

Halloween

by Marcy Dermansky

"For God's sake," my mother said. "There could be anthrax in the candy."

My mother worried about me going out on Halloween. She was always distraught, my mother. I couldn't stand to see her so upset and usually, I stayed in my room with the door closed. But my ex-best friend Gina Minetti had invited me to go trick-or-treating and there was nothing that could stop me.

My mother hugged a bag of Tootsie Pops to her chest, blocking my way out the door. The media had all sorts of information about how to handle America's new war. Articles written for parents. How to talk to your children: be truthful and at the same time, present the world as a safe and welcoming place. Instill calm. That was my mother's only job in the new world. Her patriotic duty was clear. She had to shop for electronics and be a strong parental figure. She wasn't up to the task.

"Anthrax is sent through the mail, Mom," I said. "Mail," I said. "Not candy."

I pulled down on my tutu. I was dressed as a punk rock ballerina: pink tights, pink tutu, ballet slippers, hair pulled bank into a princess bun, tiara, and then, deathly white face make-up, thick black eyeliner, black eye shadow, blood red lips outlined in black lipstick, my mother's boyfriend's motorcycle jacket. It was a good costume; it had zip, punk and pink.

"Postal workers, politicians, people in the media are at risk," I said, crossing my arms across my pink leotard. "Anthrax is a spore. It is not contagious."

My mother opened the bag of Tootsie Pops; she unwrapped a grape lollipop and started sucking.

"Terrorists," my mother said, "aim to spread terror. Once you think you've recognized one pattern, another develops. First they hit the east coast, next it's the west. You can drive yourself daft."

My mother's new boyfriend was English. He had a great vocabulary. I loved how he talked, how he said knackered and brilliant and wanker and bloody hell. Unfortunately, he was in England. My mother, sucking on her Tootsie Pop, her hair one big frizz, still wearing her silk polka-dot pajamas at four in the afternoon, was past the verge of daft.

"What I would worry about is traffic," I said. "Since daylight savings, the sun sets earlier, and darkness sets in super fast. Chances are I could get hit by a speeding car. I'd worry about traffic instead of anthrax. Anthrax is an abstract fear."

"That helps," my mother said. She bit into her Tootsie Pop. It was a terrible noise. "Traffic. There is so much to fear, babe. I feel fearful all the time."

My mother grabbed me, wrapped me in her arms. I was fearful, too, all the time. I had bad dreams that involved Mickey Mouse chasing my mother with a red baseball bat all over Disneyland. So I let her hug me, trying to keep my face from her chest, trying to save my punk rock face.

"Day after tomorrow," I said, nodding my head, sending waves of calm, "after we're done eating chocolate, we can go on a juice fast. You'll feel better. You will. We'll get rid of those toxins and you won't feel so much fear."

"I won't?" my mother said, letting me go, seeking reassurance in my

face.

"You won't." I stood on my tiptoes to give her a kiss. I missed her lips and my rhinestone tiara poked her on her cheek and this made my mother laugh.

* * *

"Your mother needs to embrace Jesus," Gina said when I arrived at her house, thirty-two precious minutes late.

Gina had only recently embraced Jesus herself. She had gone to Church with the other popular girls from school after September 11th and had started praying regularly.

"Halloween is a pagan holiday," I said.

Gina nodded. Probably she didn't know the word pagan, and didn't care enough to ask. A good vocabulary was something to be ashamed of, and all I had to do at school was talk to get laughed at. Gina fit right in. She stuck to one-syllable words, she was the second girl in her group to get her period, and she already had boobs. So maybe, new Christianity and all, it made sense that Gina was dressed as a prostitute. Her red top was skin tight and low cut, her mini-skirt barely covered her ass, and with that she had on black fishnet stockings and high-heeled boots.

"What would Jesus say about your costume?" I said.

Gina shrugged. "I look cool," she said.

"Those are stupid shoes for trick-or-treating," I said, and immediately regretted it. My pink Capezio ballet slippers were equally moronic. I felt every pebble beneath my feet.

Gina was my ex-best friend and even though our friendship was doomed, I still clung to her. Without her, I would have been a complete outcast. We'd been babies together, Gina and I, and I had pictures to prove it: me and Gina in a playpen, in the plastic wading pool, at the skating rink, standing on line at the amusement park. I had never trick-or-treated with anybody else.

Lately, I'd been feeling sad for no reason. And it seemed wrong to cry about Gina when I watched my mother spending her days in front of the television, watching the news, fearful, always fearful. Cracking her knuckles. Once, I tried to tell my mother how it was for me at school.

"The popular girls always get date raped," was all my mother could say.

* * *

Trick-or-treating had been getting worse in our neighborhood through the years. Long before there was anthrax, my mother had been fearful of Halloween. Mrs. Nimkin, for instance, who lived next door, used to make candy apples until the warnings on TV about razor blades. Another year, the TV warned parents about the dangers of red M&Ms that contained speed. Gina and I were forced to throw out all of our perfectly good M&Ms, peanut and plain. The old families moved out, and new ones kept pouring in, until Gina and I no longer knew which were the good houses and which were the

bad ones. People started giving out loose change instead of candy.

But if you persevered, and Gina and I did, there was always candy to be found. One woman gave us four Snickers, each. We got good stuff: Milk Duds, Almond Joys, Mars bars, and grape bubble gum. At the red brick house on Cambridge Avenue, a Latino woman dressed in white gave out miniature boxes of Godiva chocolates. But most houses were empty, and I was getting colder and colder in my thin, pink leotard.

"My nipples are hard as a rock," said Gina.

At the next house, an old woman with a face so wrinkled she reminded me of Gina's bulldog insisted we do tricks at her door. I did a pirouette. Gina tried to French kiss me, but I wiggled away. The woman, it turned out, didn't have anything to give us anyway.

I wiped Gina's spit off my lips.

Gina and I walked from house to house, more and more discouraged.

"I'm getting blisters," Gina said.

She looked down at her high-heeled boots.

"Jesus would not embrace those boots," I said.

Gina reached into her candy bag and threw a Snickers at me.

"That hurt," I said.

Gina shrugged. She walked past me on those tiny heels and bent down to reclaim her Snickers bar.

"When did you get so boring?" she said.

I bit my lip.

No self-respecting punk ballerina cried in today's new war. Only I hadn't gotten boring. Gina talked about boys who were as boring as Cornflakes and she prayed to Jesus Christ. Only the day before, in history class, she professed her belief that mass bombings of the entire Middle East Region was the best way to end terror. She didn't want to go bowling, she didn't want to bake chocolate chip cookies or dance naked in the bedroom listening to CDs.

Gina was boring.

Gina was popular.

Gina's mother taught motivational speaking classes for major corporations. There was no fear in her house. She wore clean crisp navy blue suits and served baked chicken with mashed potatoes for dinner. A home cooked dinner to my mother was preparing a box of macaroni and cheese. I didn't dare fight with Gina. I was the one with no friends.

"This house looks good," I said, pointing to the house in front of us.

Actually, it wasn't a promising looking house. The paint was faded and peeling. In center of the patchy front lawn, more covered with dirt than grass, lay a rusty car; a detached car door and fender rested on the front porch. This was not the kind of house that would have candy, but there was, at least, a light on in the window.

"Whatever," Gina said, marching to the front door. "This is the last fucking house."

"Jesus wouldn't say fucking," I said.

Gina rang the bell. We stood on the thick woven welcome mat and we stood there and stood there. No one opened the door even though the lights were on and we could hear music playing. "This is the last house," Gina said.

"I'm boring," I said. "Not deaf."

Honestly, Halloween hadn't been good in a long time. My bag had been stolen the year before. Juan Rodriguez, only a year older than us, had snatched it. Gina had split her candy with me so that my mother wouldn't find out. I heard rumors that Gina made out with Juan at a party this year. But this was a brand new year. A brand new Halloween, and trick-or-treating had been Gina's idea. Gina's. Maybe it was suggested in her new Church youth group. Invite your loser friend out in an act of charity.

I still remembered a time when Gina and I used to love each other. I remembered the year when Halloween fell on a warm, sunny Saturday and we left early in the morning, dressed up as Kermit the Frog (me) and Miss Piggy (Gina), and we did not come back until it was way past dark, loaded down with heavy bags of delicious candy. I slept over at Gina's house, and my mother didn't get hysterical with worry about razor blades or anthrax or the possibility that my father would leave on a business trip with his administrative assistant and never come back. Gina and I melted chocolate bars, poured the melted chocolate on to vanilla ice cream and watched "The Muppets Take Manhattan."

Halloween was once my favorite holiday of them all. Better than Thanksgiving. Better than Christmas. Better than anything.

"This house sucks," Gina said.

She was right. What could you expect from a house whose lawn was littered with old car parts. It was time to go home. I stepped off the

gnarly welcome mat, turned back towards the street, ready to admit defeat. And then Gina screamed. I looked at what Gina was screaming at and I screamed too. Osama bin Laden himself had opened the front door. He was wearing a Yankees T-shirt.

I peed in my tutu. I wanted to run but I couldn't move. The pee dripped down my pink stockings, warm on my ice cold leg. I could smell the pee. So could Gina. So could bin Laden. Osama bin Laden shook his head. He took off his white turban. Then I saw the beige face make-up, the fake beard.

"Hey," he said. "I'm sorry."

Gina held up her tiny fist and shook it at the guy, who was just an ugly white guy with stringy hair. College age, sort of skinny.

"You are the devil," Gina screamed. "You worship the devil. You are evil."

I had watched the TV, I had seen the people jumping out of the windows of the World Trade Center, watched my weeping mother spellbound by the news. She'd been laid off the week before, so she watched the news all day. She was scared before the Anthrax attacks, but she'd been scared before September 11th. Gina turned to Jesus. That's what all of the popular girls did. But I was the same. I was exactly the same. I still wanted to get one hundreds plus extra credit on all my tests. I still hated school, still wished that Gina would pick me for her softball team in gym class. She never did. I was sad and lonely before, and I was sad and lonely now. I had no idea I was scared of Osama bin Laden.

"You deserve to die," Gina screamed, jumping up and down on her tiny heels, pointing her finger.

I started to cry.

"Girls," the guy said, putting his turban back on, taking it off, putting it back on. "It's Halloween. See. Lighten up. Lighten up, girls. Come inside. Come inside and have a fear."

"A fear?" I screamed. "A fear?"

The day had turned to night. It was dark outside. A pimply Osama bin Laden imitator was going to kill us. Take us into his crummy house, tie our hands behind our backs, and do unspeakable things. It was my fault for trick-or-treating when my mother wanted me to stay home. When had it gotten so dark outside?

"A beer," bin Laden said. "A beer."

"You said fear." Gina took a step back from the door, grabbing my hand. She stood straight and tall in her high-heeled shoes, her breasts pointy and proud. "You deserve to die," she said. "But Jesus is merciful. Embrace Jesus. Only Jesus can save you. Pervert."

Gina grabbed my hand.

"Run" she said. "Run." And I ran.

Gina tripped in her pointy boots stepping off the curb. Her fishnet stockings ripped at the knee. We gazed down at the blood that soaked through the black lace, and then I grabbed her hand, pulled her up. We ran all the way to her house.

Two days later, a woman who was not a politician or a member of the media or the postal service died of Anthrax, and then, came the next terrible thing to scare my mother, and not long after, the bombing started, which for awhile, made my mother furious instead of scared. I was ignored all through seventh grade and then the eighth, ignored all through high school. My mother stayed fearful,

and for years and years, had no luck finding a job. But that night, Halloween, Gina and I melted chocolate bars on the stove and poured it over vanilla ice cream and watched the original Muppet Movie.

I loved Kermit the Frog.

