

Destroying Halloween
by May Cotton © 2016, 2023

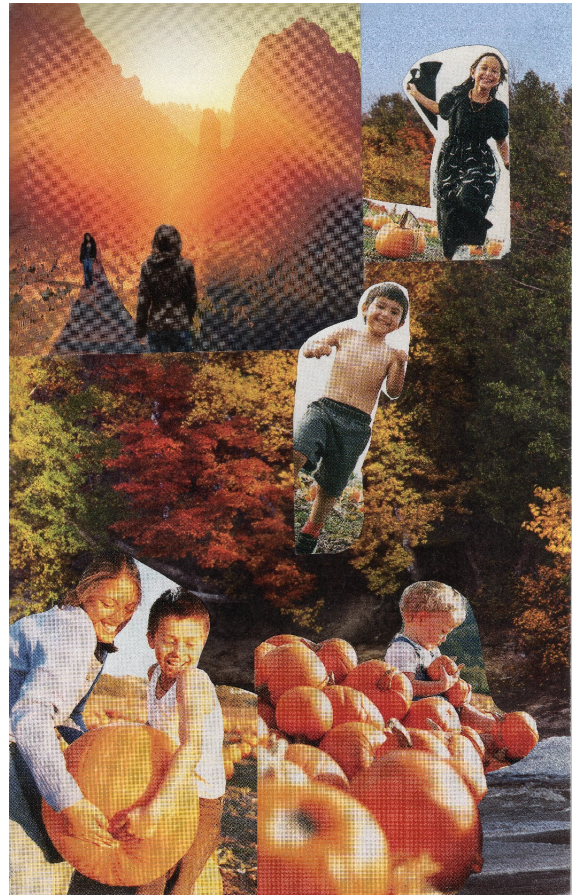
It was unseasonably warm that Friday night in 1958. A splendid afternoon for Trick-or-Treating, we started out as soon as we got home from school, having been dressed for it all day. I was a Turk in the costume my mom made, with blue satin pants cinched at the ankle, a gold ric-rac trimmed vest and matching red fez, complete with an aluminum foil-covered cardboard scimitar at my waist. I was a fierce little warrior that year when I was almost 8 — until my brother and I arrived at the church Halloween party.

We gathered in the gym to hear frightening tales from a dramatic voice on a record player. This was my first exposure to Edgar Allan Poe and his terrifying imagination. I distinctly remember “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Tell Tale Heart.” By the time “The Black Cat” was being read, I was shaking with emotion, remembering Midnight, who had been returned to the pound¹ without my knowledge the previous year. I still grieved for the loss of my very first pet, a sweet black cat with a white star on her chest.

Gradually one after another of us was taken away by a big teenager. There was no standing in line, waiting eagerly to be the next one to enter into the excitement.

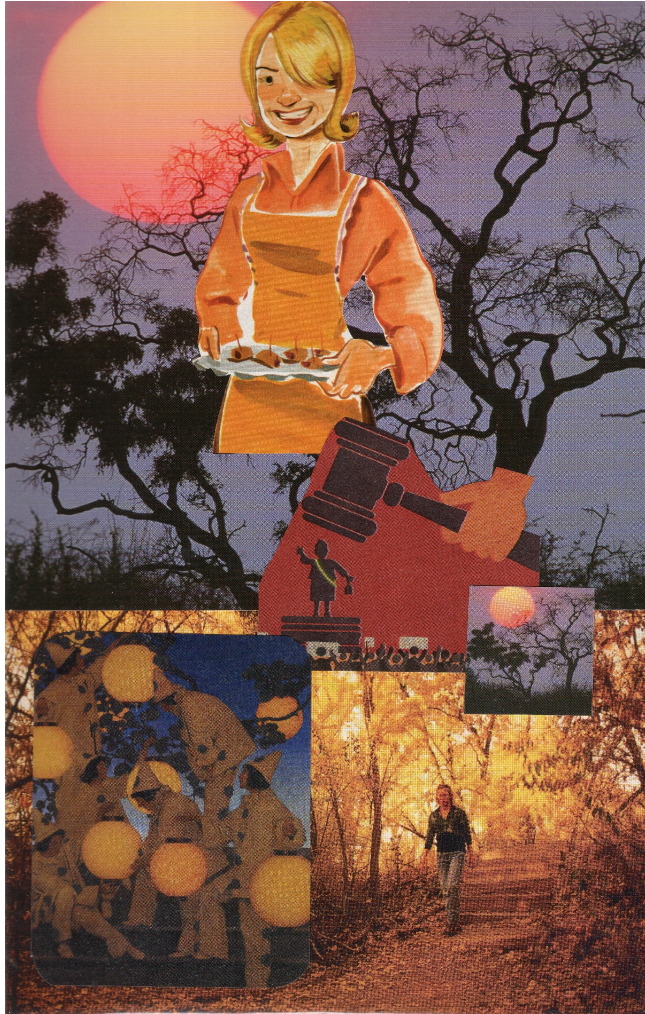
Instead, my heart ripped from my throat as hands grabbed my shoulders. I was dragged to my feet and led to the door of the famous MYF² spook house and shoved inside. The door slammed behind me. I was alone in a long dark hallway, terrified out of my mind.

Gradually faint pink lights rose from the edges of the floor, and I could see ghostly shapes fluttering through dangling cobwebs. I turned around to exit where I had entered, only



¹For the full story, read “Red Feather Lakes,” Chapter 8 of my memoir *Sister, Sister* (above).

²Methodist Youth Fellowship



to find the big boy who dragged me in there blocking my way. He roared at me in a loud voice. “There is no exit,” he hissed. “You can only go forward.”

I tried to fight my way back out, but the boy was twice my size, and he shoved me forward. I fell onto my hand and knees, stunned. “Go!” he yelled at me. “Go forward, or you will be sorry!”

I was already sorry I’d even come to the church with my brother, but not nearly as sorry as I would be when it was all over. I had broken my cardboard sword when I fell, and I was no match for this bully. I got to my feet and moved cautiously down the hall. All around me were frightening shapes and dreadful sounds. The walls began to shudder and moan, and I ran a few steps forward, only to be grabbed by skeletal hands reaching for me from both sides. I was too frightened to scream; instead I burst into tears and wet my pants.

For some reason, the older kids who were putting on the spook house did not think my reactions mattered, and they continued to torment me as I was pushed and shoved along through the house of horrors they had built. I witnessed hangings and beheadings, floating body parts, decaying dead bodies rising out of coffins, not to mention several frightening creatures which leapt out of the walls at me.

Because our church was such a large, sprawling building, I was forced up two flights of stairs, down a long series of hallways, through a wading pool of brackish water, back down two different flights of stairs and through an opening so small I was forced to crawl. I’d had nightmares all my life, but nothing was as terrifying as this.

Finally I came to the end of the spook house. The exit turned out to be only a dozen yards from the entrance door where this waking nightmare had begun, but because it ended in a different room, it was invisible to everyone in the gym.

The moment I was free from the spook house, I ran to a nearby bathroom and saw an

even greater horror in the full-length mirror. My satin trousers were wet to the waist from the pool of water and the urine running down my legs. In spite of all the terror I'd already experienced, there was still my mother's wrath awaiting me at home. What would she do to me when she saw how I'd ruined my costume.³

At my tender age, I had not yet reached the stage where I could distinguish fact from fiction, fantasy from reality. So it stands to reason all the horrors of the evening helped turn that little Turkish warrior into the easily-frightened adult I became. Over the course of the next three years, my brother would take me to three movies which continued the process.

After we saw *The Time Machine*, I came to believe World War Three would be going strong by 1964 when I would be in junior high. It was 1965 when I finally let go of that fallacy. Next we saw *War of the Worlds*, which ruined me for anything with tentacles and increased my fear of war. And for some bizarre reason, later that year our parents let Tom drag me along to *Black Sabbath*, where I huddled in the bathroom until a big tough usher forced me out and demanded that I either return to the theater or leave.

I was too young to go home by myself, and I had no idea how to get there. The theater was not in our neighborhood. My pleading met with stony resistance from the usher—returning to the theater was my only option. So I sat next to my brother with my hands over my ears and my eyes tightly shut against the monstrous things happening on the big screen; what I had already seen remained in my nightmares for years to come.

As to that frightened adult I mentioned earlier, I do not read or watch anything scary. No thrillers, no mysteries, no suspense; I don't care how good it's supposed to be — if it



³She eventually forgave me and washed the costume, which my sister wore a couple of years later.

elevates my adrenalin, I'm not interested. I read none of the stories in the local paper about the vampire movies being filmed here. Spokane's loss, I suppose, though I do read nearly every article about the horrors of politics and the ongoing destruction of our beloved planet.

There are enough terrors in the real world. I truly do not understand the draw of horror, how it makes normally sane adults laugh. What I do understand is that children need to be protected from such nonsense until they are mature enough to distinguish fantasy from reality. I was in my teens before I finally understood the difference, which allowed the monsters under my bed to fade away. But it was not until I went away to college that I could finally fall asleep easily.

Even with no more ghosts drifting out of my closet mirror in the middle of the night, no creatures in the toilet waiting to grab me, there was still my father to contend with. Now that I was older, he mostly left me alone — until he didn't, which caused the nightmares to return. In that regard, I remained broken for many years from this horror I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Fortunately, I live in a community with rules prohibiting trick-or-treaters. I don't have to see all the small children who are being prepared to witness the horrors of Halloween, a holiday I could gratefully do without. I suspect these fears that creep up on me seasonally have also contributed to my strong dislike of the color orange.