

13 Halloweens

by Michael K. White

1.

The Walking Heart Attack Man has two outfits. In the summer he dresses in a short sleeve checkered button down shirt and high waisted Bermuda shorts with sandals. In the winter he wears dark pants and loafers with a gray corduroy coat which he buttons tightly across his throat. At all times, summer and winter, he hides behind large black impenetrable sunglasses which cover a good deal of his creased, leathery face. His hair is dark and his gait quick and confident. He swings his arms as if they were dead weight. He doesn't walk like a man who is made of heart attacks.

Every evening the Walking Heart Attack Man walks the sidewalks so he can stay alive. It is before the modern era of bypass surgeries, stints and heart transplants. We don't even know his name; all we know is the neighborhood gossip that says he is a man of many heart attacks. He must walk in the sun and rain, snow and sleet if he wants to live. He has to walk, even on Christmas even on Easter and even on Halloween.

Here he comes toward us, swinging his arms, his face a perpetual sunburned smile. He neither nods nor speaks as he passes, but his serene smile impresses all who watch him on his nightly rounds.

We are many children in this neighborhood, dressed in bright plastic costumes which vibrate against the cold metal sky and snowflaky air. The Walking Heart Attack Man walks toward us and we part to let him by, and suddenly he is surrounded by luminous, colorful goblins and princesses, his gray coat buttoned to his throat being swallowed by the gray Halloween evening. His Cheshire Cat smile hangs in the air like tintinnabulation, and we can see

ourselves full of life and color reflected in his black sunglasses, in that moment before the light leaves the evening entirely.

The Walking Heart Attack Man stops and appears to be admiring our Halloween costumes. He stops walking and we are all afraid.

2.

1983.

We're doing our live comedy show outside on a rooftop. It is a special midnight Halloween performance. Our largest crowd ever. All three of us are completely fucked up on beer, whiskey, Nyquil, and whatever else we can get our hands on. The entire show is a kaleidoscope of images. I can't remember what sketches or bits we did.

I remember the heavy sweet smell of burning pumpkins and the crisp sting of October night.

I remember being enthralled with my hollering voice and hearing its amplified sound bounce off the rooftops and then suddenly looking up into the sky and marveling at how twinkly the stars were.

I remember puking in someone's open suitcase in the dressing room and laughingly closing it back up.

I remember the helpless laughter of our audience, all as drunk and fucked up as we were.

I remember doing a bit (yelling into a microphone) and turning to see Kyle, in my peripheral vision, approaching me from the side in full nun's habit, about to give his special benediction. Matt staggers behind him with a lighter setting the tail of the black gown on fire. Kyle, flames climbing up his legs and back, breaks character, slapping at the nun's habit and shrieking, "This is fuckin' rented you asshole!"

3.

It is Halloween night on Lynwood Lane and that means one thing, Tony Curtis as Houdini. Houdini is what I am thinking about at 13, when staring out our picture window and I see something strange in the sky.

It is a light. Not a star or a plane but what looks now to be a ring of undulating lights, moving in a weird circular motion, like a crooked Ferris wheel. It is very high in the sky.

Now my heart pounds. Oh my God! A UFO! I'm actually seeing one! I yell out for my dad who is in the bathroom shaving. He runs out with no shirt on, shaving cream all over his face. He is pissed off.

Wordlessly I point to the light which to my relief has not vanished into thin air the moment my authority figure entered the room. My father looks at it, gapes and looks at it again. The radio on KDZA is segueing from Michael Jackson singing "Ben" a love song to a rat, to the breathless announcer, RandyJay.

"There are scattered reports of a unidentified flying object on the south side of Pueblo. This is no Orson Welles Halloween joke, please stand by for further information."

"Radar Love" by Golden Earring comes on and I look to my father whose stolid sensible nature is the anchor to our family and I see him in utter terror. His face is red, his eyes are bulging and his mouth is open.

"Go get my binoculars," he says in a low voice, as if the strange lights could hear him.

Panic-stricken but still in control I hazily go to his room. I pass my sister in the hallway; she is hollow eyed and clutching a stuffed animal. Her lower lip is trembling. I fumble, thinking nothing is ever going to be the same now. We're experiencing history now. This is really happening and I'm a part of it now. A part of history, a piece of history.

I get the binoculars and hand them to my father who hasn't even wiped the shaving foam off his face yet. He holds them up to his eyes.

"Goddamn sonofabitch!" he spits and hands me back the binoculars then he stalks back into the bathroom and slams the door so hard it cracks the wall.

I look through the binoculars and I see the rotating light, but now that it's closer I can also see that it is spelling out words. English words.

"Happy Halloween From Jess Hunter Ford"

Thank God I thought, thank God the world was still the same that everything was still the same that I was not a part of history.

4.

One year at the Raw Haus Art Gallery we were having a pumpkin carving contest. It was my idea to turn it into performance art. I suggested that we pre-cut some pumpkins, hollow them out then fill them with stage blood and cow guts so that when people cut into them they would bleed.

5.

I am nine. My dad is just home from work, excited. "The mailman just got killed," he says breathlessly. "Hit by a car over on Garwood."

He puts his lunch pail down and takes off running out the door. The whole neighborhood follows. Gruesome deaths are big news and always followed by large masses of people seeking the bloody affirmation of their own mortality.

Garwood is only a couple blocks away. It's on my paper route. I try and focus my mind on this mailman, whose name we do not know. All I can call up on him is the fact that he always wore a pith helmet.

As we get nearer, the crowds thicken, heavy engines are sputtering and growling, and people are turning away, silent, sated. I am anxious to see my first dead body. But when we get to the front of the line the body, in an ambulance, has long been gone. What we gawk at now is two oddly smashed shoes and a pool of blood that is being eagerly licked up by the neighborhood cats.

6.

Kyle is in love.

We have just wound down a rockin' Halloween party and I find myself alone in my apartment for the moment, smoking a bowl and enthralled by James Whale's "Bride of Frankenstein." Breathless, drunk and giddy, Kyle staggers in and sits down, slobbering all over my pipe.

"That girl Marilyn, I really like her. I kissed her goodnight and I even got a feel," he enthused, but I was annoyed that he was disturbing the best part of the movie, where the insane Dr. Pretorious is revealing the contents of his weird homunculus jars to a horrified Dr. Frankenstein. (Played by Colin Clive.)

Noting my lack of enthusiasm for his womanizing, Kyle pouts, hitting the pipe again. Brightening, he removes a cassette tape from his pocket. It is some piano music he has been playing with at home. His piano is a little out of tune, but the music is sad and lilting with just a touch of grace and humor. He inserts it into a cassette player and it begins playing softly.

At first it seems to be a soundtrack for the movie. It is minutes before I realize what he has done. By then I have begun to gravitate toward the music as it accentuates what is happening on the screen. Kyle is sitting low in the couch, never taking his mouth from the pipe, his head enveloped in a cloud of white smoke.

I turn down the sound on the television, and turn up the sound on the cassette player so the piano music fills the room while the black and white horror movie plays itself on the screen. The music and the moving pictures seems to meld, to anticipate each

other. At first I think it's because I'm stoned, but Kyle looks at me through the haze and smiles.

"Hey do you notice.." He stammers.

"This is cool," I manage, but the words hang there like lead turds, so I shut up and turn the music even louder.

Now Dr. Pretorious is laughing heartily in a catacomb crypt, having a very civilized dinner with the Frankenstein monster. (Played by Boris Karloff.) They share delicate glasses of wine, while Kyle's music fills in the gaps where words would ordinarily go.

7.

The radio says there's a baby crying in a field. The only light on Red Creek Road is our headlights.

Being in high school now and having outgrown Halloween trick or treating, Matt and I spend the night with our older teenage mentor Doug, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. Doug is nineteen and has his own place, a junk filled garage on Poplar Street where we spend the night watching old movies.

This Halloween night, we are playing Monopoly, a game we all take very seriously indeed, when on KDZA we hear the deejay say that there are reports of a baby crying in a field on Red Creek Road and volunteers are needed to search for it.

Even though it is after two in the morning, we all look at each other and think the same thing. Now is our chance to be heroes. We pile into Doug's 1967 Ford Fairlane and ride the deserted post-Halloween streets. The radio says there's a baby in the field.

At one point, Doug stops the car and shuts it off, plunging us into darkness. We roll down the windows and listen. Usually Halloween is the night of the First Snow in our town but it is warm almost balmy for a change. Red Creek Road is out in the middle of nowhere, a dirt road that bisects the outskirts of the city, well traveled by drag racers,

teenage neckers and stoners. At three in the morning though it feels like the dark side of the moon.

"Shh! Shut the fuck up!" Doug whispers firmly.

"We should see some lights," Matt says. "I mean if there's a search there would be some light."

"Joke!" I say. "Halloween prank!"

"Fuck!" Doug says, suddenly opening his door and stepping outside. He lights a cigarette. Matt and I get out the back seat. As we double slam the car doors and plunge ourselves into the breezy night we hear it.

Clear and close, the long steady wail of a baby in the prairie darkness.

Instinctively, all three of us leap back into the car and roar down the road, excited and frightened. I'm not sure where we're going, because we're driving away from the sound, not toward it.

We come upon a car turnaround on the dirt road and there we see a police car and a woman wearing a fur coat sitting on a horse. I'm serious. The cop immediately puts his hand on his gun as we rush out of the car babbling about crying babies in the dark.

"See I tole you." The woman says thickly to the cop, who is holding his hand out, palm up to stop us from charging him. We stop, breathless, flushed and blurt out the story, the radio, the car, the dark, the scream.

All he says is, "Goddamn radio station."

"I heard it too," the woman assures us though her dirty clothes beneath the gamey fur coat and heavy air of alcohol indicate that as a witness to anything she may be taken as less than credible.

Still, I *know* I heard a baby cry.

"It was just a rooster." The cop says. "Go home."

"It was a baby," the woman repeats. "Look here what I found." She tosses a bundle of tattered rags onto the hood of the police car. The cop glares at her then shines his big Maglight on the rags. He spreads them out until they take the shape of a weathered baby sleeper pajama; obviously it has been outside for a long time.

A chill runs down my spine and I look at Matt who is looking away and at Doug, who leans against the car, looking at the woman appraisingly and not at the clothes. My eyes lock with the cops.

He asks me how old I am.

8.

It is the last year of the 1960s; an overrated decade. I have just returned home from trick or treating and am in my room frantically stashing my candy so my sister won't find it. This is a very delicate and important procedure requiring all of my attention and intelligence when my mother comes barging into my room.

Our cat Mackey has been sick and she has just learned through neighborhood gossip that the Carlino family is poisoning our cats because they shit in their yard. My mother is livid.

"I need you to help me in a little while," she hisses and I nod, afraid of her wrath. "Don't go to bed. We're going out," she says and she leaves my room. Hastily I stash my candy. I sit and wait.

It is late, about ten o'clock. I have been waiting for my mother to return so we can go on this urgent errand. I am half annoyed and half frightened because for one thing she never wants my help or even my presence for anything. It was her tone that scared me more than anything else.

As I was working this out she reappeared in my door. The look on her face was determined but when she saw me sitting primly on my bed atop a mound of candy witlessly stashed under my bedspread she grinned a wry grin that showed a slight gap between her front teeth.

"Yeah, keep your costume on. That's a good idea." She said, pleased that I'd been thinking for once. I hadn't until that moment realized that I was still wearing my Frankenstein costume. I had been into Frankenstein a lot lately, obsessively watching the old

universal horror movies and freezing my Revel monster models in blocks of ice so I could melt them as in "House of Frankenstein."

Silently I followed my mother. Our house was dark. My dad, who was always wary of my mother's plans, had gone to bed. My sister and my baby brother were also

asleep; one with a candy smeared face the other with a full diaper. I was apprehensive about being so alone with my mother. I was not comfortable.

She was carrying a piece of white chalk a stubby black candle and some of our baby teeth in her hand.

"What are you doing with my baby teeth?" I asked her.

"Shut up." She snapped.

I recognized the black candle as being part of her latest craze, witchcraft.

Witchcraft was only one of a long line of fads that my mother wholeheartedly embraced then discarded with rock solid regularity. Other fads of her life included tropical fish, plants, rock hunting, and pornography. In her current incarnation as a Wiccan, she had painted all the doors to her house black, much to my father's dismay.

"Where are we going?" I whined because I knew the black candle meant business.

"I know whose poisoning Mackey. I'm going to go over there and I need you to go with me."

I had stomach-knotting visions of wild confrontations involving flinging hot wax at our enemies or something. What I couldn't figure out was why did she want me to come with her? Was I to be a sacrifice? Would she throw me to the wolves so she would be free to wreak her havoc? It seemed plausible.

We walked across two yards behind our house and went to the front porch of the Carlino family.

"Watch for cops," My mother said to me. "If you see any just pretend to be trick or treating." It was ten thirty now, a school night and the street was dead. All the porch lights were extinguished marking the end of another successful Halloween

bacchanal. I pulled down my plastic Frankenstein mask like a knight's helmet visor and kept my vigil as ordered.

My mother, working quickly, drew a shaky pentagram on the Carlino's tidy cement porch, and then carefully placed one of our baby teeth in each enclosed triangle of the devil star.

"C'mere," She whispered and I obeyed. She bent her head down low then looked at me and gestured to do the same, so I did. A sharp stab went through my scalp as she snatched out a few hairs but that was nothing compared to how she poked her own finger and squeezed tiny droplets of black blood on each point of Satan's emblem.

"There," she said with real satisfaction. "Those motherfuckers will never poison our cats again. Will they!" This last was directed at me in an almost conspiratorial way. Its tone made my heart bloom with love and friendship for my mother.

As we made our way across two backyards to our house, we didn't talk to each other, but my mother placed her hand on my shoulder when we jumped the fence, and fleetingly, I felt the absence of unease.

9.

My son wants to be a Red Power Ranger for Halloween. We find the deluxe Red Power Ranger uniform at the mall for twenty-five bucks. He's four and he doesn't know

that twenty-five bucks is a shitload of money for a flimsy Red Power Ranger costume. His eyes glitter and I remember that feeling, that flame of Halloween, the colors. To this day the combination of orange and black can put the smell of burning pumpkins into my head.

When he puts on the deluxe Red Power Ranger uniform on his whole demeanor and his whole posture changes. He slides the mask down and strikes an impeccable karate pose. He swaggers,

not like the toddling four year old he is, but like a man, a Power Ranger.

We're trick or treating and he is walking excitedly ahead of us. My wife and I link arms and suddenly our son drops his bag of candy and wheels on us menacingly, in perfect martial form.

"I am the destroyer you must heed me words now! Time Force Megazord mode red. Your weapons are useless against me. I am the conqueror and you are the defeated you will now obey me and all I stand for."

All around us it begins to snow.

10.

It's Halloween night. I'm in my worrying phase. I've been out of weed for three days and all the worry in the world wells up in me. For instance, right now it is three in the morning. I worry that if I stay up past four that I'm going to wake up with a headache tomorrow morning. I look at the television and I can't focus on what is on. I think to myself Oh Jesus what am I going to do when this TV breaks.

All Machines Fail.

How am I going to get the two hundred bucks it'll take to replace it? Oh God. Then my cat walks past me and I think, what am I going to do when this cat dies.

All Machines Fail.

I go into my mind and imagine the horrible death of this beloved cat. Where will I get the strength to face it?

A noise out the window and I notice a strobe blue and red flash of light suddenly bouncing off my walls, and I look out. Below my apartment are some drunken teenage partyers. A police car has stopped them, his spotlight illuminating them as if on a stage. They are happy drunk, their costumes not very original K-Mart witches and devils red and black schemed kind of things. I see the cop go into their car and come out with a four-foot Graphix bong.

"What's this?" He asks them jovially, thrusting the mouthpiece of the bong against a startled partyer's lips. Withdrawing the bong, the cop has gotten his message across. The drunken giggling ceases.

"What's this?" The cop teases.

I shift on my couch, trying to stay low while this tableau plays itself out. There is a horrible silence in the street. My heart is pounding.

"What's this?" the cop taunts and someone finally speaks up.

"That's a pop bottle rocket launcher sir. See where it's all burnt up there?"

All of a sudden the dark room I'm hunkered in is exploded with white light. Every dark corner and hole brightly illuminated by a brilliant electric glow. My wife is standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here sitting in the dark?" She asks.

"Off! Off! Turn the lights off!" I yell and startled, she turns them off. I look out the window again and the partyers, the cop and both cars are gone. No sign or trace. Did I imagine it?

"What is with you?" My wife says, slightly annoyed and tired from a hard night at work. "Here chill out." She tosses a baggie of pot at me and goes into the bathroom to take a bath.

11.

Matt and I are fifteen and delivering pre-dawn bundles of newspapers to 7-11. It is a sharp steely October morning, and we discuss our Halloween plans, which include listening to a double record set of Orson Welles "War Of The Worlds" broadcast and beating my brother up for his trick or treat candy.

We are driving down Fourth Street crossing into the rough east side of Pueblo. As we drive past the bars we see a patch of color that stands out against the gray pre-sunrise sky.

It is a clown, a red and white happy face clown in full clown regalia which includes an orange and yellow polka dot clownsuit, big

shoes and a tiny hat perched precariously atop his head. He is sitting on the curb, his legs sprawled in the gutter, just in front of the White Horse Tavern. He has a stick and with this stick he is idly jabbing the street.

As we drive by Matt reflexively slows the truck, and we gawk at this apparition and as we pass him he brightens, sitting ramrod straight. He brightens and to our everlasting horror he smiles largely and knowingly and waves.

12.

The earliest Halloween I can remember seems like a dream a long time ago. A dream you can barely remember but has left its remnants of emotion on you like honey on a telephone.

I am small and dressed like a ghost. I wear a sheet with holes in it. Did I dream that part? Can that be? I am walking with my dad, carrying an orange plastic pumpkin bucket.

Then there's a duck. A fluffy white duck with a bright orange bill. Can this be? I like to touch the hard bill and the soft fluffy feathers. I like the funny grunting quacking sound it makes when I grab it. Then the duck bites me with the bill and I yell.

Later when I ask about the duck there are whispers.

13.

October 31, 2001 NYC

It is Halloween and I am in New York. Ten a.m. and we are walking toward Ground Zero with a crowd of people streaming toward some spooky loudspeaker opera music. There is a special service going on at the wreckage of the World Trade Center. We decide to walk it from midtown, a not inconsiderable hike, but I am

flying home today and I want to soak up every last bit of New York I can.

As we walk through Chelsea, Greenwich Village, Little Italy, Soho, and Chinatown, I focus on the little things like a man in sunglasses surrounded by a swirl of costumed schoolchildren, the smile on his face beatific. Or on Church Street, just three blocks way from the epicenter of wreckage, a nun in full habit singing "God Bless America" over a karaoke speaker, her eyes closed, her voice in love with its amplified self. A plane flying over, towing a sign whose message is meaningless and illegible against the bright blue sky.

As we get closer, I see shrines to the fallen ringed with black candles melted into Rorschach pools and Xeroxed images of vibrant people who were once alive and now are "missing." The street gets dustier and I notice the fabric signs cheerfully announcing "New York's Financial District" on lampposts are singed and scorched. I look on the ground and see little fragments of gypsum and cement, sharp and new and fresh. Picking one up and putting it into my pocket, I think, a piece of history, a part of history, all around me imprints and smithereens of history.

We're stopped on the edge of the Future by a plywood wall, the sad, reverberating opera music now loud and blaring, and we can hear someone reading names over a PA. We're on the steps of a church still covered with soot and dust, and on the steps are more candles, chalked messages, and neatly arranged piles of shoes. I wonder about the shoes until I overhear someone say, "Well you know the first thing that happens in something like that is you get knocked out of your shoes."

Video news cameras roam the gathering and people play to them, like the man dressed all in a red white and blue costume. He looks like a clown with no make up on. He weeps and slowly dances to the sad opera music, waving two little flags in each hand. His tears roll until the camera stops looking at him, then he resumes selling the little flags to stupid fucking tourists.

Like me.

All around me I am feeling a need, an urgent need, but for what I can't say. I look up at all the buildings surrounding us and I see the burned walls and the blasted out windows. Inside the jagged windows I can see offices and apartments all still covered with fine white powder like some huge art exhibit. I look down and see gouges out of the cement sidewalk. The debris pile is still burning and an acrid, strangely sweet chemical smell lingers in the area.

A baby is crying in its stroller and its mother takes him out and holds him, giving him a toy duck to gnaw on. The baby looks right into my eyes, smiling largely and knowingly and waves. I know that in seven hours I will be home in Colorado, holding my son's hand while he demands candy from strangers. It will be a night of ghosts and monsters, but by now I've already had my fill of both.

