

HALLOWEEN STORIES

by

S.M.Cashmore

HALLOWEEN STORIES

Last Halloween the family gathered around the fire, switched off the lights so that only the flickering flames lit the room, and told each other ghostly stories.

The little girl told a story about werewolves, which surprised nobody because she had been telling stories about werewolves for weeks, ever since she saw a programme about them on television. Still, it was a frightening story and everyone huddled a little closer round the fire in case a werewolf took it into its hairy head to come and visit them that Halloween night.

The youngest boy told a story about a hand which reached up out of a muddy puddle and dragged down whoever happened to be walking past, down into the thick gluey mud never to be seen again. He had got the idea, he said, when they went out for a walk with the dog a few days earlier and he had got himself stuck in a puddle: both his boots had come off and he had to wade back onto the path in just his socks. Mum sighed. She remembered the incident very well indeed - she was the one who had to do the washing as a result. Still, it was another frightening story, and although nobody expected a muddy puddle to come knocking on the door, everyone looked carefully at the floor in case one was already secretly there.

The older boy told a story about a boy and a girl who were playing catch in the middle of a field when their ball disappeared through a mysterious hole which came from nowhere, and both the boy and the girl disappeared too when they went to look for it. And they were never seen again. He said he knew it wasn't really a ghost story but more like a story you would get in Star Trek, but it was frightening enough anyway. Everyone agreed. Everyone hoped that no mysterious holes would appear to suck them away from the world on this Halloween night.

Mum told a story about a group of children who met up in a deserted house to hold a Halloween party. They took with them a big, hollowed-out pumpkin with holes cut for eyes and mouth, so that when they lit a candle on its inside and put its top back on, it looked like a monster's head with red, glowing eyes. But as they sat around in the spooky house, eating marshmallows and chocolate, one of them noticed that the mouth on the pumpkin-head seemed to be getting bigger. And it seemed to be growing teeth. One of the children bravely went up and blew out the candle, but it sprang back to life with a noisy *whoosh!* just like one of those trick candles on birthday cakes, and the eyes on the pumpkin-head glowed even more fiercely. The teeth seemed to be getting longer - or perhaps it was just the shadows from the candlelight. None of the children waited to find out. They all ran from the house screaming at the top of their voices, and the last one out was almost sure that he saw the mouth on the pumpkin-head begin to move, and he was almost certain that he heard a grating, raspy, pumpkin-head sort of voice begin to speak, before he finally tumbled out of the front door and, screaming with the others, rushed back up the deserted street to the safety of his house.

This was the most scary story so far, and everyone looked round to make sure no glowing eyes were glaring at them from out of corners. Dad poked up the fire and put on some more wood just to make the room brighter. And then everyone looked at Dad so that he could tell them his story.

So Dad told a story about a boy who was trying to go to sleep in his room, on the day before his birthday, but he was frightened that there might be a monster in his wardrobe. And when he remembered that there was no space in his wardrobe, so that there couldn't possibly be any monster in there, he remembered that there was a flat space behind it, and he started to get frightened that maybe there was a flat sort of monster hiding there. But when he started to think about what a flat monster would look like, he felt less and less frightened, deciding that it was impossible to be frightened of something so flat. So he went to sleep. And then, Dad said, long after midnight, a flat monster came out from behind the wardrobe and crept across

the room, and wriggled up onto the bed, and crawled slowly up to where the boy was sleeping. Mum and all the children sat forward, mouths open, wondering what was going to happen. The monster opened *its* mouth..... here Dad paused and the little girl clutched at Mum and closed her eyes..... opened its red, ribbon-shaped mouth..... Dad paused again and the youngest boy put his thumb in *his* mouth nervously, not even realising that he was doing it....., opened its ribbon-shaped mouth with very small, spiky teeth, and whispered in a faint, flat voice..... Dad looked round and whispered: *Happy Birthday*.

For a moment all the others could not quite believe that the story had finished like that, and then they all heaved sighs of relief.

"Good story, dad!" said the youngest boy.

"I liked the bit about being like a rug, with a fringe on," said Mum.

"I liked the bit about it being after midnight," said the older boy. "That was clever. Nobody realised that because it was after midnight, it must be the boy's birthday."

"What was his name?" asked the little girl.

Dad sat and nodded happily, pleased that everyone had liked his story.

"Wasn't very frightening, though," said a voice suddenly from the corner. "At least the other ones were frightening. At least they had *and were never seen again* in them. A good Halloween story *always* has *and they were never seen again* in it. All ghost stories do."

Everyone looked at each other, eyes and mouths wide open. The little girl was trembling and Mum clutched her tightly. None of *them* seemed to be talking.

"That's what's needed on Halloween," continued the voice. "A good fright. What's the point of telling stories about fairies or gnomes, or stories that everyone has heard before? Remember who might be listening on Halloween. Do you think *I* am frightened by a flat monster which comes out and wishes someone happy birthday? What's so frightening about that?"

Dad put a finger to his lips and stood up. They all stood up. Slowly, they moved to the door and then in a mad rush they all scrambled to get through, out into the hall. The dog,

which had been fast asleep and minding his own business, woke up with a start and barked furiously. The little girl started to cry. The boys asked what was happening, and Mum said "hush, hush, hush" to anyone who was listening, which was nobody. Dad held up his hands for silence and eventually everyone was quiet.

They all listened.

Nothing could be heard.

"We all imagined it," said Dad firmly. He went back into the room (with the dog), turned on the light, and after a few moments came out again. "Nothing there," he said cheerfully. "Off to bed!"

Well, you can imagine how difficult it was to get those three children into bed and off to sleep that night. First the little girl decided that she wanted to sleep with the boys in their room. Then all three of them decided it would be better to have the lights on, not off like they usually were. Then the boys wanted something put around the wardrobe. This was a bit silly, since it was only Dad's story they were thinking about and not the ghostly voice, but still..... "Just in case," said the older boy nervously. After that there was a problem because whenever two of them went to sleep the third one got frightened and woke them up again. But eventually, long after midnight, they all went to sleep and dreamed strange Halloween dreams.

Downstairs, Mum said to Dad: "Was that you? Did you use a tape recorder or something?"

"No," said Dad. "I thought perhaps it was you."

"Don't be silly. How was I to know your story was going to be about a flat monster?"

"Ah well," said Dad. "I expect we imagined it. Or heard a radio in a car outside. Or something."

Mum said nothing, but she was not so sure. The next day, she cleaned out the room thoroughly. The day after that, she took out all the furniture and washed the carpet. The day after *that*, she put the furniture all back in again, only in different places. As a result the room

looked completely different, much lighter, with not so many dark corners. Everyone liked it - even the dog, which found a new place in which to curl up and go to sleep.

Within a few days, nobody was frightened of the room any more.

Within a few more days, the children started to forget all about the strange voice.

Not long after that, it was Christmas, and they all forgot all about Halloween in the excitement of Christmas stockings, Christmas trees, and Christmas presents. Then the year came to an end, the new year started with a party next door, and after that everything was back to normal.

That was all *last* Halloween. This Halloween, as the day got closer and closer, they all remembered what had happened in the previous year. They remembered the fire, and the leaping flame-shadows. They remembered the ghostly stories and the strange little voice piping up out of nowhere. They remembered their mad rush into the hall, and Mum clearing out the room afterwards. They remembered how they had forgot.

Nobody said anything, but they all decided that it was going to be different this Halloween. Even though it was a wet, dark, blustery evening Mum decided not to light a fire. Dad didn't make up a story. In fact, nobody thought of a story and nobody even suggested sitting around in that room to tell any stories. They stayed in another room where there was a big table, and started what might have been the world's longest game of Monopoly.

It *might* have been the longest game because the little girl did not really know how to play, and the older boy took forever to make all his decisions, and the youngest boy kept playing up and lost the dice at least three times. *Might*, but something happened to change all that. It was, after all, Halloween so perhaps they should have expected it.

The dog barked - a sudden loud excited woofing usually reserved for the postman. But the postman was certainly not visiting on that dark, blustery night.

"Is it trick-or-treaters?" wondered Dad, looking out of the window. He could see the trees outside bending in the wind, and the streetlight behind them appearing to flicker on and off as the branches moved. He could see their garden gate, and the wet street glistening in the lamplight. He let the curtains drop and returned into the lighted room. "Nobody there," he said. "Daft dog - go back to sleep!"

But the dog only barked again, and went to the door, trembling with excitement.

"Perhaps it's the wind," said Mum doubtfully. "Do you hear it?"

They all listened. It did sound like the wind, but as they went on listening, it started to sound more and more like something else. It sounded like mournful crying, like someone somewhere crying sadly. They looked at each other out of the corner of their eyes.

"Just the wind," said Dad firmly, and shook out the dice. But even he did not really believe it, and when the dice stopped rolling, instead of making a move he looked again at the dog still standing with his nose pressed against the door. "Daft dog," he said again, gently. He stood up and, holding on to the dog's collar, opened the door and went out into the hall. The others followed.

There was no doubt about it. Behind the door of the other room, where there was no fire and no light and perhaps most important of all, no people - behind that door something was crying.

"It's the voice," whispered the younger boy. He was standing behind his brother, on tip-toe, peeping over his shoulder. Dad nodded. He reached forward and carefully opened the door.

Inside it was as dark as the darkest room in the scariest ghost story you have ever read. The curtains were pulled so that the light from the streetlamp could not get in through the window. Nobody had thought to put the light on in the hall, so no light got into the room through the door either. Inside was full of dark shadows and black shapes where the furniture blocked off even the shadows. And away in the corner furthest from the door, a voice sobbed and cried and snuffled in tune with the whistling Halloween wind outside. If you opened a

book and looked at a picture of that black, haunted room, you would know that you were reading one of the scariest ghost stories any writer had ever written.

But none of the family felt scared. They only felt sorry for the voice. It sounded so lonely, and lost, and alone. Perhaps, Mum thought, this was the only night it ever came visiting, and it was upset to find nobody there. She was the first to step forward, and the others followed, even the dog. One by one they stepped into the dark room, not bothering to put on the light, and after a moment the voice stopped crying and there came a long pause. All they could hear was the wind whooshing and howling outside. They all wondered if the voice had gone.

Eventually Mum said: "How about this? I remember someone telling me this story long ago - perhaps it was your Dad, before you were born. He was always telling me stories."

In the darkness, Dad smiled at her.

This is the story she told:

"Long, long ago, when your grandparents were just children, a boy and a girl went to stay with an old Aunt who lived in the country. It was the school holidays, but the main reason that they went to stay there was because their parents were busy moving house. So while their parents were packing up boxes and suitcases and parcels and goodness knows what, and while they were supervising the loading up of furniture onto lorries and then arranging for everything to be unpacked at the other end of the lorries' long trip, the children played in the garden and the house of their old Aunt. She did not interfere with them much, but just sat in the front room knitting. A cook made them meals, and a housemaid looked after the house, but nobody really looked after them. They just enjoyed themselves.

One rainy day they decided (after checking with their Aunt that it would be all right) to have a look in the attic. Up they went, clearing away the dust and cobwebs, and found - well, nothing much. It was an attic like any other, full of boxes of things which people saved one day but years later couldn't for the life of them remember why they had saved in the first place.

Still, it was raining outside and they had nothing much better to do, so they continued to look around, and after a while the boy found a big box with something unusual in it.

It was a rocking horse.

Well, although they had brought a few toys with them from their own house, they certainly had not brought anything as big as a rocking horse. In fact, they did not even have one at home. So, very much excited, they dragged it over to the attic entrance and after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing managed to squeeze it through and drop it onto their bedroom floor. It landed with an enormous thump, and the two children held their breath, expecting a great outcry from down below. But fortunately their old Aunt was rather deaf, and apparently did not hear the crash.

They scrambled down after the horse, dusted it off - although surprisingly it was not very dusty - and the girl quickly jumped on. *Creek-crok* went the old rocking horse as she rocked backwards and forwards. *Creek-crok, creek-crok, creek, crok*. They looked underneath the horse, and sort of pushed and prodded at all its wooden joints, and then the boy jumped on. *Creek-crok, creek-crok, creek, crok* went the horse, if possible even more loudly than before. They shrugged their shoulders. It didn't really matter, after all. The horse rocked perfectly well and it didn't really matter that it creaked in its old joints.

Except that it did matter, and this is why.

The two children slept in two beds, one at each end of the big room where their aunt had put them. The rocking horse stood somewhere in between. On that very night after they had investigated the attic, in the middle of that dark country night where there were no streetlights or even the headlights of passing cars, the girl unexpectedly woke up. Something had woken her, but for the moment she could not think what it was. Then she heard it - fainter than during the day, but still unmistakeable - *creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok*.

Her first thought was that her brother had for some reason decided to have a go on the horse in the middle of the night.

"Is that you?" she whispered.

"Um?"

She heard a stirring in the bed on the other side of the room, and at the same time she heard the steady *creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok*. Her heart started to pound with fear. Who could be riding the old rocking horse in their bedroom in the middle of this dark night?

"Can you hear it?" she whispered. "Can you?"

"I say, is that you on the horse?" came a whispered reply.

"No, it isn't! I'm still in bed."

"Well, so am I."

Creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok.

"I'll make a light," said the boy, for this was at a time when some houses out in the country had no electric lights. He struck a match and it flared brightly. Instantly, the sound of the rocking horse stopped. There was silence in the room.

After a moment, the boy managed to light his candle and he cautiously went over to look at the horse. The girl stayed where she was, with all of her except her eyes underneath the blankets.

"There's no-one here," he said presently. "Is your window open?"

It was not.

"I wonder if the door is open?" he muttered to himself, and went over to have a look. It was not. "I wonder what made the horse rock, then?" he said. "It wasn't the wind blowing in from somewhere - anyway, there isn't a wind tonight."

"I'm frightened," said the girl. So was the boy, although he was not about to admit it.

"Look," he said, "I'll get in with you, all right? Nothing can happen to you then." And he thought to himself, *perhaps nothing will happen to me, either*. He climbed into his sister's bed and after a moment's hesitation, blew out the candle.

Nothing happened. He snuggled down, glad not to be on his own, because after the light of the candle, the room seemed even darker than before.

Creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok.

The girl gave a little shriek, and he gripped hard on the edge of the bed. There was no doubt about it. Now that it was dark, the horse was rocking again, rocking to itself in the darkness, even though there was nobody else but the two children in the room.

"Light the candle," whispered the girl. "Quick!"

The boy jumped at the sound of her voice. Then he gasped with horror. "I can't! I've left the matches over by my bed!"

Creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok.

He did not volunteer to creep over to get them, and his sister did not ask him to. Neither of them wanted to go anywhere near the eery rocking horse and its invisible passenger.

"It must be a ghost," whispered the girl. "Do you think its the ghost of a child? Why else would it ride on a rocking horse?"

"How should I know?" whispered the boy. They listened to the ghostly noise for a few more minutes, and it seemed to get fainter. Or perhaps they just started to get used to it.

"It can't be long till morning now," whispered the girl. "I suppose we'll just have to wait."

"I suppose so," agreed the boy. He had been trying to think of something else to do, but nothing came to mind. Perhaps the steady rocking of the horse would even lull them to sleep. Perhaps their aunt would come upstairs to see them, although he could not think why. And then something else happened.

The creaking noise stopped.

You might think that this was the best thing that could have happened, and a few moments ago the two children in the haunted room would have agreed with you. But as soon as it happened, they changed their minds.

"Do you think," whispered the girl, sliding even further under the blankets, "that whatever-it-is *has got off*?" The boy was wondering the same thing. Something had been riding the horse. The horse had stopped. So perhaps something had got off and was even now walking towards them in the darkness.

He gave a little shriek too, and dived down under the blankets with his sister. They both listened as hard as they could, listened for footsteps or some other sound in the empty room. And they heard - nothing.

"It's gone," whispered the boy.

The girl did not reply. She did not know whether whatever it was had gone or not, but she knew she was not going to look out to find out. She stayed snuggled down, and so did her brother. And after nothing had continued to happen for quite some time, something eventually happened which they would hardly have believed possible.

They went to sleep.

Not surprisingly, they slept a bit late the next morning, so when they did wake up they rushed down to breakfast as quickly as they could. Their Aunt was already sitting at the table, reading a newspaper and drinking a cup of tea.

"My, you're late this morning," she said. "The country air must be getting to you."

"No, Auntie!" said the girl excitedly. "It's not that. Did you know you had a ghost?"

The old lady looked at her over the rims of her spectacles. "No," she said. "Have you seen one, then? I can't say I'm very surprised. This is a very old house, you know."

"That's why we're late," said the boy. "We were up half the night!"

"We didn't actually see the ghost," said the girl. "But we heard it. What happened was...."

"Sit down," interrupted the old lady. "You're making me feel tired."

"..... we found an old rocking horse up in the attic. You remember we were looking around up in the attic? We did ask you. Anyway, we found this old rocking horse which creaks when you ride it, and in the night - "

" - in the night," broke in the boy, wanting to tell at least some of the story, "we heard someone...."

".... or something," said the girl.

"..... yes, or something, riding the horse even though we were the only ones in the room! What do you think of that?"

They stopped, breathless, and looked at the old lady. She was looking at them with an astonished look in her eyes, but when she finally spoke, she did not say quite what they expected.

"A rocking horse," she said. "You found a rocking horse?"

"Yes," they said.

"And when you ride it, it makes a noise like *creek-crok, creek-crok*?"

"Yes," whispered the children, feeling a cold tingle up their spines, although they could not quite say why.

"I had an old rocking horse when I was a girl," said their Aunt. She had taken off her glasses, and was gazing into space as she remembered the past. "I used to call him Muddy. My grandfather made him for me. He was my favourite toy and I used to ride him for hours and hours when I was little. I can still remember the noise he made: *creek-crok, creek-crok, creek-crok*." She sighed, and fell silent for a while. Then she put her glasses back on and looked back at the children. "Years before you were born," she said, "there was a fire in this house. My room was burned up, and everything in it. Yes," she said, seeing the boy glance at the girl in sudden understanding, "everything. Including Muddy. There has been no rocking horse in this house for more than fifty years."

"But," cried the girl, "but there was! I mean there is! We rode him yesterday - he's up in the bedroom now. Come and see!"

The old lady shook her head, and the children thought they saw a glint of tears in her eyes. "No, I'm too old to go up the stairs now," she whispered. "You go up. Go up and tell me what you see."

So the two children, without having eaten so much as one bite of breakfast, rushed back upstairs to their bedroom. And of course, when they got there, the old brown rocking horse was nowhere to be seen."

Mum paused for a minute, there in the darkest of dark rooms, with the Halloween wind howling. "So you see," she said softly, "there was a ghost in the old house that night. But it wasn't something riding the rocking horse. It was the rocking horse itself. And I have heard that in later years visitors to the house often heard a faint *creek-crok, creek-crok* from that room, even though nobody ever saw the horse again."

Mum stopped. The smallest boy came over and clung to her hand.

"That was scary," he whispered.

The little girl said nothing. She was thinking of going upstairs to her room to sleep, and she was thinking of the big brown rocking horse sitting in the middle of her room.

"Pooh," said the older boy bravely. "Ghost stories don't frighten *me!*" But all the same, he was glad that he shared a room with his brother.

Dad said nothing. He listened, looking about the room, peering into the darkness. At last he heard a faint patter of footsteps - or maybe it was a fluttering of wings - and a faint laugh. He smiled to himself.

Their lonely Halloween voice had stayed to listen to the story after all.