

Dracula Slinks Into The Night

A bright orange envelope came addressed to “The Ghouls of the House.” I ripped it open to find a card with Diane Arbus’s famous black-and-white photo of twin seven-year-old girls in white tights, prim dresses, and wide headbands standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a thought bubble saying, “Hey, Tony! Where’re you goin’?” Next to them as part of a collage, actor Tony Perkins dangled keys in front of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* house and said, “To Randolph and Eloise’s Halloween costume party.” Inside, the invitation gave the date, address, and time. It was in one month.

I liked parties, but, come on: costume? I was forty-two. Besides, that weekend I would have a big contract to write as well as unfair labor practices to consider. My firm specialized in labor law. Workers were getting screwed in this country with more and more labor going to Mexico, India, and other less-developed countries, and unions were getting bashed. The grocery store

clerks, specifically, were renegotiating their contract, and healthcare was a big issue once again. Health was everything.

Also inside the party invitation were the words, “Come dance until you drop...dead!” I wasn’t in the mood. Of course, my wife Kathleen liked this kind of stuff despite her job, and Eloise was her best friend from work. Kathleen was the administrative assistant to a director of Forest Lawn, a cemetery in Los Angeles. Actually, it was called a memorial park, and a quartet of Forest Lawns dotted Los Angeles like birthmarks. Kathleen’s job included taking on special assignments of a delicate nature brought to the director. She recently had to deal with a set of parents whose son had died from a fall during a wild weekend in Las Vegas, and the parents wanted to harvest sperm from their dead son—for a grandchild. Kathleen had to arrange the rush delivery of the body from Las Vegas to Los Angeles for the sperm harvester. Sperm, Kathleen learned, lived for three or more days after a man’s death, and the parents had already found a surrogate mother—someone willing to open herself to a dead guy. This is why I try not to ask my wife each day how work was. The specifics can give me nightmares.

I heard the garage door open below. Moments later, Kathleen appeared at the top of the stairs, black boots and purple skirt, and she held her thin briefcase and her large black purse as if carrying a load of coal. She looked tired. However, when she saw me, she gave a smile. Her face became a musical rest note. This reminded me of one of the many reasons I loved living with her: she could be cheerful, even under pressure. When she saw the invitation, she said, “How fun! You want to go, don’t you?” Granted, I was late at the marriage game, having waited until I hit forty, and Kathleen was ten years my junior, closer to youth, but if I knew one thing, it was to proceed with caution in these matters.

“That’s a tricky weekend,” I said. “I’d like to go, but the labor contract will be heating up, and I might even have to meet with the negotiating committee.”

“Nothing says you have to drink,” she said. Her hopefulness made it seem as if the costume party was crucial to our marriage. I

saw a twinkle in her eye, and I was as smitten with her now as I had been on our blind date.

“It’s not that,” I said. “You know I like to have fun with you.”

“I’m starting to wonder. When was the last time you truly let go?”

“There was Catalina.” As I said it, I remembered how even then I’d spent a lot of time on the laptop.

“Hugh,” was all she replied.

“Once I make partner—”

“Not that again!”

“It’s important.”

“So are babies,” she said, running her finger around my ear, taking another tack.

There, I fell into it again. Despite my law degree, my skills were no match for Kathleen’s. Soon she might be humming a song and dancing around me. Maybe she’d even sing spontaneously again about her biological time clock. Hey, I wanted kids, but first things first. Quickly I said, “Okay, okay. The party sounds fun.”

“Could you pretend that I’m a jury and you’re trying to persuade me?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’d *love* to go with you to the costume party.”

She looked at me suspiciously. “You’d *love* to go? And you’ll wear a costume?”

“I’ll see what they have at the 99 Cents Store.”

She laughed. “Figures.”

A costume party should cost no more than 99 cents, but I decided not to say that out loud.

The next weekend on a Saturday, we drove to our respective stores in separate cars. I found that while the 99 Cents Store had costumes, they were basically iconographic. A pirate hat made you a pirate. A tiara made you a princess. And, hey, a black cape made you Dracula. I could wear black jeans, a black shirt and shoes, and maybe a little gel in my hair to slick it back. Voila—a fabulous Dracula!

Kathleen returned home an hour after I did with two bags and a huge smile on her face. “Want to see?” she said.

She pulled out what had been an elegant white wedding gown, but it was full of holes and black streaks as if she had exhumed it at Forest Lawn. The bag also had a bouquet of dead flowers and a grungy garland for her head. Maybe she’d spent less than I had, after all.

She then held the dress in front of her. It was strapless, and bones had been painted on the side to show a fleshless rib cage. This costume wasn’t from a dump. “So what are you going to be?” I asked.

“The Corpse Bride.”

I shrugged. I’d never heard of such a thing.

“It’s a movie.” From her other bag, she pulled out a packet that said, *Official Corpse Bride Makeup Kit*. “It’s approved by Tim Burton,” she explained. “And it comes with a Burton-approved overskirt train, a wig of yarn twist strands, and everything!”

“They always jack up the price when there’s a licensing agreement. Dracula, on the other hand, is in the public domain.”

She licked her lips sensuously. “You shall be in my domain,” she commanded with glee and moved her eyebrows up and down like Groucho Marx.

Yikes. This woman was amazing. I froze, however, when she added, “Just have fun. You’ve got to learn to let it go.”

“Sure,” I said, stuck on the thought that my wife saw me as tight. Had I become a workaholic? I could have fun. Not at that moment, however. I had a videoconference to attend shortly.

On the night of the party, I grabbed my new digital camera from the car. It offered a high ASA rating, which meant I could shoot in low light, and there surely would be tricky lighting and unusual people. As we approached the house in Pasadena, we could hear booming music, and as we turned the corner, I stopped, dumbfounded at the sight. Standing in front of the two-story Craftsman home, taller than the structure, was a human skeleton wearing a tall striped hat like the Cat in the Hat. Three fresh graves with headstones rested on the lawn, and one had the

inscription of “You.” A giant 3-D skull twirled at the peak of the house, a projection of a hologram. Music blasted everywhere. Fun, I thought.

“Where’s the hologram’s projector?” I asked. “How did Randolph do that?”

“I don’t know,” Kathleen said, a number of steps away from me. Her long dark-haired wig blended into the darkness, and her pale white makeup made her look ghostly. “He’s a genius. Let’s go.”

Randolph, Eloise’s husband, worked at JPL and had been an engineer on the Mars Rover missions. When one of the landers had crashed due to a simple miscalculation, he had told us over drinks, “Oops.”

“How do you think he built such a large skeleton?” I wondered. “Are there kits for this? How does it stand?” I tried to look for bracing.

“I thought you didn’t like Halloween.”

“This is an engineering marvel.”

“Let’s get inside already.”

I paused and photographed the scene with wide shots, close-ups, and different angles. When I was finished, I saw Kathleen impatiently waiting with that look on her face.

We entered the house going up a few steps. The front porch had been walled in with bricks since the last time we visited. It was odd there were no windows in it. We walked into the open front door. The living room, devoid of all furniture, was entirely a dance floor, undulating with costumed figures that included winged bats, a white-faced Geisha, a revolutionary soldier, an Egyptian princess with jet-black hair, and a man whose head was inside an aquarium. The aquarium had suspended fish and kelp and an eerie blue light from the top. Against one wall of the living room, a high-definition video projector cast moving abstract imagery like something from the sixties.

The awe I had felt outside vanished. These were adults with too much time on their hands. And didn’t they know that the projector, sound system, and speakers were all Japanese? Their

dancing shoes were probably from Mexico or China. America’s jobs were going elsewhere and Americans were just dressing up and playing like kids. Gas prices were high. General Motors was going broke and laying off thousands—and these people were dancing.

“Let’s find the hosts,” said Kathleen, looking excited.

In the kitchen, we found our friends, a tall slender man and a much shorter woman. Normally she was blond. “Howdy, partner!” said Eloise, who was dressed as a cowgirl in a white shirt, red hat, chaps, and crimson hair with a matching long fake ponytail. She and Kathleen hugged as if they hadn’t seen each other in weeks, even though it had been just hours. Eloise looked me up and down and chose not to comment and simply hugged me, too. “Nice that you two could make it.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for anything,” I said and glanced at Kathleen, who only smiled and shook her head.

“And I can’t wait to get her on the dance floor.” At that Eloise guffawed. Clearly, they’d spoken. Women seem to talk to each other about their men the way guys speak in well-considered analysis about football. Of course, I’ve never talked about football. I never understood a game with a ball that looked like a loaf of bread.

“Hey, Hugh,” said Randolph who shook my hand, as friendly as always, then hugged Kathleen. He sported old-fashioned mutton chop sideburns and a mustache that connected. He must have spent months growing it. His diamond-checked sweater vest over a white shirt clashed with his plaid pants, and he wore a short-billed beret.

“What are you supposed to be?” I asked.

“Hoot, mon, what you reckon we go to the 19th hole?”

Only then did I notice he had a short golf club in his hand. “A Scottish golfer?”

“At the original golf course in St. Andrews, mon.” He did his best to sound like Sean Connery, but he came across more like Jamaican Bob Marley. Randolph held up a golf ball. “The dimple

pattern maximizes lift while minimizing drag.” Leave it to an engineer to love that fact.

“Have fun!” said Eloise, taking Randolph by the hand and moving back into their party.

“Drinks and food are out back,” said Randolph before disappearing. “And pies and desserts are in the dining room as you may have already seen.”

“Food,” I said.

“Dance,” said Kathleen.

“I want to eat first.”

“We ate before we came here. You said you’d dance.”

“How about a drink? Let’s have a drink.”

“You always do this.”

“What?”

“Do things your way.”

“What’re you talking about? We’re at a party.”

“Never mind,” she said. “I’ll wait. I always do.”

She waited in the kitchen as I grabbed two Heinekens out back. Kathleen took the beer when I returned. She said nothing and just drank the beer. Women are as mysterious as comets.

After a slice of blueberry pie, my favorite, and another beer, I was feeling good enough to attack the dance floor and make a fool of myself.

As we danced on the dance floor to an old 10,000 Maniacs song, “These Are Days,” Kathleen looked sexy in her low-cut gown. She moved and body-flirted with me, her fingers running down my arm. It was as if we were dating again. I bounced with my college-best motions. With the volume high, the female singer shouted:

*These are days that you’ll remember
When May is rushing over you
With desire to be part of the miracles.*

We sashayed to the side where the speakers weren’t connected to our heads. “I want to drink your blood,” Kathleen said in her best Transylvanian accent.

“That’s my line,” I said. “I’m Dracula.”

Keeping the accent, she said, “Maybe you want to rock my bones.”

“I want to all the time,” I replied, mimicking her. “But we can’t here.”

“Vy not? Ze bathroom?”

“Did you bring und condom perhaps?”

She stopped cold in her tracks. Everyone else, including me, kept dancing. “Can’t you be spontaneous ever?” she asked in no accent, shoulders slumped.

“I’m happy to oblige—even eager,” I said happily and eagerly. “I’m just not ready for a baby yet.”

She shook her head, but I didn’t stop dancing. Soon she got into the beat again and she moved close and whispered in my ear. “Do you know how they get sperm from a dead person?” she asked.

“No. I don’t particularly want to know. I suppose they have to cut into the body.”

She smiled. “It’s easier than that,” she said. “I found out today that they just take a cattle prod-like thing, stick it up his butt, and give a jolt of electricity. It makes the dead ejaculate.”

“Gross!” I yelled. “Please, I don’t like hearing that kind of stuff.”

“That’s how those parents harvested sperm from their dead son. They’ll be grandparents.”

I didn’t even want to think about it. It must have shown on my face because she laughed. Then she became all sexy again, dancing. After awhile she said, “Maybe I should get the device to use it on you—one way to get your sperm.”

Now I stopped cold. “I know you want a baby, okay? And we will. Tonight is just not the night.” I whipped off the dance floor onto the walled-in porch. I was too hot now. Kathleen followed.

“Hugh, it’s like you have Asperger’s Syndrome when it comes to the finer art of wooing.”

“I woo plenty fine. I must have done something right to marry you.” I thought of how we wed on the beach and had my good friend the mime officiate.

“Woo woo,” she said.

“Are you trying to get my goat?”

“If you had a goat, its milk would be sour.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’d understand if you knew women—too bad you had no sisters.”

“And I went to a boys’ school, too.”

“Exactly. Those were critical years,” she said. She turned away. “I’m going to get something to eat. Maybe a cream pie,” and she turned on her heel. She left with her syllables biting into me.

“You go do that,” I replied. I stayed on the porch and I watched my corpse bride in white, gray around the edges, walk off. The sea of people parted in front of her.

What was I supposed to do now? Out there on the porch, I looked through the front door at the strange dancing people. A giant yellow mustard bottle spun with her husband dressed as a hot dog. There was a Girl Scout in a short slutty skirt whose troop number was 69, and she danced with a bearded man as a giant mint cookie. Perhaps their childish behavior and carefree attitude was merely a respite from their more complex lives with bosses berating them, spouses misunderstanding them, and the world chewing into their hides. Why not dance? We’re merely blobs of water and minerals procreating to create what? It was a world run over with gas-guzzlers and pollution and cattle prods for semen.

The music changed to the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil,” and cheers went up. In a swirl of masks and mania, everyone danced that much harder. I grabbed the digital camera around my neck. The scene spoke to me, like angels to Abraham, and I needed that picture. The light was low, though. According to my meter, one-fifteenth of a second was needed, which was long for a clear shot. I had to steady myself. If I leaned against the wall and held my breath, I might get it. I leaned back, but the wall must have been farther back than I had anticipated because I didn’t feel it, which caused me to trip, and I was falling, tipping back. I realized in a horrible instant that the wall was not solid but merely

cloth, designed with a brick motif. I fell backwards from the front porch. Dracula soared into the night.

They say time slows down when you're in a very dangerous moment, and it's true. Above me, I saw a rising tower of bones, and, beyond that, stars in the sky. I felt extraordinarily alone, and I knew right then where I was. I was falling underneath the giant skeleton into the garden. I pictured myself plunging down five feet in an arc that any engineer could have plotted. Oops.

Then I heard a lot of crunching sounds like a wood crate breaking. Was that me? I couldn't breathe and felt searing pain. I looked up. The giant skeleton shook and cracked. I must have hit one of its legs. Bones like arrows shot toward me. While I couldn't breathe, I still covered my head. We are creatures designed for survival. Miraculously, with thudding around me, no bone hit me.

Then I thought: I may be dying anyway.

Then I thought: this is it. Death—it's too damn simple.

Then I thought: I'll never see Kathleen again. That made me sad.

And I was desperate for air.

I could feel air.

I could feel air coming in. A little. I uncovered my eyes and saw a man. He wore leather S & M straps. “Can you talk? Hello?” he said. I couldn't. I was still trying to catch my breath, and my back was on fire. Even so, I had a strange thought: this is someone I wouldn't normally talk to.

Another person spoke, and I turned to see the hot dog. “Should we call 911?” said the man as a wiener and bun.

“I— I— can breathe,” I managed. “Maybe... if you... could you... lift me to my feet?” My breathing was short.

“Should we call the ambulance?” said Mr. S & M while I remained on my back.

“Maybe we should get him a board,” said the hot dog, “for his back.”

By now other people had gathered around me, clearing away bones. The circle included a boxer in a fake muscle suit and a woman in black with white dashes down her middle. She had an

Interstate shield painted on one of her abundant breasts. “Who are you?” I gasped.

“The 405 Freeway,” she said.

“Please lift me up,” I asked.

The men lifted, and I stood on shaky legs.

“Look at his back,” said somebody. “Lift up the black tablecloth.”

“It’s a cape,” I said weakly.

“Pretty bloody,” said another. Doesn’t look good.”

The 405 Freeway pulled something that seemed caught in the top of my pants. She held before me a broken sprinkler head on top of a long white broken PVC pipe.

“It really scraped up your back, cut a hole in your shirt, too,” said the hot dog. “Otherwise, you’re probably okay.”

“Lucky the pipe wasn’t copper or it’d be through him,” said Mr. S & M.

Where was Kathleen? I needed her more than ever. A refrigerator-sized guy dressed as a security man waddled in. “Security” was emblazoned in yellow across his black coat. Then I remembered he was a real security man, one of two in charge of checking people into the party. He looked so big and serious, I automatically said, “I’m fine. Really, I didn’t drink that much—it’s a fake wall.” I pointed. It was then I saw my hand was cut up and bloody, too. My hand had shot out thanks to my wonderful autonomic nervous system. My hand had helped break my fall, assisting the sprinkler head in doing the same thing. Hence, my head hadn’t hit the ground.

At this point, my Corpse Bride ran over.

“I just heard,” she said. “Are you okay?” She looked aghast. I nodded. She said, “Someone ran in and said my husband had fallen. I’d seen people out here a minute earlier, but I thought it was a drunk in the bushes.”

“No, it was me, Dracula.”

We kissed. We kissed hard.

Randolph rushed in, still holding his club. "Are you all right, mate? Are you all right?" he asked. Did he have an Australian accent now?

"I've been better," I said.

"Oh, mercy," he replied, looking out at his field of bones. He turned back to me, refocused. "Let's get you cleaned up," he said. He and Kathleen led me into the kitchen.

Just beyond the doorway of the kitchen, a woman dressed in short vinyl shorts and a vinyl bra, rings in her lip, nose, and eyebrow, and deep dark makeup ate pie.

She looked at me, impressed. "Halloween blood," she said as a statement.

"No, real blood," I said.

"Even better," she replied.

Kathleen and Randolph shuttled me toward the sink.

"My first aid kit's in here," said Randolph. "Face your wife," he said. I held Kathleen's hand. She still looked worried. My breathing was a little better. "Here we go," said Randolph.

The first sensation was a cool towel then a deep sting as if he were shoving a stake into my heart from behind. "Yeooowwww!" I screamed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Rubbing alcohol kills all germs," he said. The pain was enough to make my reflection disappear from the mirror.

"Oh, your hand," said Randolph, taking it, and before I could protest, he pushed an alcohol-soaked paper towel onto my hand, and it felt like a hundred nails. Dracula was being crucified.

"Time to go home?" said Kathleen.

"Please," I said. I'd been too alone without her.

As we walked through the dance floor, the man whose head was inside a fish tank said, "Are you all right?"

"I had fun," I mumbled. "It was as good as jamming bamboo shoots under my fingernails."

We walked slowly to the car, past the bones on the lawn, past the graves, past the two chunky security guards at the head of the driveway. They were having a smoke and looked at my hunched figure slinking into the night. Kathleen held my hand, guiding me.

When we turned the corner onto the main street, the stream of cars was only binocular lights to me. It then occurred to me: we had to cross that street, and I was dressed completely in black: black pants, black shoes, black socks, and, of course, a black shirt and cape, both with holes in them as large as the hole in my confidence. My life was in danger before and now again. I couldn't escape.

Kathleen squeezed my hand as if knowing all this. She held out her other hand in front of her like an assured traffic cop. The traffic stopped. We crossed and no one honked.

We were safe. I saw our car. As I gingerly dug for the car keys in my pocket with my sore hand, I gazed at Kathleen who looked at me not as crazy or inept but with concern. It was as if we were two souls with telepathy.

The whole evening rushed at me: my stubbornness, our fight, and my sudden fall as I plunged toward death alone. I could have died, one of those stupid ain't-it-weird deaths in a two-inch column in the newspaper. But I wasn't dead, and I wasn't alone. As sore as I was, I felt extraordinarily lucky—and luckier as I looked at Kathleen and grinned. She returned the gesture, smiling like the open sea. I laughed, and she opened her arms to welcome me. We danced in an embrace to the music still audible a block away, the Stones' "Wild Horses."

And I thought: it's as if by lightning we're born, and by its thunder we're gone. What the hell was I waiting for?

The two houses next to us had their lights completely out, and in the large gap between the houses, the lawn led to a grouping of pines, a small forest. I took Kathleen's hand and led her to a soft grassy spot by a bush and, standing, kissed her madly. She kissed back with fervor, needing me as much as I needed her. In moments, we tore at each other's clothes, discarding them like hermit crabs their shells. Despite my injuries, the pain faded. Naked and kissing, we moved slowly to our knees, and soon I felt soft moss under my back. Kathleen lay on me, her soft weight melting into me. We made love.

Afterwards, side-by-side on our backs and close, we watched through the trees the moon appear. It was the tiniest of crescents. What I didn't know then was that I had cracked a rib in my fall. What I also didn't know was that in two days I would happen to cough, which would separate my rib into two, sending me into such a white-walled paroxysm of pain that I'd have to be ambulated from my work's law library to a hospital. What I *did* know now, however, wedged there against the warmth of Kathleen, was that she was quietly laughing, happy, and I knew why. If we had created a baby, then perhaps he or she had been sparked to life by our closeness and joy. Someone could carry that on.

The traffic swished by. We peered upwards, flat and still at the celebration of stars.