

Cold Felt and a Warm Autumn Night

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I am rushing quickly through the aisles of the store after my father. Rolls and rolls of cloth fill the space around me and my shoes squeak on the white linoleum floor. We grab squares of felt from the aisle in the back of the store, a bag of glue sticks in the same place. My dad always moves too quickly. I jog after him to the center of the store, the fabric and foam around us reach almost to the ceiling. The store feels like a maze, I can never see past one or two rows. We pluck one roll out of the sea of fabric around us. I think the other color will work better, this one is too bright. We put it back and I carry the new one, hugging it like a tree. I follow again, running to keep up as we turn right and emerge into an overwhelming rainbow of thread on little spools. We match the thread to the fabric and then we stand in line behind the other crafty people. My sister has her fabric in her arms. She demanded to be a gorilla, so the fabric is black and fuzzy. She will be the smallest gorilla I have ever seen. We reach a desk in the center of the store, it is an island with four old women in the middle each equipped with a pair of scissors. They ask us how much we want. I stand with my arms wide and my dad measures what we will need. He holds the fabric up in front of me, from one outstretched fingertip to the other, then doubles the measured length and pinches the fabric together as he hands it over to our designated cutter. She holds her scissors at the ready. Then she grabs the fabric, lays it out in one flick of her wrist, and slides the scissors all the way through the cut without ever closing them. She skillfully transforms our purchase into a small folded square with a yellow tag Scotch-taped on top. The woman is machine-like and automatic in her

movements. My dad tries to make small talk. He probably says something embarrassing because for some reason he loves to embarrass my sister and me. Our friends tell us he has an accent, but we can never hear it. We check out and walk outside into the crisp October breeze.

I am walking through the halls of my elementary school. We are all lined up by class, in awkward costumes that are too big for our little bodies. The carpet is a pale blue on the stairs. The handrail is wooden. We aren't allowed to slide down the handrail; once a boy slid down it and got a huge splinter in his leg. As we walk up and down the stairs, we pass each other in orderly lines and we are treated to a parade of spidermen, princesses, and ghosts. I don't like those costumes, though; I always want to be an animal. This year I am a cobra, but eagle, owl, frog, and bat are also in my repertoire. Over the PA system, cheesy Halloween music is playing, the same song every year. "Put it in my witches brew, I got maaagic, abra cadabra cadoo" in a voice that sounds like an Elvis impersonator. I look down and try not to trip on my tail, which is wrapped around me so it looks like I'm constricting myself. My costume is the best. My costume is always the best. The other kids excitedly point me out as their classes pass, but it's hard for me to see them through my mask. We reach the top of the stairs and the floor is smooth cement, glossy and arranged in big squares. We pass another class and head past the library. The hallways are bigger now than they will be in a few years, they feel the size of ballrooms.

I am on the sidewalk in the apartment complex where my family lives. It is dark, but there are brown metal lampposts with tops shaped like Chinese wicker hats. Their light

is yellow and barely brightens the sidewalk ahead. Beyond them it is dark again, until the next set of lights. Light, dark, light, dark, light, dark. We crinkle dry leaves under our shoes as we step. I walk with my sister and my friends. It is the same group every year, maybe there is a parent, maybe not. These are my neighborhood friends, and they're different from my school friends. All our parents know each other and get together over food and wine for any holiday they can, packing themselves around a table in a tiny, brightly lit apartment surrounded by the night.

Cars aren't allowed near the buildings in the complex, and fewer and fewer people pass because it's getting late. All the little kids and their parents are back home. The street is in front of us, but it is far away and it is never busy anyway. It sits quietly, the border of our domain. It feels like we are by ourselves, like we own all the three-story brick buildings with the metal roofs, the oak trees, the grass, the fallen leaves. It's all ours. We knock on the door, but only if there is a sign that reads "Trick-or-Treaters Welcome" in script surrounding a jack-o'-lantern (we knock on the other doors too, just in case). There is a feeling of nervous excitement around us, probably because our neighborhood is creepier at night than we're willing to admit. The light through the tree branches is broken and eerie. The trees give off that strange feeling that so many Halloween movies and TV specials have over and over again failed to capture. As we pass by, I watch their spindly shadows grab at the leaves on the sidewalk. Maybe they don't want to give them away to winter just yet. It feels like winter. It's bitterly cold, and I can feel the wetness of condensation turning to ice in the front of my felt mask. It smells like glue and paint still, because I had to fix it after school. My costumes always smell the same, a distinctive mix of fabric, glue, and posterboard.

We shuffle along in the darkness toward the next building. This one has the closed, warm hallways with the weighted metal doors that keep out the cold. These are where the couples without kids live. The buildings would seem too industrial for apartments, if I had any idea what it was like to be in an industrial building. Right now they feel homey and familiar. We wrench open the heavy door and walk inside into a flood of warm iridescent light. It swings slowly and silently shut behind us as we rush ahead.

I am walking in the door on Eighth and Evergreen. The old brick buildings just a memory now. Last year we moved when I started middle school. I now know the bittersweetness of change. My mom's car pulls away as the door opens in front of me and my friends greet me, dressed in drag. The brothers and sisters have switched places. I don't recognize the sister at first and I'm embarrassed, but I don't think she notices. I'm an owl, a brown one with big yellow eyes, but my mask is too hot so I take it off and put it somewhere near the door. It's dark so I try to remember where I stash it. I don't think it's one of my best costumes and all my friends have already seen it, so I don't mind taking part of it off. My hands are still covered by the feathers on my wings, and there is a white patch on my chest. I've been in the house enough to have the furniture memorized, and it feels odd for it to be pushed to the side to make way for the festivities. We rush downstairs to a more familiar room. We pass the parents in the kitchen. The parents are drunk. They're loudly spilling out onto the back porch, yelling bits of conversation over our heads as we dart between them. We stumble quickly down the stairs towards candy and friends.

I am sitting in the backseat of the car. It's a black Nissan Sentra that my uncle

shipped to my mom from Virginia when he bought his new Lexus. We are winding through a giant quilt of farmland, it feels very far away from my normal existence, even though I'm only a few miles from my home. My sister sleeps through car rides; she takes up too much space and kicks me whenever she repositions herself. The drive feels long. Eventually, we turn into a dirt parking lot on the left side of the road, half full with old station wagons and a pickup truck. I've been here before with a friend and his mom to buy corn to cook for dinner. It was white with yellow spots, sweet, and fresh. But the season for corn has passed. My sister and I get out of the car and follow my mom past a small pen with chickens and goats. The air is cool. It's cloudy and it looks like the sun will go down soon. There is a corn maze to our right, but we pass it and head out to the pumpkin patch. The hay beneath our feet crackles as we step carefully through the prickly vines on the ground. My sister and I hop over the pumpkins, searching for one with the perfect shape and a good handle on top. We hobble over orange orbs big enough to hold us, and we pass some that are still green but rotting and flat on the bottom. My mom follows us slowly now, as we let our passion guide us haphazardly through the field. She always wants us to go to the pumpkin patch, but I don't think she has carved a pumpkin since she was a kid. My sister, my dad, and I always end up doing all the work while she sits with us in the kitchen.

I am in sixth grade. We have a costume contest that I didn't know about. It's my first year at the school. I'm elected to represent my first period geography class at the assembly at the end of the day. I move quickly through the halls from geography to history, from history to science, from science to writing, from writing to art. The day is a

blur, the assembly comes quickly. I join the other finalists backstage, where some administrator lines us up in single file. I can see a judges' table with three teachers I recognize through the heavy red curtain. We can all hear the chatter of the rest of the school in their seats, past what those in the theater like to call the fourth wall. I kind of wish there was a wall there. I didn't realize this contest was such a big deal. Nobody can see me through my mask, though, so I'm only a little nervous. I can't see much either, and walking off the front of the stage may not be the quickest way to gain the respect of my classmates. My dad and I remade the mask last night because it looked like a black and white pillowcase and not a penguin. This one is rounder, with a bright pointy beak sticking out the front. It looks like a cartoon instead of a real penguin, but I like it anyway. I sacrificed my ability to see for the look of it, and I'm glad my parents let me do that. The line in front of me is getting shorter, being eaten up by the monster curtain in front of us. I can hear girls shrieking when they see their friends on stage. I wait for my turn, I hear them mispronounce my name and I walk in front of the curtain onto a narrow strip of stage. It's louder than I expected; 600 people can make a lot of noise. I have a little plastic orange fish on a dowel that is supposed to look like a fishing pole. It doesn't, but it was my idea and I made it on my own, so I'm proud of it. My nerves are overtaken by some instinct deep inside myself to perform, and I stop and quickly pretend to fish. When I lift up my catch I hide it and run feverishly to the other side of the stage. I must look ridiculous, but I like the attention. I catch a glimpse of my tennis shoes showing beneath the three-toed yellow feet we made. The crowd is chanting "Penguin! Penguin! Penguin!" I disappear behind the other side of the curtain. I win a new backpack and a new nickname for the semester.

I am walking into my backyard. I push open the old wooden gate that always catches on the rocks. Inside there is no grass. Just a 12 foot by 12 foot patch of concrete with a little garden along the edge. There is a cardboard tombstone in the garden painted in grey and black acrylics. It reads "Trick or treat." The one next to it reads "Don't Forget to Vote!" My dad thought that just Halloween messages weren't enough, I guess. He can't vote since he's not a citizen, but I won't quite understand what it means to have a green card and be a "resident alien" for a while. This is his version of political involvement (along with long-winded, passionate conversations on long car rides to soccer games). In a week, the scandal of the Bush-Gore election will begin, and my own budding political activism will be shocked to life. Right now it doesn't seem important. I won't be able to vote for another two elections, so all I care about is getting in out of the cold and starting to eat my candy.

The light above our door is a bare orange bulb, surrounded by those fake spider-webs made of a million little strings that you have to pull apart and stretch. There are big black plastic spiders floating on it. Two jack-o'-lanterns line the narrow front door step, one crumbling and collapsing in on itself—probably the work of a mischievous and hungry squirrel. The yellow light from the candles inside flickers out onto the sidewalk. I turn the brass doorknob and walk inside.

I am pouring out my candy on the floor. It slides out of the pillowcase as one mass of multicolored dots on the brown carpet. I quickly pick through it, taking inventory and arranging from best to worst. My mom yells from the kitchen telling me not to eat anything

that is already open; I put those off to the side.

I am standing in my living room barefoot on the soft brown carpet. There is fabric spread out on the floor. The table, crowded with posterboard and glue sticks, is pushed up against the wall. It's already dark outside and I'm tired. My dad is cutting up pieces of felt while I glue the ones together that we already measured out. I try on the sleeves. My hands don't come out the sides. He wants to cut them shorter but I don't think it will look good. I plead with him not to change it; really, I don't need to use my hands. He tells me about the time his grandmother made him a Batman costume for Carnival in Rio. It had short sleeves because it was hot and humid in Brazil in the summer. He was so embarrassed he didn't want to wear it. I let him cut the sleeves, but I'm not happy about it. Later he will tell me about his first Halloween in the US, when he thought the idea was to have a costume as gruesome as possible. He carved broken bones out of wood that stuck out from his bloody clothes. I've never had a gruesome costume. We paint an outline on the mask, I fill it in with a little paintbrush and some acrylic. He adds the final touches. When I wake up to take it to school tomorrow it will look completely different. The perfectionist in him can't help it. I guess the parent in him can't help it either. I will go to sleep too tired to stay awake any longer, stressed out that I couldn't finish making my costume, and I will wake up to it arranged very neatly on the couch. It will be folded with the mask sitting on top, the shoes on the floor. In my subconscious I must know it will be done but that doesn't make me any less worried. I will rush downstairs because I always wake up first; I want it to look good. I wander up the creaky wooden stairs and past the brown bathroom door to the room my sister and I share. I walk past her bed packed with stuffed animals and tuck

myself in. I fall asleep to the familiar sound of cars rushing by outside my window.

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