

## The King

Reggie was playing the radio again. He sat with the old transistor on his lap, one hand resting on the top like he was petting a small animal. The radio played old rock and roll songs and he tapped along to the rhythm. He sat in the middle of the garage on the cold concrete floor. The garage smelled like cigarettes, not the ones his mom smoked but the kind his older brother smoked, the ones that didn't come in a pack which meant his brother or one of his friends had to roll them. He looked out across the street toward the carved pumpkins glowing a spooky orange. Mr. Lecrone lived at that house and earlier in the day he had let him carve a pumpkin, watching carefully over his shoulder as he struggled to shape the teeth with the orange handled safety knife. "Take 'er easy now," Mr. Lecrone had said. "The teeth are the most important part." When he finished carving, Mr. Lecrone gave him a thumbs-up and told him he was a natural. Reggie liked the pointed teeth and thought they looked scary, like a vampire's fangs. His fingers still smelled from scooping out the pumpkin guts. He liked the smell and every few minutes he stopped tapping and brought his fingers to his nose.

A song by Elvis came on the radio and he thought about getting up to dance in his costume. His aunt had made the rhinestone suit for him when she came home from art school last weekend. After she finished she had him try it on.

"You're even more handsome than Elvis," she had said. "Now let me see you shake those hips."

He wished his aunt still lived with them instead of with her new husband. If she were here she could take him trick or treating. Earlier in the day his mom had promised to take him but that was before Paul, her boyfriend, came over. When he reminded her of her promise she had told him to go along with his older brother Jesse.

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He didn't want to tell his mom that Jesse didn't really go trick or treating. Jesse and his friends went around and stole candy from the younger kids.

"Why can't I go by myself?" Reggie had said.

"Are you kidding," his mom said. "Have you seen the kind of people that live in this neighborhood?"

The Elvis song ended and the station went to a commercial. Reggie stood up and brushed dirt off the backside of his costume. He decided he would ask Mom once more if she would take him trick or treating. She always told him not to bother her when her boyfriend was over but he had a plan. He knew his Mom and Paul would probably run out of beer soon. The party store they bought their beer from was a few blocks away. They could take him along and he'd at least get to a few houses and show people his costume.

Reggie shut off the radio. He set it down on one of the wooden shelves near the front of the garage. Outside the garage it was cool and smelled like dead leaves. He walked up to the back of his house, stopping at the back door. The door opened up to a little mud room where he carefully took off the blue suede shoes his aunt had found for him at a local costume store. Beyond the mud room was the kitchen. The kitchen smelled like ketchup, French fries, beer, and the hamburgers his mom had cooked for dinner. On the counter Reggie saw a whole bunch of empty beer cans—blue ones with a red leaf, and gold ones with white letters, and white ones with blue letters. He smiled, feeling pretty sure his plan would work.

The swinging door that opened up to the living room was closed. Reggie pushed it open a little. The room was dark except for the light he was letting in from the kitchen. He stopped when he saw his Mom and Paul on the couch. They were naked. He was on top of her, his butt going up and down real fast. Reggie let go of the door and it swung shut. He walked out of the kitchen slowly, trying not to make any noise. He picked up his shoes from the mud room and took them back to the garage.

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Reggie took the radio out of its hiding place. He turned it on, hoping to hear something good like maybe the Monster Mash or Elvis but instead it was a love song, a really slow one. He turned the dial slowly, trying to find new stations, strange ones buried mostly in static but still there. Sometimes he imagined that they were radio stations in far-away cities, cities he had heard of but never seen like St. Louis, Memphis, and Chicago, where Reggie's dad had gone to live. No matter where his fingers moved the dial, all that came out was static with an occasional voice sounding like someone trying to talk underwater.

Across the street he saw a group of trick or treaters walking up to Mr. Lecrone's house. There was a princess, a gorilla, a ghost, and two vampires; one with a black cape and the other a red one. They were all laughing and swinging their pillowcases full of candy. He watched them ring the doorbell. Mr. Lecrone came out holding a big dish. Reggie imagined it was full of miniature Snickers bars and peanut butter cups. Mr. Lecrone always had good candy. He heard the kids all say "Trick or Treat!" They held open their pillowcases and Mr. Lecrone put what looked like three or four pieces of candy in each one. Once the kids had their candy they took off down the sidewalk, their feet crunching up dry leaves as they ran.

Reggie got up and put his radio in its hiding place. He took a step outside of the garage, looked back toward his house then ran across the street. He stopped at a big pile of leaves next to the woodpile at the edge of Mr. Lecrone's yard. The woodpile had always seemed huge, about twice as big as he was, but the pile of leaves was even bigger. He wanted to climb onto the wood and jump into the leaves, get lost in their smell and the crackling sound they'd make. He thought about it for a while then decided it would ruin the costume his aunt had made. He was pretty sure he wasn't going to trick or treat tonight but he didn't want to hurt his aunt's feelings.

Another group of trick or treaters was coming up to Mr. Lecrone's. This time it was a robot, a soldier, and a ninja with a really neat-looking sword on his back. They were taller than he was

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and probably older. He wondered if they would say yes if he asked if he could tag along. The idea seemed like a good one until he thought about his mom. If she found out he would probably get in trouble. It would be like the time he tried to clean the house for her when she was sick and he accidentally messed up the TV by spraying too much Windex on the screen.

“Oh, Reggie,” she had said, taking the bottle from his hands.

Reggie hid behind the leaves until the trick or treaters passed. When the sound of their laughter was far away he came out. He didn't know why he hid behind the leaves exactly. He just knew he didn't want those kids to see him. They might have thought someone had stolen his candy since he didn't even have a bag.

He walked up to Mr. Lecrone's door and rang the bell. Mr. Lecrone opened the door holding the candy dish with both hands.

“Well look what we have here,” he said.

Mr. Lecrone curled his lip and sang a few lines of “Hound Dog.” Reggie didn't think Mr. Lecrone sounded anything like Elvis. His voice was too quiet and scratchy but he liked to hear him sing anyway.

“Here,” Mr. Lecrone said, holding out the candy dish. “Take as much as you want.”

In the dish there was everything that Reggie had imagined. The Snickers bars were big size instead of mini and there were also Milky Ways and Baby Ruths. Reggie took one peanut butter cup, opened the wrapping, and popped it into his mouth. He chewed the candy, letting the creamy peanut butter coat his tongue.

“Where's your bag?” Mr. Lecrone said.

He said he didn't have one.

“Aren't you trick or treating?”

He shook his head.

“Why not? You've got your costume on and everything.”

Reggie turned his head, looked across the street at his house then looked at the ground.

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“Why don’t you stay here,” Mr. Lecrone said. “You can help me pass out candy.”

Reggie liked passing out the candy. He liked how Mr. Lecrone let him hold the big bowl and drop as much candy into each bag as he wanted.

“Don’t be stingy,” he had said. “I’ve got plenty more in the kitchen.”

He tried to give each boy or girl the same amount but sometimes he saw a really cool costume like a zombie dripping blood and pus and then he’d give them an extra peanut butter cup.

In between trick or treaters they waited inside. Reggie would have liked to watch a monster movie or something on TV, but Mr. Lecrone didn’t have one. He said he liked hobbies that make you think, like chess. Reggie liked chess too, he liked to move the carved wooden pieces around the board, form them into armies, or play farm with the pieces that looked like horses.

“That one’s the knight,” Mr. Lecrone would say, pointing to the piece Reggie was moving around. “And that one’s the bishop.”

Reggie could usually remember most of them except for the rook, he still called it the castle. He was playing with the castles, stacking them up to make a larger castle, when the doorbell rang.

“That’s us, Reggie,” Mr. Lecrone said.

Reggie grabbed the candy dish on the way to the front door. He opened the door and saw two kids. Both of them were taller than his brother. They each wore blue jeans and a t-shirt. One of them, the taller one, also had on a gold necklace. They both smelled like the cigarettes his brother smoked.

“Aren’t you fellas too old for Halloween?” Mr. Lecrone said.

“We’re only fifteen,” the boy with the necklace said.

“Yeah,” the other boy said. “We’re just tall for our age.”

The boys turned to each other and laughed. They each held out a bag toward Reggie.

“Where’s your costume, then?” Mr. Lecrone said.

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The boy with the necklace took a toothpick from his pocket. He shoved the toothpick into the side of his mouth and then spoke.

“We’re hoboes,” he said.

“Yeah,” the other one said. “Just a couple folks down on they luck.”

Reggie looked up at Mr. Lecrone. His jaw was moving up and down like he had stuffed his mouth full of gum. The two boys had big smiles, bigger, it seemed to Reggie, than the glowing pumpkins and their crooked teeth.

“Give them a piece,” Mr. Lecrone said.

Reggie dug his hand into the dish. He stared at the shadows the pumpkins made on the porch as he dropped the candy into each bag.

“There,” Mr. Lecrone said. “Now thank the boy and move on.”

The taller boy flicked the toothpick side to side with his tongue.

“We need some more,” he said.

“Remember,” the other boy said. “We’re down on our luck.”

“Give them one more, Reggie,” Mr. Lecrone said. “Then we’re going inside.”

Reggie thought his voice sounded even scratchier than it did earlier when he was singing Elvis. He grabbed as much candy as he could hold and gave it to the boys. The wind picked up and the shadows on the porch flickered wildly.

“How about you just give us all of it,” the taller boy said, taking the toothpick out of his mouth.

Reggie looked up quick and saw the boy wasn’t smiling. Mr. Lecrone bent down and whispered in Reggie’s ear.

“Take the candy and go inside.”

The shorter boy reached out and snatched the bowl from Reggie. Reggie felt a hand pushing him inside. He was pushed so hard he fell backwards and landed on his butt. Once he got to his feet he looked outside to see what was happening. He saw Mr. Lecrone grab the taller boy’s shirt by the neck.

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“You niggers get off my porch,” Mr. Lecrone said. “Before I break your skinny little asses.”

Mr. Lecrone let go of the boy’s shirt. The boy smiled and flicked his toothpick into the grass.

“That’s fine, old man,” he said. “We’ll go. But from now on you best watch your ass.”

Reggie moved the chess pieces around the board, dragging them really, with no specific game in mind. Mr. Lecrone sat across from him with his head bent down and his hands squeezed together. It looked to Reggie like he was going to say something. His mouth opened then he shut it and moved his jaw up and down.

“You want some candy?” Mr. Lecrone said. “There’s more in the kitchen.”

Reggie shook his head. He thought about the word Mr. Lecrone had yelled at the boys. He knew it was a bad thing to say. He had heard his Mom tell Paul not to use it. “You want the boy to hear?” she’d say.

“You feel the same way I do,” Paul had said. “You just don’t say it out loud and that makes you think you’re better somehow.”

Reggie stopped playing with the pieces. He tried to put them back in their right places like he had seen Mr. Lecrone do, but it was hard to remember.

“You can leave them how they are,” Mr. Lecrone said.

He nodded.

“I think I have some Elvis records downstairs,” Mr. Lecrone said. “You want me to look?”

“I think maybe I should go home,” Reggie said.

Mr. Lecrone nodded.

The lights were on in the living room when Reggie crossed the street to come home. He hoped that meant his Mom and Paul were done being naked. The wind was blowing leaves through the street and Reggie felt cold in his costume. He thought about his bed, the warm

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blankets, and the flannel pajamas his aunt gave him last year for his birthday. He came into the house through the back door, took his shoes off, and walked into the warm kitchen. He went toward the living room door, planning to go right upstairs. He stopped when he heard someone talk.

“Why are you getting up?”

His Mom sounded sleepy or sad, he wasn’t sure.

“I told you I wasn’t staying the night.”

“Please, could you?”

“You’ve got the kids tonight.”

“I always have them.”

Reggie backed away from the door in case someone was going to come into the kitchen. He thought about going down to the basement and then decided it would be too cold.

“If I stay,” Paul said, “they’ll just get used to seeing me around. They might start expecting things of me like I was their daddy.”

Reggie remembered what Jesse had told him after their dad left and then again when Mom started dating. “You only get one dad,” Jesse had said. “Just one, little brother, and he’s gone for good.”

“Paul,” his mom said. “Just one night. You can leave early and the kids won’t even know.”

“I’ll call you,” he said.

Reggie ran to the basement. He didn’t want to go down there but he didn’t want Paul to see him. Paul could be nice sometimes like when he let Reggie scratch the lotto tickets he bought from the party store but mostly he smelled like beer and said lots of bad words to him and his mom.

The light was on in the laundry room, one bare bulb hanging above the washer. He stood underneath the bulb, looking at the piles of clothes on the floor. One of the piles was big enough to jump on, not as big as the leaf pile across the street but still big. He saw one of his brother’s sweatshirts on top of the pile. The basement was colder than upstairs and the sweatshirt looked warm. It was too big and it smelled sweaty but he put it on anyway. He

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moved closer to the stairs and listened until he heard Paul leave through the back door.

His mom was crying. He could hear her even though he was in the kitchen. The sound of her crying seemed to rise above the voices coming from the TV—the picture still faded out now and then from the time he sprayed it with Windex—and above the noisy trick or treaters passing by the house, laughing and crunching through the leaves. He thought he should go to her, maybe make her feel better somehow, do his Elvis dance for her maybe. He knew she would reach out to him, hug him tight and say, “You’re my boy, ain’t you my boy,” and he would nod and she would smile. But he knew her breath probably smelled like beer. He hated that smell. If he smelled it for too long he knew he would puke and then she’d get mad at him for messing up the living room carpet. He decided he would go to the garage. He would listen to the radio for a while till Mom went to bed. Then he could go to his room, get into his flannel pajamas, dive under all his blankets, and curl up tight.

The lights at Mr. Lecrone’s house were still on. The pumpkins were still glowing too. He watched them from his spot in the garage. He remembered how last year all the pumpkins disappeared from porches the day after Halloween and ended up in pieces all over the neighborhood. Every sidewalk in the neighborhood was strewn with rotten orange chunks, shriveled up seeds and sometimes even a piece of the stalk. He had a feeling Jesse and his friends snuck out late and smashed them all. Reggie knew it was a mean thing to do but he thought it would be fun to see the pumpkin break into pieces and the seeds fly everywhere.

The air outside the garage smelled like cigarettes again, the ones Jesse smoked. He heard some people talking and it sounded like they were coming toward the garage. He turned his radio off to hear them better. It was probably Jesse and his friends but it could have been the boys from Mr. Lecrone’s house and that scared him a

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little. He stood up and looked around for a good hiding spot just in case. The garage was mostly empty except for a lawnmower, a watering can, some old rusty tools his dad had left behind, and in one corner choked with cobwebs, a big oil drum. He could fit behind the drum and not be seen if he squatted with his butt close to the oil streaked floor. He would probably get his costume dirty but he had on the sweatshirt so it would only mess up the pants. He decided to risk it. He left the radio on the floor, snuck into the corner, brushed back some cobwebs, and squatted down.

The smell of oil was thick and it almost made him gag. He breathed mostly through his mouth and told himself it wasn't as bad as smelling puke, or Paul's beer breath. He heard the footsteps get closer and he was sure whoever was there was in the garage. Now that the sound was so near he was pretty sure it was only one person. Reggie poked his head around the oil drum to see who it was. He saw the glowing tip of a cigarette first and then his brother's long black hair. He stood up and came out of his hiding spot. Jesse was holding pillowcases stuffed with candy in each hand. He set them down and put his cigarette out on the concrete.

"All done trick or treating, little brother?" Jesse said.

"I didn't go," Reggie said.

Jesse nodded and swiped some of his long hair out of his face. He squinted at Reggie for a while then came up to him. Reggie thought he was going to ask him why he didn't go trick or treating.

"Let's go now," Jesse said. "Take off that sweatshirt and get a pillowcase."

"Halloween's over."

"Not for you," he said. "Now come on."

Jesse dumped out the candy from one of his pillowcases and handed it to Reggie.

"I don't want to go anymore."

He felt his nose running like it always did before he cried. His face was hot and so was his body. The sweatshirt seemed too heavy

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now and it smelled like sweat and oil and he wanted to tear it off and run inside the house.

“I’m going to bed,” Reggie said.

Jesse put his hand on Reggie’s shoulder.

“Halloween’s not over yet, little brother,” Jesse said. “So tell me what you want to do.”

Reggie looked at the candy scattered on the floor, then across the street at Mr. Lecrone’s. All the lights in the house had been turned off and the wind had blown out the candles inside the pumpkins. The only light came from a streetlight a couple houses down and from this Reggie could still make out the rounded orange shapes and their toothy smiles. Reggie put his radio away and wiped his nose on the sleeve of the sweatshirt.

“I know what I want to do,” Reggie said.

Jesse smiled at him and set down his other pillowcases.

“Tell me, little brother,” he said. “Tell me.”