle back into the smoking fire. Lady jumped up, placing a foot on John's back, and he turned and held his dog in a parody of a couple dancing. The breeze changed, and smoke blinded and choked John. Dragging the stick on the ground, he made his way to the barn. Lady limped behind him, wagging her tail and barking at the stick.

The mask was gone. John froze. He looked around the vast dim room with its thousand hiding places. He opened the barn doors wide and looked behind the tackle box. Who could have stolen his mask? He walked around the front of the barn. There was no mask or anything that could pass for one. Maybe his mother had found it and had taken it in the house to sew an elastic band on. He thought that must be what had happened.

He found the mask on the porch. It was badly chewed and and utterly ruined. Lady limped onto the porch and picked up the mask. She shook it at John and he, with a choked cry, swung his stick at her crippled foot. Dust leaped from the porch where he'd struck, and Lady leaped backwards onto the ground. John sprang after her, swinging the stick for her head. Lady dodged and dropped the mask in the dust. It was moist, and the dirt clung to it. John swung the stick at Lady and grazed her head. She yelped and ran limping for the woods.

It took John a moment to stop crying. He burned the fouled mask and, when his eyes were dry, he went around back and came in through the kitchen door. He could hear his mother on the telephone. Her voice was angry and somewhat slurred.

"... little spick slut shaves it too!

"I don't care Mom...

"Maybe we didn't get married too young...maybe, I guess I wasn't young enough....

"He wants it shaved, he'll get it shaved...

John stepped into the living room. His mother was still in her green house coat. She saw him and motioned him to her. He sat close to her on the sofa. He could smell wine on her breath. She stroked his neck like he was a cat and said to her mother, "Yeah...Well...Hey, I've got to go. My little man's here and he's hungry....Yeah, 'bye Mom."

She hung up the phone and ruffled John's hair. "You hungry?"

He shrugged. She was looking right at his damp, red eyes. He looked down at the floor and her bright red toenails. "A little."

"Okay..." His mother smiled at the top of his head, but made no effort to get up. John didn't think she was drunk. More likely she'd had a glass of wine and another of her pills. She looked at him with her movie star look and said, "Am I as pretty as that teacher of yours...what's her name?"

Out of the corner of his eye John saw that her house coat had fallen open. "Miss Larsen?" he asked, then said, "A lot prettier Mom. A lot."

John got off the sofa. "I'm going to wash up," he said, hoping she'd take the hint to start dinner.

John went to his room and stayed there until he could smell potatoes frying on the stove. When he came downstairs, he was surprised to find his father sitting at the kitchen table. On the table was a bag of candy for the Trick Or Treaters, and the broken chair was gone. His father had a can of beer in his hand and was smiling. It was safe to go in.

"Happy Halloween, son." John Senior raised his can of beer to his son.

From the stove, his mother said, "Your father sold that broken down old tractor to Sonny James for three thousand dollars."

"Sonny's a damn fool," his dad chuckled and inspected a grimy, broken fingernail on his left hand. "Say, what's this I hear, you need a mask?"

John, made sick by the smell of the frying baloney, shook his head. "I'm too old for that now."

"Yeah," John Senior chuckled again and let his eyes fall on the green robe where it was pulled tight over his wife's rear, "You're just about big enough to start whipping your old man."

John didn't know what would be safe to say. The smell

of frying baloney filled the quiet kitchen. John looked out the window at the pines and elms. When he turned back to the table, a brand new .22 rifle was lying on it.

His father smiled at him with eyes filled with pride.

"Now, I just don't know how that thing got here. Do you?"

"No, sir," John whispered.

"Well, don't let it sit there and rust. Take it up to your room."

"Yes sir." John picked up the rifle. He felt like he was expected to hug his father. He felt he should tell his father he loved him.

"Thank you," John said and cradled the gun. "Thank you." John could not bring himself to look at the dirty, smug man who'd handed him the rifle.

His father nodded absently. "You can take her out after dinner."

As John was going up the stairs, his mother laughed, "Now stop that! You just wait till he goes out."

After he'd eaten, John changed his clothes and put on his work boots. He had about an hour of sun left and twelve bullets. When he passed through the living room on his way out, John saw his mother's green robe on the floor by the sofa. The radio in his parents' room was playing loud, but he could still hear the bed springs fighting.

On the front porch, John stood in the long, orange shadows and watched Lady limp up to him with a road-kill squirrel in her mouth. She dropped the mangled thing at his feet and eyed him. John petted her head, stepped off the porch and started across the yard to the two huge lilac bushes that marked the trail in the line of the pines and elms that led to a small forest on the old Davis place. Lady followed John, limping.

When John and the dog reached the forest, John veered off the path. In his head he could still hear the music coming from his mother's room. Tomorrow, he would have nothing to take

Reba. And he would never have another Halloween. Next week, or the week after, his father would come home drunk and beat his mother. Like John's life, the shadows of the trees stretched long before him. The small forest was still. The rifle was long and clean. Here, now, John really knew that he was too old for trick-or-treating.

Lady limped ahead of him, sniffing the ground. The air was cool and crisp like it got just before winter. John watched the dog and thought it was time for a little payback. Lady smelled something in a large pile of leaves. The dog buried her nose and rooted in the crinkling bed of leaves. John laid the muzzle of the .22 behind her left ear and pulled the trigger. Lady stiffened and collapsed into the brown nest of fall leaves. John stared at his dog and thought that she didn't look near as bad as road kill. She looked like she was sleeping. She looked like she could sleep through anything. He kicked leaves over her and, when the dog was hidden, John picked out three really nice orange leaves to take to Reba.

