

Halloween Zeem

two thousand seventzeen

- art
- fiction...?
- other stuff
- non-fiction...???

a free zine
(or "zeem")
of creative work
by terrifying people



from the Editor

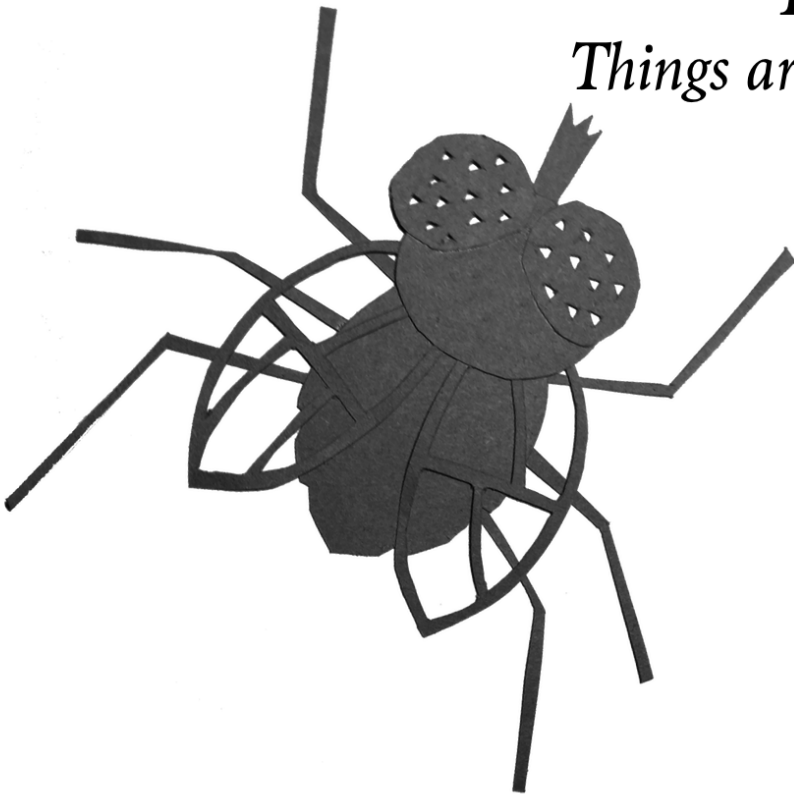
Thanks for checking
out the Zeen.

Stay safe out there.

— Ryan
Velder

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BONELIGHT BY CALEB WILSON

Abot, a poor skeleton, was walking home after his shift at the factory. The tiny candle inside his skull shone out through the eye sockets, weak yellow light guttering with shadows over the angel statues along the path. Abot's unsteady mind wandered, dreaming of incandescent bulbs and LEDs.

What was this? Coming towards him from around the corner of a mausoleum built to look like a miniature Gothic mansion was a flickering blue and violet glow. Through the cemetery strolled a resplendent skeleton—Mundt, a factory supervisor—sealed inside a glass suit. The suit was filled with neon gas, and filaments of glowing blue plasma spread like roots or blood vessels from the power source set in Mundt's skull, making violet splotches where they licked against the inner surface of the glass. The cool light played over the stones and open graves.

Abot, whose candle was dim, was stunned with a sudden envy of Mundt. He wanted to crack open that glass suit, let out the glowing gas and observe the moment of Mundt realizing that money can't buy safety. Abot picked up a head-sized stone from a fallen wall and hid behind an obelisk. He leaped out as Mundt passed and swung the stone at Mundt's shoulder.

The stone cracked once into the glass shoulder, plasma swarming towards the blow like bruises or like blossoms. But before Abot could strike again Mundt whirled, lifting the tiny bellows he wore on a lanyard around his neck. He squeezed the bellows, sending a puff of air into Abot's eye socket. Abot's candle winked out and with the inside of his skull dark, he collapsed. His last thought was incomplete: "Good thing I spent my last dime on—"

Mundt twisted back to look at the shoulder of his suit. The glass was cracked where Abot's stone had struck it and neon was hissing free. His plasma light would soon go dim.

Mundt knelt over Abot's fallen bones. Desperate for an inner light, he scrambled at Abot's skull, hoping to crack it open, to take and re-light Abot's candle for himself. But while skeletal fingers are made to rip open skulls, the mitten-like hands of Mundt's glass suit were clumsy. Glass clinked uselessly on bone.

The last blue filaments flickered on the inside of Mundt's glass suit and went dim. Mundt's unlit bones sagged, clicking against the glass. Inside Abot's skull, the candle flickered back to life. Abot finished his thought: "—a trick birthday-cake candle."



Little Jimmy's Artificial Nut

Chandler Groover

Little Jimmy was walking through the woods one autumn morning when he stubbed his toe. He looked down and found a nut partially buried in the dirt.

"I'll put this in my pocket," he said.

But it was too big. He had to use both hands to carry it.

When he got home, he showed the nut to his parents.

"What kind is it?" he asked them. "A pistachio?"

"Maybe it's a cashew," said his father.

"I bet it's a walnut," said his mother.

His grandmother was listening from the corner. She was almost too frail to walk, and nowadays spent all her time tucked into bed.

"It's an artificial nut," she said. "Mark my words, no good ever comes from those. I'd put it back where you got it."

But Little Jimmy didn't listen and his parents didn't make him. That night, he slept with the nut cradled between his arms.

Some time passed. Nothing happened.

Eventually, however, something did.

What made the nut special was that it had a seam around the outside. You could twist its top and it would pop open. Little Jimmy became accustomed to popping it open and snapping it shut. He enjoyed the sound.

"I wonder if my hand would fit in there," he said one day.

He tried it, and it did.

"I wonder if my other hand would fit."

It also did.

Hours later, when the sun had set and it was supertime, his parents tried to find him. They could only find the nut.

"Where could he have gone?" asked his father.

"He might be in the woods again," said his mother.

"It's too late to worry now," said his grandmother. "If you have any sense, you'll hide that nut where nobody will ever look for it."

They didn't know how that would help, but there was a cabinet in the basement. Little

Jimmy's father locked the nut inside. He kept the key.

Some days passed. They searched and searched.

They couldn't find their son.

Little Jimmy's father started to think about the cabinet again. He would absentmindedly touch the key in his pocket.

"There's something strange about that nut," he said.

One evening, after midnight, he snuck into the basement. He didn't tell anyone what he was doing. When he unlocked the cabinet, the nut was larger than he remembered.

He noticed the seam.

He twisted the top.

"Huh," he said. "My hand could fit in here."

Morning broke, and he never did return from the basement.

Another day passed before his wife discovered the nut. She knew something was wrong when her husband wasn't there for breakfast, but she didn't think to check the basement until it was practically sunset again. When she called downstairs, he didn't answer. She went to look. That's when she saw the nut sitting on the floor outside the cabinet.

"This can't be a walnut," she said.

She struggled to lift it.

"Or a pistachio or a cashew."

It was warm to the touch.

"I'm beginning to think it's not ordinary."

She noticed the seam, and she twisted the top.

More time passed. Nothing seemed to happen.

Eventually, however, perhaps something did.

Little Jimmy's grandmother listened as hard as she could. She was still in her bed in the corner upstairs, and she couldn't hear anything. She shook her head and clucked her tongue.

"Always have to do the job yourself," she said.

It took her a mighty effort, but she heaved her bedclothes aside and wiggled into her slippers. One fumbling hand found her cane. Her bones ached and her joints popped. She rose and tottered through the house in her nightgown.

Very, very carefully, she descended the basement stairs.

Nobody was there.

She saw the nut.

Very, very carefully, she held the nut under one arm and ascended the stairs. Her cane was in her other hand. She planted it on every step, pushing her weight toward the next. It was slow work, but she made it work.

She entered the kitchen and put the nut onto the table.

In the cupboard, there was a nutcracker. It wasn't a normal nutcracker. It was more like a vise. She clamped its base onto the table, wedged the nut into its jaws, and started to crank the handle.

Initially the nut refused to crack.

She cranked the handle more.

She heard a little sound, almost a whine.

"That's the sound I want to hear," she said.

The more she cranked the handle, the louder the whine got. It began to splutter and slurp. By now the nut was as big as a watermelon, and not just any watermelon: the kind that would've won first prize at a state fair. It was squelching and hissing and puckering.

"I'm not going to open you," she said.

The nut caterwauled.

"No, absolutely not." She cranked the handle one last time, and the nut cracked.

Black ooze bubbled through its seam. It splattered across the table, rolled onto the floor. It stayed together, slithering outside into the woods. All that remained was its deflated shell.

Little Jimmy's grandmother wiped her forehead.

"I knew it," she said. "That was definitely an artificial nut."



NOTES FOR A FUTURE RESTORATION

Neale Barnholden
for *Digital Video Digest* issue 305
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When you've seen pretty much every film that's out there, you naturally start hunting around the edges of the cinema world for the rumoured, the fabled, the half-legendary Holy Grails of moviemaking. Our own *Digital Video Digest* recently chronicled the efforts of a dedicated cadre of investigators to "fill in the blanks" of the crime films made for regional Turkish television in the 1960s (see issue 184). Other fans dream about Orson Welles's safe deposit boxes, or frozen piles of silent nitrate. One of the grails closest to our hearts here at DVD was recently made available for scrutiny, so in an unusual move we hope our readers will forgive, for the first time we're printing an article about films that aren't being released soon. Maybe the attention will light a fire under the owners and finally reverse their longstanding scarcity.

Through a series of events I've been asked not to talk about or even allude to, the estate of Glen Alan Scobie allowed me to view his personal prints for much of his work. Scobie—who last appeared in these pages as part of the Beach Party retrospective in DVD #120—is, of course, best known as the producer, director, writer, and sometimes lead actor, of hundreds of educational films made in Oregon from about 1951 to his retirement in 1986. Horror fans have long appreciated him for his most famous film, 1966's *Nightmare*

Beach, also known as *The Beach-o-Rama Monster*, *Surf's Dead*, and *Beach Nightmare*. Sometimes these are credited as separate movies, despite *Surf's Dead* only ever appearing in a 1992 VHS release, incidentally the only home video release of any of Scobie's fiction work.

It's long been rumoured that Scobie made a number of other movies. I can now confirm that, as the letter printed in *Horrorland Digest* 73 suggests, this is true and Scobie kept prints of his many finished films. Now that I've seen several of them, I can report that the obscurity of these movies is entirely to the loss of the film community.

The oldest film I viewed, *Assignment: Blood*, seems to date from the mid-1950s, although some location footage looks to be later. I suspect this was Scobie's first foray into fiction, since at least 20 of the film's 65 minutes seem to be outtakes from an educational film about donating blood, some with awkwardly overdubbed narration of the characters' horror-based thoughts. It also seems that the film was recorded without sound equipment, since the only sound in the film is the narrator. Scobie's family told me that this narrator wasn't the director himself, but it's hard not to think so when the entire film is simply narrating the story of a man wandering what looks like Portland thinking about his fear of vampires.

I worry that we'll never know the genesis of this film, though I was shown a draft of a letter from Scobie to Lewis Schultz of Carousel Film Distributors in which Scobie is angrily refuting Schultz's enthusiasm for the film as a horror picture. According to Scobie it was meant to be a psychological exploration inspired by the concept of blood, and he seems to have held particular disdain for Carousel's proposal to bulk out the film with a subplot about a vampire reporter. Another document in the same collection, apparently of letters Scobie felt were too angry to send without revision, sheds a surprising light on *Nightmare Beach*, which I'll explain later.

The next item in the collection finally confirms that noted B-director Rudy Allessin actually *did* come to the Pacific Northwest and at least deigned to appear in footage short by Scobie. The appearance of this footage finally clears up a baffling passage in Allessin's autobiography *I Shot Forty Thousand Men*:

"By this time my so-called fame was restricted to weird cults of strange-smelling college boys with bad skin. It was humiliating when a cinematographer introduced me to a director who claimed to have no idea who I was and instead cast me as a hobo in a cheap horror flick, but it was worse when fans knew exactly who I was and just

wanted to talk about *Confessions of a Zombie*."

Allessin's story has long been taken as another outburst from the infamously crabby director of the underappreciated *Doppel-dämmerung* (1926), but Scobie's footage confirms that he really did film an uncomfortable-looking Allessin squinting at a skeleton woman (Doreen Musée). Allessin's reaction is typically outsized, but he accidentally drops the bottle of whisky during his double-take, making it more puzzling why Scobie kept the footage.

In this unnamed film—which Scobie calls "the psychological picture"—the skeleton woman played by local dancer Musée is constantly wandering through various Portland-area locations, occasionally embracing various actors who then turn up dead. A memo by Scobie explains that he considered the picture to be an allegory for the Freudian death-drive, though in a phone call the still-lively Musée succinctly characterized her role as "sexy bones". Perhaps that could be the title.

Scobie was no luckier with distribution of this film, apparently shot in the summer of 1955, than with his earlier projects. In letters relating to *Nightmare Beach*, the best documented as well as best known of all his films, he mentions that once again, he didn't think it was a horror film. One wonders if this film solves the longstanding mystery of *Dance of the Skull Woman*, a title that appears on some American International Pictures distribution lists from 1961-2 but apparently was never actually

sent out. According to Musée, Scobie never told her what happened to the picture, instead calling off filming during production so he could make a driver's ed instructional film in the desert.

It should be noted that this period, the late Fifties and early Sixties, was the peak of Scobie's work for Western Education Films Incorporated, during which he turned out approximately five hundred hours of educational films on various topics, the majority of which were written by Scobie based on textbooks. Despite his obscurity, the rate of production suggests a certain technical proficiency.

The longest surviving document from this period is a long outline Scobie wrote but never mailed to Schultz. In it, Scobie explains a film he thinks Schultz might like. Titled *The Haunted House*, it takes place, uniquely, inside the *idea* of a haunted house, where various characters who represent ideas of characters wander about getting up to, one must admit, some pretty standard horror movie business that is described in extremely lofty terms. The peak comes on page 7, when we are informed that

THE YOUNG WOMAN takes a step, extending her foot as a probe into a hostile universe, turning back at the peak of the foot's arc so that the foot comes to rest in the world of the human, on a plank of wood arranged and tamed into a stair, only for the sound of an audible creak to remind us that even the refuges built by civilization can betray us at any moment

Which must range up there with the longest ways any scripter has ever called for a sound effect. Though the script for *The Haunted House* is extremely difficult to understand, a parenthetical note at the end suggests that someone told Scobie about *The House on Haunted Hill* and that he was going to view it, though he confusingly calls the film *The Hill of the House Haunted*. There remains the slightly possibility that *The Hill of the House Haunted* is yet another Scobie project mouldering somewhere.

While *The Haunted House* came to nothing, Scobie's next project was received with enthusiasm by Schultz. Long known from Carousel's internal documents (outlined in DVD #47 as well as Volume Four of Mark Klassen's masterful *Regional Distribution Horror*), *Humanoid Ape* actually had some test footage shot before Schultz cancelled the project. *Humanoid Ape* was to feature a hitherto-unknown species of primate found in Africa who escapes into a college town and proceeds to murder at will until it is sent into frozen suspension by being trapped in a freezer. According to a letter from Schultz, he supported the project in the face of Scobie's "confusing" conception of the project, believing that apes were good box office, but found Scobie's test footage insupportable.

Looking at the footage, it's difficult to see why. The unpublished papers of Rick Mayer, the famous Ape Guy of countless films, held in the archives of UC Santa Cruz, indicate that Scobie was a

difficult director with an eye for composition, and their footage of Mayer in an ape suit clambering around Cannon Beach is framed at least as steadily as any of Scobie's educational features. On the other hand, a letter from Schultz references frustration with Scobie's insistence that the ape suit look as fake as possible:

What exactly is the meaning of your comment that 'it should look like a man in a suit'? How is 'the real horror' that it's a man in an ape suit? Have you ever seen a horror picture?

For whatever reason, the project fell apart, but led directly to *Nightmare Beach*. Apparently enraged at Schultz's treatment of the project, Scobie, as his correspondence reveals, set out to make the most absurd trash imaginable. A surviving letter to prospective funders reveals that he couched this in terms of "what's popular" and the "teen audiences" of the day. He describes a horror movie in sadistic terms of titillation, to the point where a prominent dentist accused him of being a pornographer. Regular reports to investors reveals the course of shooting, and the change that would make *Nightmare Beach* the most popular film of Scobie's career.

Early on in shooting over the winter of 1964-5, Scobie became aware that lightning conditions were inadequate. Feeling the pressure of time, he shifted locations to the most reliably well-lit area where the cast and crew could be accommodated: Cannon Beach, where he and Nick Mayer had cavorted. Mayer

was back on the crew, this time using his dancer's physique to embody a psychotic murderer—preying on a youthful crew mostly notable for future actress and news anchor Laura Sinclair (credited as Laurel St. Clair) and local bongo-drum-and-comedy duo Messinger & Pauli. This necessitated a few changes to the script, perhaps bringing to mind Sinclair's comment at the *Horrortoberfest* "Women of Fear" panel 2002 that horror emerges from a willingness to improvise. Mayer, uncomfortable out of his ape suit, gained a tiki mask purchased from a local surf shop; and Messinger & Pauli's cinematic routine was increased as the shoot went on.

By Groundhog Day 1965 the film was complete. What happened next didn't surprise anyone, except apparently Scobie himself. Messinger, in a private email, recalls running into Scobie:

I saw him at a men's shop across the river where I was picking up a fez. I asked him how editing was going, and how things looked, he said great. Then I said the movie would probably do well, what with all the beach movies coming out then—Horror of Party Beach, that kind of thing. He got this look like I'd just blown a big line or something, and then he got quiet and left. I really don't think he knew that anybody else had already done it!

AIP, who had already released seven "beach" movies, was very interested in Scobie's work, and packaged it as the back half of a double bill with the British *Love*

of the Wolfman's Daughter, probably because the UK film was in colour. *Love of the Wolfman's Daughter* was a typically leaden exploitation film from the short lived Regent Studios, notable mostly for pioneering lesbian werewolf subtext, and by early 1966 *Nightmare Beach* was on its own. Scobie apparently wasn't happy, and he seized all the copies returned, destroying them as his contract allowed. Two decades later when home video negotiations began, Scobie was unable to prevent a VHS release, but asserted his moral rights to keep the title sacrosanct. Hence, *Surf's Dead*.

Scobie never made another horror movie again, though if you're familiar with his work, it's possible that the low-key family dramas he made for local television were intended to be horror. He did continue to make hundreds of nonfiction films, and even one nonfiction feature, the 77 minute anti-smoking-pot-and-driving scare film *Don't Drugs and Drive* (1978). The infamous *Don't Drugs and Drive* contains a few moments of horror, but in light of Scobie's earlier features the most revealing is probably the bizarre moment at the beginning. Main character Mark is fumbling to unlock a door and is shot in increasingly fragmentary close-ups, implying that Mark is figuratively losing his mind, despite the fact that he hasn't even done any drugs yet. What I wouldn't give to ask Scobie what that meant.



The Haunting at Sheumakkee Creek

author unknown

The essential elements of a ghost story are Time and Place. Time, because a haunting represents two points upon that continuum (the past and the present) colliding; Place, because the perceptory functions of the human mind are limited by its particular imprisoning body (until the moment of that vessel's expiration), which necessarily occupies a single location, a point among infinite points in space. The values of these variables, for purposes of this story, are as follows: Time, the 1980s. Place, Sheumakkee Creek.

Bernice Zelewski, a nursing student, crossed Sheumakkee Creek most days of the week by means of a wooden footbridge, erected some decades earlier. Exiting her apartment on the northeast side of town, she crossed the Sheumakkee Creek footbridge, continued some five or six blocks across town, and arrived at the nursing school building, where she studied and socialized for much of the day before walking back through town to the footbridge, which she crossed before continuing to her apartment building. This pattern was interrupted infrequently by holidays, illnesses, and various other occurrences as prosaic and quotidian as the pattern itself, of walking back and forth across a bridge that spanned only fifteen or twenty feet—an unremarkable interval that served to separate one unremarkable day from the next.

In winter months, the hours of daylight often came to an end long before Bernice's classes, and she was obliged to walk home in bitter cold and darkness. This caused her to grumble at first, but soon the dark and cold were as familiar to her as that wooden footbridge, and soon the nights came when she did not grumble. Eventually, Bernice as much as forgot how cold she was, and ignored the eerie stillness of the air.

It was on one of these nights, when the bridge and the cold and even the dark had ceased to be remarkable or even noticeable, when Bernice was at last taken by surprise. As she crossed the Sheumakkee Creek bridge, she looked up and was startled to see a shape—a human shape: a man wrapped in warm clothes crossing the bridge from the other side.

Bernice possessed a certain shyness, or a desire for privacy, that rendered unnecessary her elders'

admonishments not to talk to strangers; indeed, it superseded even the admonishments, handed down from those same elders only a few years later, to treat strangers with warmth and friendliness. Bernice averted her gaze, and quickened her pace toward a cozy bed and a sleep that would erase the man's appearance from her memory.

But the man did not quicken his pace: He slowed to a stop, and with a motion of his hand and a tentative greeting he succeeded in slowing and then stopping Bernice Zelewski. The woman had little time to think, and although instinct dictated that she should ignore this gentleman's invitation, she was afflicted in this moment by one of those quirks of psychology (to which we are all at one time or another susceptible) that arrest both the instinct and the higher reasoning of the victim: Her body and mind were fixed in place at the midpoint of the old Sheumakkee Creek bridge, and all that was in her power to do was to listen to the man's story:

His name was Jeffery Phillips, and he had been born in 1860, in the Kansas Territory. As a child, he had been the subject of and subjected to various inexplicable phenomena: His left pinky, chopped off in a baseball accident, grew back over the course of several days. Numerous strangers, especially the elderly, recognized Jeffery on sight and remembered his name and interests, despite never having met the boy or any of his acquaintances. On some days, Jeffery responded to questions an hour before they were asked. His mother reported that for half an hour or so after he woke up each morning, a luminosity "like concentrated moonlight" shone out of his eyes.

Over the first fifteen years of his life, Jeffery became an oddity, then a wonder, then a sensation, then a cliché, and finally a footnote. Throughout all these phases, the essential qualities of Jeffery's uniqueness remained constant: It was the interest of his fellow man that wavered (although a true "fellow" to Jeffery Phillips could not be found). But in his sixteenth year, 1876, there finally came into Jeffery's life an event that could match his own existence for bizarreness of spectacle.

One cold night, as he crossed an anonymous footbridge over a frozen creek, an "infernal

conflagration” burst across the night sky, gradually resolving into a dozen or so individual lights. The lights, multifarious in hue, circled Jeffery like wolves, or like vultures. They whirled closer, propelled by invisible impulses. And finally, from somewhere between or among the lights, a sound came:

∨∨ **JEFFERY PHILLIPS** ∨∨ the lights screamed in unison. ∨∨ **YOU MUST COME WITH US** ∨∨

Jeffery could not react: The lights closed in, enveloped him, and transported the young man far, far away—far from the state of Kansas, and far from the year 1876.

When Jeffery regained consciousness, he stood on the pinnacle of a transparent skyscraper overlooking a city of a million more such structures, identical in their inhuman regularity and colorlessness. Pale rust-green smog curled between these buildings, and Jeffery could not even guess at his distance from the planet’s surface. From out of the smoke rose a creature like a great purple bat, with clawed wings tearing desperately at the acrid air, its tails flapping fiendishly behind it.

The colored lights had congealed into a vaguely humanoid photonic lifeform. ∨∨ **JEFFERY PHILLIPS** ∨∨ it warbled, ∨∨ **THIS IS THE YEAR 2019** ∨∨ **THIS IS THE YEAR THAT YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN BORN** ∨∨

“I understand,” Jeffery said.

∨∨ **YOU MUST REMAIN HERE AND SAVE THE HUMAN RACE FROM DESTRUCTION** ∨∨ the photonic lifeform continued. ∨∨ **SEEK OUT THE FIK-FOLK OF THE PLANET GICH AND BRING BACK THE EIGHT CYBERKEYS** ∨∨

If the photonic lifeform had more demands, they were cut short by the appearance of a Gov-Police-Poly-Copter-Drone, rising silently out of the smog. The GPPCD’s telepathic matrices invaded Jeffery’s mind, ordering him to surrender and be arrested. Jeffery was paralyzed. The GPPCD hovered closer.

Then, suddenly and without warning, as if from out of nowhere, the photonic lifeform sprang into the air and tackled the GPPCD! The two entities became locked in mortal aerial combat, floating in the sulfuric air for a moment before tumbling down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down into the fiery depths of the future.

The Good Book, in its introductory volume,

explains to us that the human race was created in God’s own image. Therefore it can inarguably be stated, without fear of committing any heresy or blasphemy, that each of us, no matter how uncomely in aspect, or vile in deeds, or dull in wit, embodies some element, however atrophied by the foibles and ineptitude particular to mankind, of the Divine. Nonetheless, that same Book warns us against the sins of pride and of hubris, and despite our uncontested claims to heavenly beauty, we are admonished to ignore, or pretend to ignore, our most admirable qualities; that is, we are obliged to practice humility; and even if we were to meet the standards of humility set for us in that Book, we ought never to admit to our success, lest like Babel the products of our strivings for Virtue be struck down, blasted from the earth, and remembered only as the paradigm of failure.

Thus it is with great regret that I reach this juncture of our story. It has at last become unavoidable that I must forget, momentarily, the great value that my elders through long years of moral instruction have taught me to place upon humility, or else the story in which you and I have now invested so much of our emotional energy and aesthetic energy, respectively, would come to an abrupt and unsatisfying end, for it is at this moment in our drama that my own personage must step hesitantly upon the stage.

You see, having claimed the eight cyberkeys of the Fik-Folk, and having returned them to the Pyramids of Øygart, thereby saving the human race, Jeffery was permitted by the photonic lifeform to return to nineteenth century America, where he at once sought out its most foremost author and storyteller, a gentleman celebrated the world over, though to an extent far out of proportion with his unextraordinary talent. And, having at last arranged an audience with this infamous gentleman, Mr Phillips proceeded to recount the entirety of his remarkable story as his host leant forward in rapt attention.

Far too quickly was the story ended, and I rose from my seat and applauded mightily. “Why, Mr Phillips, you have a definite yarn to tell—and a finer yarn than I have ever set to the page in all my years of writing! You must publish it at once!”

Jeffery Phillips, possessed of infinite humility, looked at his shoes and spoke softly: “I cannot write a word, Mr Twain, though I have made myself attempt the task more than once. And this is why I



“The lights, multifarious in hue, circled Jeffery like wolves, or like vultures.”

have asked to tell my story to you: A man of your talent could certainly make more of my story than could I, and put into handsome print what I can only barely speak aloud.”

“Why, Mr Phillips,” I said, “You do yourself a host of injustices—But the world must hear your yarn at any rate, and if I must tell it from the pulpit afforded me by my immeasurable success, then I must. I will insist, however, that the frontispiece of our collaboration declare that the narrative within is that of Jeffery Phillips, *as told to* Mark Twain, and thereby ensure for you the praise that is due your heroic deeds.”

This arrangement was to the liking of my interlocutor, and we shook on the deal before I called my manservant Ninian to summon such refreshments as would suit so auspicious an occasion. I called out his name twice, the second time with a volume and cadence unworthy of a man addressing his fellow man, but brought on by a twinge of ungentlemanly impatience. When at last my calling was answered, it was not Ninian who appeared, but Nils, my reliable Swede.

With some consternation I demanded to know Ninian’s whereabouts. In a meek voice, and with eyes shifting uncomfortably, Nils made to me a most unsettling revelation, the details of which I will put to paper now:

It was a dark, cold night, and Ninian was walking alone down an old and unlit road. As he passed beneath the boughs of great old trees—invisible in the darkness—their shadows blotted out the stars one by one—until there was no light, not even the light of the moon.

In this stygian landscape, only dimly aware of even his own body, Ninian thought he heard a noise—a growl—an animal. Ninian’s heart leapt in his chest—his pace quickened—his eyes darted to and fro.

The noise came again! Ninian broke into a sprint. He strained his ears to hear if the beast was pursuing him—he could only hear his own noisy footsteps—and the beating of his own heart. He ran through the woods, hoping he was staying on the path.

The noise came again—a screeching, keening growl, so close and loud that Ninian tripped over himself and fell to the cold ground. He turned over to see his predator—

It was a little cat! Ninian goggled in shock at the tiny animal, and after a moment he laughed at

himself for feeling such terror in its pursuit. He could have reached out and scooped the creature into his arms—

But the cat began to grow. In a moment it was as big as a duck—it was as big as a beaver—it was as big as a dog—it was as big as a howler monkey—it was as big as a pig—it was as big as a sheep—it was as big as a wolf—it was as big as a small tiger—it was as big as a large tiger—it was as big as a hippo—it was as big as an elephant—it was as big as a fire engine—it was as big as a house—it was as big as the Taj Mahal!

Ninian scrambled to his feet and ran. He was half-blind in the dark, but he no longer cared whether he was on the path. The massive footfalls of the giant cat sounded like peals of thunder through the frigid air. Ninian ran *faster than he had ever run in his entire life*. He ran through the woods, leaping over trunks and stumps and patches of thorny briars—until he came to a gully, a wide ravine worn by an old creek through the black soil of the black woods.

With nowhere left to run, Ninian ran at a superhuman speed right into the gully—he fell into the creek—and died.



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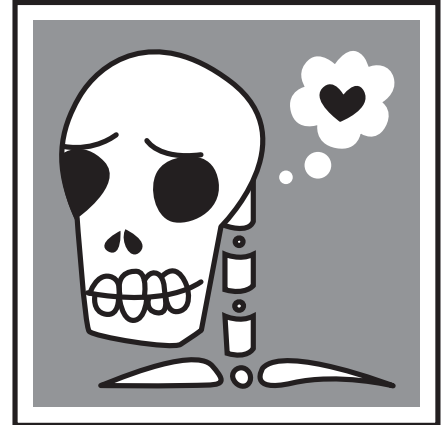
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Curse Your Enthusiasm S01 E01 - The Toad

Nathaniel Edwards

“Good afternoon,” Laurencia intoned, standing with her shoulders bent forward, peeking over the cash register at a pet store.

“It certainly is a good afternoon!” the woman at the register said as she rang up one African Bouncing Toad. “Glad to finally see a new toad owner in town. I used to own a couple of bearded dragons myself, and while of course they are very different pets, I—”

“Thank you. I must be going,” Laurencia interrupted, speaking in a low, slow, gravelly voice. She then flew home, changed out of her black dress into black pajamas with yellow crescent moons on them, and then boiled the toad alive.

Ever since she moved out of her parents’ bog, Laurencia has struggled to source amphibians. Even newt eyes, the most standard possible potion ingredient, had remained out of stock at even the biggest of big box stores (she did manage to find a newt slurping around in the garden section of a Lowe’s one time).

The next afternoon, Laurencia flew over to Welch Hall, an all-female dorm at NC State University. There she met with her best customer, Carys (born Cheryl), a Colonial American History major. “Your wart potion,” Laurencia said in a quick and unfriendly manner, trying to start and end the conversation there.

“Yes! Yes! You finally found a toad to boil?” Carys said, bouncing up and down. “And so I just rub this potion on the spot where I want my wart? This is perfect, yes, yes, yes!”

Carys wanted more than anything to be a witch, but she wasn’t. Laurencia had no choice but to be a witch, and wasn’t really enthused about it. She felt deeply ashamed as she worked out how to reverse the formula for the standard wart removal potion that everyone knows, so that Carys, a witch fangirl, could have a wart addition potion. No real witch would want to have a wart. They just occasionally get too busy with other things to remove the ones they naturally grow.

“It would have been quicker and cheaper to use your pet toad,” Laurencia said.

“He’s not a pet,” Carys said, giggling. “Jasper is my familiar. One day I’ll learn how to use his magic, and then I won’t have to pay you to do it for me anymore.”

Laurencia shuddered and flew away, intentionally spewing a cloud of dust behind her broomstick that washed over Carys. Though Laurencia couldn’t stand Carys, she needed her money to keep paying the rent. It wasn’t easy finding clients as the youngest and least experienced of the five or six dozen witches living in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The next morning, Laurencia had a voicemail from Carys on her phone. “Okay, so I kind of spazzed and got the potion all over my face,” Carys said. “There are already, like, seven or eight, maybe nine bumps starting. I only wanted one wart, on one cheek. So I’m going to need a wart removal potion now. I’m so sorry! I’m going to ask my dad for money real quick and then I’ll pay you! I can’t be seen like this, so please hurry! Thank you bye!”

Laurencia needed another toad for the wart removal potion, so she went back to the pet store for another African Bouncing Toad. The same woman was working the register, and when she noticed what Laurencia was buying, her face shifted. “You’re already buying a second toad?” the woman asked, quite reasonably.

“Yes...” Laurencia said, her eyes stalking around the room as if she would find an excuse somewhere. “My toad... She wants a friend.”

“Well first of all, that toad you bought yesterday was male,” the pet store employee said, and as she talked, wheels turned in her head. The creepy voice, the dark purple outfit, multiple toad purchases, and a complete lack of interest in friendly anecdotes about bearded dragon ownership... This young lady might be a toad-boiler. “I’ll tell you what. Bring in your toad from yesterday just to show me he’s doing okay, and then I’ll sell you this ‘friend.’ If you’re going to keep multiple toads, I have to make sure you’re taking good care of them.”

Laurencia didn’t have the toad, of course, but there was a simple way to get past this small obstacle: Borrow Carys’ toad and present it to the woman at the pet store. Back at Welch Hall, Laurencia met with Carys again, in her room, where she now had multiple tiers of warts on top of one another covering the entire left side of her face. “I must borrow your toad,” Laurencia said.

Carys looked shocked. “You can’t boil Jasper,” she said. “He’s the source of all my (potential) magic power. Don’t you dare even boil a little piece of him.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Laurencia said, but she didn’t feel comfortable telling Carys the full story. It was simply too embarrassing to tell her that she had to borrow a toad to settle a dispute with a pet store cashier. “I have a... Multiplication spell of sorts.” There’s no such thing as a multiplication spell. “I need a magical toad in order to create more toads, and Jasper is of course very magical, so only he will do.” Jasper was definitely not a magical toad.

Flattered to hear Laurencia finally call Jasper by his name instead of simply “the toad” or “vital potion ingredient,” Carys handed him over. Laurencia flew away to the pet store, presented Jasper to the still-skeptical cashier to get a new, second toad friend, then flew home to start the wart removal potion.

At home, Laurencia started boiling some water, then opened up her small aquarium with the two toads. She looked at one toad, a green and brown lump of limbs with a fat body and head, then looked at the other one, a green and brown lump of limbs with a fat body and head. She pulled one out, looked at its underbelly, then looked at the underbelly of the other. They looked identical. So, without thinking much further, she plopped one in her pot of boiling water, then wiped her hands before tossing in everything else required to make a wart removal potion. (I won’t reveal the full formula here as that might encourage a few readers to needlessly boil toads.)

The next day, Laurencia flew over to Carys’s room in Welch Hall once again with the new potion and what had at least a 50/50 chance of being the correct toad, she reckoned. Unfortunately, in this case the cosmic coin flip came up “wrong toad.”

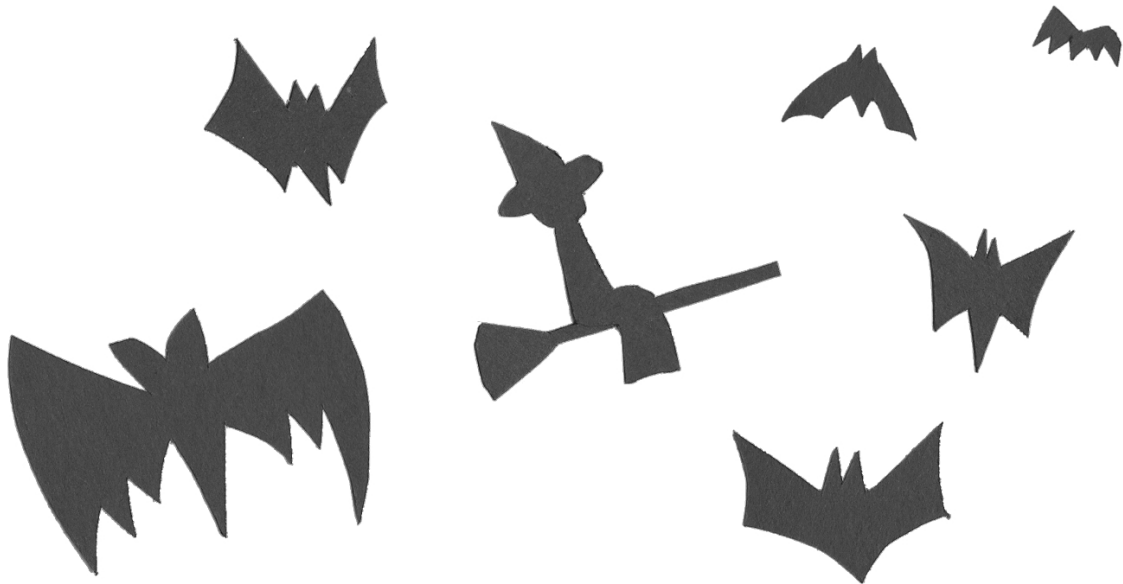
“Who is this?” Carys burred through tears as she looked at the toad. “This is nobody! This isn’t Jasper! What have you done with him?” Laurencia subconsciously flicked her eyes toward the wart removal potion, and Carys started to wail. “You boiled him! Why? He had magic powers! Now I’ll never become a witch!”

Suddenly, Carys froze, staring straight at the potion with unusual determination in her eyes. “Wait. What if I…” She yanked the potion away from Laurencia, then before she could be stopped, opened it up and chugged the entire flask. Clearly struggling with the horrible taste, she managed to keep it down, then said “Now his magic can flow through my veins. This was meant to happen. Now we can become one, and I will finally take on my true form as—”

She couldn’t finish her speech, because a small African Bouncing Toad emerged from her throat into her mouth, then bounced off her tongue and through her lips. He bounced twice more on the floor after escaping Carys’s mouth, then, shocking everyone, he began to speak.

“I am the one you call Jas’prrr,” the toad said in a deep, soothing voice, with some kind of Mediterranean accent. “Thanks to your actions, I have finally succeeded in stealing this young girl’s soul. I will now put it to use in accomplishing my dark deeds. Good day to you both.” He then bounced out the window, escaping to do God knows what.

After a moment of stunned silence, Carys vomited on the floor. After another moment of stunned silence, Carys rushed at Laurencia, chasing her out of the dorm room, into the hallways, then the lobby, then into the streets of NC State University, where Laurencia took off on her broomstick and flew away. It was safe to say she had lost her best customer.



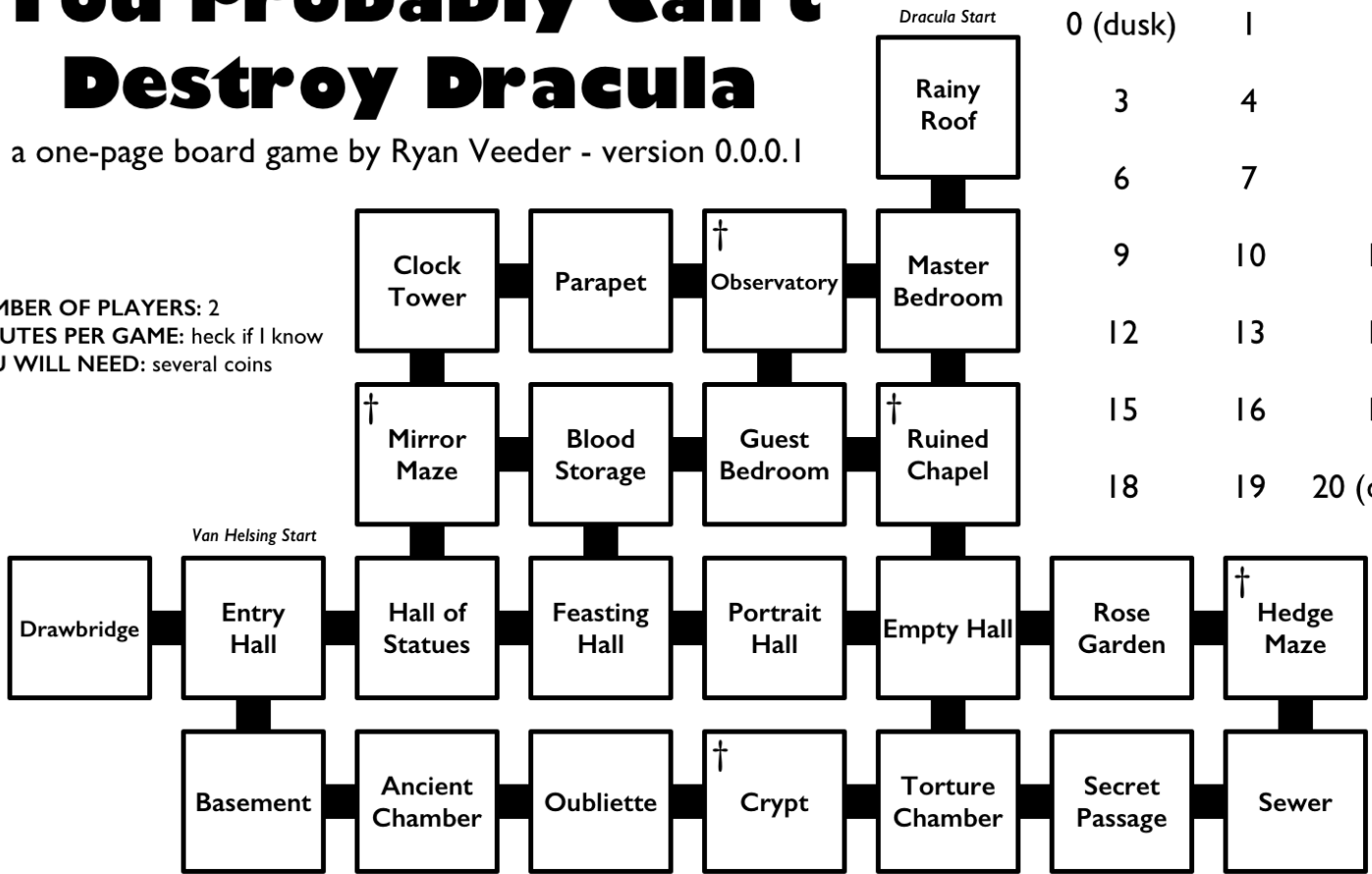
You Probably Can't Destroy Dracula

a one-page board game by Ryan Veeder - version 0.0.0.1

TIMEKEEPING TRACK

0 (dusk)	1	2
3	4	5
6	7	8
9	10	11
12	13	14
15	16	17
18	19	20 (dawn)

NUMBER OF PLAYERS: 2
 MINUTES PER GAME: heck if I know
 YOU WILL NEED: several coins



Conflict Table 1

		Initiator	
		Dracula	Van Helsing
Van Helsing Has Stake?	Nope	Table 2	Table 3
	Yep	Table 4	Table 5

Conflict Table 2

		Van Helsing	
		Heads	Tails
Dracula	Heads	@	@
	Tails	#	@

Conflict Table 3

		Van Helsing	
		Heads	Tails
Dracula	Heads	#	@
	Tails	#	@

Conflict Table 4

		Van Helsing	
		Heads	Tails
Dracula	Heads	#	@
	Tails	%	\$

Conflict Table 5

		Van Helsing	
		Heads	Tails
Dracula	Heads	\$	#
	Tails	%	\$

TO SET UP:

Decide which player will control Abraham van Helsing and which player will control Dracula, keeping in mind that Dracula will probably win. Put a penny, representing Abraham van Helsing, on the Entry Hall. Put a nickel, representing Count Dracula, on the Rainy Roof. Put a dime on the Timekeeping Track at position 0 (Dusk).

ON EACH TURN:

1. Move the dime on the Timekeeping Track into the next position.
2. Van Helsing may move into a room connected and adjacent to his current position. If van Helsing is in the same room as Dracula, conflict begins, with van Helsing initiating (see "CONFLICT" below).
3. Van Helsing may flip a coin. If it comes up heads, van Helsing may move again. If van Helsing is in the same room as Dracula, conflict begins, with van Helsing as initiator (see "CONFLICT" below).
4. If van Helsing is on the Drawbridge, the game ends in a draw.
5. If van Helsing has landed in a room marked with a dagger (†), he may search for the Stake (see "SEARCHING" below).
6. Dracula may move into a room adjacent to his current position. If Dracula is in the same room as van Helsing, conflict begins, with Dracula as initiator (see "CONFLICT" below).
7. If the Timekeeping Track is in position 20 (Dawn) and Dracula is not in the Crypt, Dracula is destroyed and van Helsing wins. If the Timekeeping Track is in position 20 and Dracula is in the crypt, van Helsing is free to escape and the game ends in a draw, regardless of whether van Helsing has found the Stake. Abraham cannot stake Dracula after dawn, because Dracula has locked his coffin from the inside. (However, if Dracula and van Helsing are both in the Crypt before the end of the 20th turn, conflict (see "CONFLICT" below) proceeds in the usual fashion.)

SEARCHING:

To search a room for the Stake, van Helsing flips three coins in a row.* If every flip comes up heads, van Helsing obtains the Stake. If van Helsing already has the Stake, there is no need to search for it anymore.

Van Helsing can search each possible Stake location (marked with †) only once. If van Helsing searches the last possible Stake location and still doesn't find the Stake, it is time to head for the Drawbridge.

*After van Helsing has searched three possible Stake locations, he only needs to flip two coins in a row.

CONFLICT:

When Dracula and van Helsing are in the same room, consult Conflict Table 1 to determine which Conflict Table you should consult. (The Initiator is whoever moved last.) Dracula and van Helsing each flip one coin simultaneously. Find the glyph from the relevant cell of the appropriate Conflict Table in the Conflict Glossary below:

@ - Dracula overpowers van Helsing and sucks his blood. Dracula wins.

- Van Helsing escapes. Van Helsing may move into an adjacent room. Begin the next turn, starting with moving the dime on the Timekeeping Track.

\$ - Dracula escapes. Dracula may move into an adjacent room. Begin the next turn, starting with moving the dime on the Timekeeping Track.

% - Van Helsing stabs Dracula with the Stake, causing him to turn into dust. Van Helsing wins.

Ghosts of the Iowa Capitol

Evelyn Carlsson

Dear Readers,

It has been my pleasure for some time to bring you stories, sometimes chilling, often poignant, of those who have gone before us, but who are not completely gone. Ghosts, in other words. I have collected these stories from friends, neighbors, and total strangers. What I have not done, oddly enough, is meet ghosts. That is, until recently.

My renown, such as it is, has acquainted me with people in many walks of life. Ghosts are no respecters of wealth, status or power. So it came to be that I was chatting with the mayor of Carlsberg, who, given the controversial nature of ghost stories, wishes to remain anonymous. "Mr. X" was telling me about a spirit in his house that made things like car keys and television remotes disappear and reappear, and he mentioned that he had engaged the services of a medium to try to communicate with the ghost. (His universal remote had been missing a long time.)

This intrigued me. Many are the ghost stories I have heard and retold, but never had I attempted to make contact with the spirit world.

"Who is this medium?" I asked.

"Her name is Madame Claire," said our anonymous notable.

"You mean Madame Claire the Fortune Teller on College Street?" I had seen her sign outside an unassuming house for many years.

"The very same," said the mayor. "You should visit her sometime."

And I determined to do precisely that.

Several days later, I found myself knocking upon her door. When she answered it, I extended my hand and said, "Hello, I'm -"

"Do not tell me who you are," she interrupted, as she took my hand gently but firmly in both of hers. She looked me directly in my eyes and said, "You are Evelyn Carlsson."

Her gaze dropped to the palm of my hand. "You have not come for me to tell your fortune," she said with quiet assurance.

I admit I was nonplussed. "Th-that's right," I stuttered, "I want -"

"You want me to communicate with the spirit world for you," she said with confidence. "Come in and sit down."

I went in and sat down. I tried to calm myself. First I had to square appearances with my expectations. I admit I expected to see a crone with a paisley scarf knotted in the back in an exotically decorated parlor with a raven strutting about. Instead, she was a fortyish brunette with a home perm and a worried look about her eyes. She ushered me through a sparsely furnished house to a bright kitchen. "Tea?" she asked.

I smiled. "Why don't you tell me?" I chuckled.

She smiled and poured me a cup.

Having momentarily gained the upper hand, I pressed my advantage. "Why don't you tell me what ghosts I'd like you to introduce me to?" I asked.

She poured milk into her tea but not into mine. ("Uncanny," I thought.) She looked me in the face again, and then looked down. "You know there are many ghosts in our State Capitol building," she said quietly.

"I have often heard that," I said, and it's true - spooky stories of the Statehouse abound in my *milieu*.

She nodded. "And I think...you would like to contact some of these ghosts."

I realized she was absolutely right. "Yes, yes, I would!" I stammered. "Would you be willing -"

"To help you? Yes, I can help you. You will make the financial arrangements?" she asked mysteriously. I nodded.

Three weeks later Madame Claire was settled in a suite of rooms in the recently restored and refurbished Hotel Fort Des Moines (a sentimental favorite of hers), while I bunked with relatives. I went to the hotel to pick her up for our first visit to the Capitol, and called her from the lobby. When she stepped out of the elevator, she walked straight to the hotel entrance without even glancing at me. I caught her up at the door, saying, "Madame Claire, wait!"

When she reached the sidewalk she stopped. "I'm sorry," she said, a bit flushed, "but the concierge dislikes me."

I was baffled. "I saw the concierge table, but I saw no concierge," I said.

"Not *that* concierge," she rejoined. "I mean his predecessor save one."

"Oh," I said. "The Fort Des Moines is haunted too?"

"Yes," she replied with an odd smile.

Madame Claire and I had discussed our plans for approaching the Capitol spirits. I knew several stories that I hoped to investigate, but we resolutely refused to discuss them, so that she would have no prior knowledge of what to expect.

The Iowa Capitol is a regally beautiful building crowning a hill rising from the Des Moines River. Its gold dome hints at the grandeur within. The legislature was out of session this late October day, so parking was not a problem. Dry leaves swirled around us as we climbed the hill to the south entrance. We passed through the security station without incident. We were on the ground floor, or basement of the Statehouse, and I hoped to have an audience with an alleged denizen of a room there.

What had once been a storage area has long since become a warren of offices for the Department of Management. It had been some years since the shade of a filing clerk had been sighted here, but the descriptions had been so vivid that I hoped that Madame Claire could summon her.

We stopped at the front desk, and were asked if we had an appointment. I explained that we were looking for a ghost. "We'd just like to see if we can make some kind of contact," I said. The receptionist asked us to wait as she went to find her supervisor.

A moustachioed gentleman with a perpetual sneer appeared, the receptionist sheepishly trailing. "There are no ghosts here," he said. "And we're quite busy."

"We won't be a bother," I said. "We aren't conducting a séance or anything like that."

The supervisor grimaced. Clearly the thought hadn't occurred to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "This is a working office. I'm afraid I must ask you to leave."

"There has been a mistake," Madame Claire said quietly. "We have come to see the director."

"The director's office is not on this floor," the supervisor said tightly.

"We will wait," said Madame Claire, and she sat in one of two chairs positioned for that purpose. After a slight hesitation I sat in the other.

I stared straight ahead as I felt the supervisor's eyes bore holes into me. After a long moment he

turned and left. The receptionist returned to her desk and started typing on her keyboard.

I realized I had been holding my breath. I commenced a long exhalation through my nose, and turned to look at Madame Claire. Her eyes were closed.

"Madame Claire?" I said, but a wince cut me off. I contented myself with looking at an equal employment opportunity poster.

A few minutes went by, and then Madame Claire spoke in a strained voice. "What do you wish to ask Ruthie?"

A wave of gooseflesh passed down my back. "Is she here?" I whispered loudly.

"I sensed her as soon as we entered," said Madame Claire. Her eyes were still closed. "What do you wish to ask her?"

My mind went blank. "Ask her – ask her what she's doing here," I said idiotically.

After a pause the answer came. "She works here."

A regular conversation of a sort followed. I would ask a question, and after a moment Madame Claire would give Ruthie's response, if there was one. Here, as near as I can remember it, is the exchange:

"What is the nature of her employment?"

"She makes two copies. Carbon copies, I think."

"Does she know that she's dead?"

"She doesn't understand the question."

"How old is she?"

"She doesn't understand the question."

"Who does she work for?"

"The State of Iowa."

"Who is her direct supervisor?"

"John...Johnson...John or Johnson."

"Who is the governor?"

"She doesn't understand the question."

"Who is the governor of the State of Iowa?"

"She doesn't love him. He doesn't love her."

"What is his name?"

"She doesn't wish to say anything."

"Was she in a relationship with the governor?"

"She doesn't wish to say anything."

"Could you explain to her that she's dead?"

This time the pause was much longer. "I have told her," said Madame Claire.

"Would she like to pass over to the other side?"

"She is too busy."

"Does she understand that she's dead?"

The Madame opened her eyes. "She doesn't wish to say anything. Our communication is over."

I suddenly realized that five or six office workers were watching us intently. I asked Madame Claire if she was ready to leave. She rose and we headed for the door. As we were going out, the receptionist said, "Excuse me?"

I turned and looked at her.

"There's one on the second floor," she said.

I smiled. "I know," I said.

Once outside, I said to Madame Claire, "That's amazing, that's really amazing." I was totally thrilled. "I want to ask you a lot of questions, but first, I'd like to check out another spirit in the Secretary of State's Office."

She frowned. "I am exhausted," she said. "Please take me back to the hotel."

She appeared to sleep during the short trip back to the Fort Des Moines, but as soon as I stopped to let her out, she opened her eyes and wordlessly exited the car, entered the hotel, and strode with hunched shoulders toward the elevator bank.

I called her the next morning and asked if she was ready to go back to the Capitol. She was not. "Yesterday's communication was very exhausting," she said. "Please allow me to regain my strength." I asked her if she would like to join me for dinner. "Thank you, but I am not physically or spiritually prepared to dine in public," she apologized. "But the hotel staff is kind enough to bring meals to my room."

Day after day the answer was the same: She must recruit her strength in order to endure another draining correspondence. I was worried. I hadn't anticipated renting the suite for more than a few days, and it occurred to me that I had no idea how much her room service meals were costing.

On the other hand, my forced inactivity had given me an opportunity to do some research about Ruthie's responses. Was her supervisor named John or Johnson? Well, Richard Johnson had been Auditor of State from 1979 to 2002. And the governor whom Ruthie did not love or who did not love her? While my first suspicion was that Ruthie had been trysting with an Iowa chief executive in the bowels of the State Capitol, perusing a list of Iowa governors gave me a different idea: The governor from 1957 to 1961 was Herschel *Loveless*. Perhaps that is what

Ruthie was trying to convey, and Madame Claire, no savant in Iowa history, misunderstood her.

Meanwhile, communication with my medium had become increasingly sparse. On the fifth day, I called her with real regret and said, "Madame Claire, I'm sorry to say that we will have to return to Carlsberg soon. I fear that our expenses are reaching the point of...financial embarrassment."

"But there is work to be done," she responded, "and my mind is now prepared to undertake it. Please pick me up at one o'clock."

I felt I was being manipulated, and I would have none of it. "It is not in my power to pick you up at one o'clock," I said evenly. "I will pick you up at three o'clock."

"As you wish," said Madame Claire.

I had hoped to revisit Ruthie in the basement and employ the benefit of my research to further establish her identity, but we were seriously behind schedule. Instead we went to the ornate Secretary of State's Office on the first floor. For years, rumors have circulated that various odd phenomena occur in this office. Lights mysteriously turn on after the office is closed and empty, footsteps echo from the iron spiral staircase in the vault, and a single electrical socket rejects every plug that is introduced into it.

Two young men in dark suits greeted us with smiles as we entered the Secretary of State's high-ceilinged outer office. The smiling reception, so unlike the indifference we encountered in the basement, reminded me that we were in an elected official's office. But I was in no mood to be put off by a political flunky's condescension. "We're here to see the Secretary of State," I said.

"I'm sorry, the Secretary is out today," said one of the smiles. "May we tell him who visited?"

"We will wait," I said with finality, and looked for a place to sit.

The smiles dimmed only briefly. One of the gentleman quietly stepped into another room, and the other said, "Could you hold on for just a moment?"

Madame Claire apparently could not. She quietly turned and left the office. This perplexed me somewhat, but I remained calm. I looked at an enormous painting of a general on horseback. The second smile re-entered the room. Had he summoned security? I said, "There has been a mistake," and I left.

Outside the office I stepped directly into a large group of touring schoolchildren. I looked around for Madame Claire but couldn't see her. I rushed to the Rotunda, where I would be able to see all four corridors. I saw someone turn on the landing of the Grand Staircase and move out of sight. I bounded up the stairs, but once on the second floor I didn't see Madame Claire. And, happily, I didn't see anyone looking at me suspiciously.

My mouth had gone dry, and I found a water fountain. When I looked up I was startled to see a man in a tour guide jacket standing there. He smelled strongly of cigarette smoke. I expected him to say, "Would you please step this way?" Instead, he smiled and said, "You here for the Dome Tour?"

My anxiety drained from me. "Yes, I am."

"Of course, we can just go to the gallery," he said, opening a door to a stairwell. "There's always some kind of construction going on."

"That's fine with me," I said. "I haven't been even that high before."

"The very tip-top is 275 feet from the ground floor," he said. "Quite a trek from here."

We started our way up a winding staircase. Our breathing soon became labored, the tour guide's more than mine. He was a heavy man with a deeply lined, heavy face, but his features were usually animated by a warm, avuncular smile. We stopped a moment as he gave me a peek into a musty attic, and then moved on.

We reached the gallery and took a look around. It was a thrilling view, looking both down and up. The building is a wonder of architectural and decorative flourishes.

My guide was breathing heavily and sweat stood out on his brow. He smiled broadly, and gave me facts between gulps of air. "Construction began 1871. Completed in 1886. This is the highest spot in Des Moines. Bad fire in 1904. They were installing electricity. Working by candlelight. Worker left one night and didn't blow out his candle. Funny, huh? Installing electricity." He chuckled, and the chuckle broke into a rasping cough.

When it subsided, he said, "Well?" I gave a rueful smile and turned toward the stairs. But he stood still.

Then he grinned widely and said, "What the hell. Let's go all the way to the top."

"I thought there was construction going on," I said.

"Yeah, well, that's what they say. It won't be a problem," said the tour guide. "Let's go."

"Well, I'm game," I said. "But first, I'd like to ask a question."

"Sure."

"Do you know of any ghosts, or eerie phenomena, or stuff like that, in this area of the building?"

He gave me a sidelong grin. "Oh, I've heard stories. But I've never seen anything myself."

We started up a steep, dimly lit and very hot winding stairway between the inner and outer domes. "We're just a third of the way to the top, you know," the tour guide wheezed. As we slowly labored upward, we spoke no more, and I thought no more about the paranormal. I concentrated on each steep, narrow step.

Finally we emerged into the cupola and the bright light of the late afternoon. "Take a look around," said my guide. "Best view in the county."

I gazed around in wordless wonder. I tried to orient myself, the buildings unfamiliar from this unaccustomed vantage point. I looked in vain for the dome of the Supreme Court building.

"Want to go outside?" said the guide, opening a door.

"Can we?" I said, thrilled. We walked out into a cool, refreshing wind. Once again I looked for the landmark Supreme Court building, but the sun blinded me. The scenery started swirling about as I became dizzy. I gripped hard on the railing, and turned to ask, "Where's the Sup-" but the words froze in my mouth. The tour guide wasn't there.

I was panic-stricken. Did he go back without me? Did he fall over the railing? I went back inside and began pounding down the stairs at an unsafe speed. I would surely overtake him, I thought. But what if he stopped at one of the occasional, mysterious turnoffs? When I reached the gallery I looked into the deep well of the Rotunda, but couldn't see him. I tore down the remaining steps, and as I neared the bottom, the door to the stairwell opened, and in walked a tall, stern-looking woman in a long skirt, wearing a tour guide pin. She waited to speak until I arrived breathlessly before her.

"What are you doing in here? This area is not open to the public," she intoned.

"I was on a tour," I gasped. "But my tour guide – he – I don't know where he went!"

She looked at me very suspiciously, but then her eyes softened. "Went on a tour with Fred, did you?" I goggled at her. She smiled. "Fred is actually...retired." As my eyes widened, her smile turned sympathetic. "Let's go downstairs and have a soda, all right?"

"All right," I said uncomprehendingly.

She summoned the elevator and we rode to the ground floor. We went to the vending machines, and I insisted on buying her a bottle of pop. We walked under the opaque glass of the first-floor covering of the Rotunda and sat at a table. I saw Madame Claire halfway down the south hall at another table, but she didn't look at me.

The guide's name was Deborah. She told me that Fred Nichols was a long, *longtime* tour guide who loved giving tours of the dome, even when it was technically closed for repairs. "But he died about thirty or forty years ago, just after I started. I didn't know him well, but you didn't have to know him well to like him," she said fondly.

"Do you ever see him?" I asked.

"No," she smiled.

"But you do believe in him, I mean as a ghost, right?"

She continued to smile wistfully, and finally asked, "What do you remember seeing when you were at the top?"

I thought a moment. "It's not so much what I saw as what I didn't see. I tried to find the Supreme Court building but I couldn't see it."

She sighed. "That's what most people say. You see, the Supreme Court building wasn't built until after Fred died."

The hair on the back of my neck rose up. "Oh," I said.

Deborah screwed the lid back on her pop bottle. "I'm afraid I need to go. Are you going to be all right?"

I was about to explain that I was a veteran ghost story writer, and that the main reason I was at the Capitol was to contact its resident spirits, but in the end I just said, "Yes. Thank you very much."

She went back to the elevator and I walked to Madame Claire's table. She looked up serenely. "You met the ghost Fred, and he took you on a tour of the Capitol dome," she informed me. "This he told me."

"Correct, Madame Claire," I said wearily.

The next morning Madame Claire emerged from the hotel and waited in the car while I paid her bill. "He oppresses me still," she had explained on the phone. The concierge.

I had my checkbook out, but when the clerk handed me the bill with a helpful smile, I pocketed the checkbook and produced my credit card.

I know there are other ghosts inhabiting the Iowa Capitol, and I hope one day to bring you their stories. Perhaps it will be with the assistance of Madame Claire; perhaps I'll find a Des Moines local with her clairvoyant powers. In any case, it will be done with the utmost sincerity and with a deep respect for our friends...from the other side.



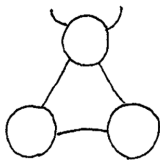
Tomb of Horrorscope

A. Sarah Raq



CREEPY MOUTH DEVIL
March 21 – April 19

The path ahead of you is long and winding, but there is no deviating from it. The only way through the difficult times ahead is forward. The sacred artifact of your survival is a long pole.



STONE JUGGERNAUT
April 20 – May 20

Pay attention to the insinuations of those around you. It is easy to get caught up in your actions and misunderstand another person's intent. The sacred artifact of your survival is a lantern.



DUAL SWORDS
May 21 – June 21

Reevaluate your loyalties. Someone close to you has been misleading you for some time, either by ignorance, or malfeasance. The sacred artifact of your survival is a skullcap.



GIANT SKELETON
June 23 – July 23

It is important to seek out recognition for your hard work. Just do not let yourself fall into the pitfalls of a cruel and fickle fame. The sacred artifact of your survival is a gold coin.



JACKAL FACED MAN
July 23 – Aug 22

It is tempting to stay on the offensive at this time, but do not be reckless. Someone may come along soon to turn your own strength against you. The sacred artifact of your survival is a bag of stones.



SIREN
Aug 23 – Sept 22

Experience has made you a creature of habit. You are going to be forced to buck routine and take a risk, or else lose everything. The sacred artifact of your survival is an article of clothing.



EFREETI
Sept 23 – Oct 23

The waves of unrest that have plagued your life all this time are about to subside, making way for an altogether new experience. The sacred artifact of your survival is a large jewel.



MUMMY LORD
Oct 24 – Nov 21

Your instincts will tell you not to trust those around you. Ignore them, or else fall to a defeat of your own design. The sacred artifact of your survival is within an ornate urn.



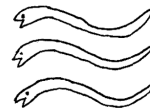
WIGHT
Nov 22 – Dec 21

Do not rush into anything, especially when the moon hangs in the sky. Take some time to consider your next action; it may be your last. The sacred artifact of your survival is a musical instrument.



GARGOYLE
Dec 22 – Jan 19

The puzzle pieces of your eventual success have started to fall into place. Distraction remains your primary obstacle to your desires. The sacred artifact of your survival is a rod.



SWARM OF SNAKES
Jan 20 – Feb 18

You may wish to take on all of the world's evil by yourself, but know that your true talent is for bringing new allies into the fold. The sacred artifact of your survival is an old tome.



OCHRE JELLY
Feb 19 – March 20

Your upbeat attitude even in the most dire circumstances is a boon to your comrades, but it causes you undue pain deep inside. The sacred artifact of your survival is a healing salve.

THINGS ARE GOING PRETTY SWELL

Derek Sotak

You sit in the Burger King, enjoying your lunch break. Work is going fine, you just got yourself a promotion so you've King sized your Angry Whopper meal, plus you got a bunch of extra food because it's Friday and you deserve it. Is it too much Burger King? No, there is never too much Burger King. Heck, there's even a rogue onion ring in your fries. Things are going pretty swell.

You stare out the window, marveling at how dark and stormy it is outside, which is surprising considering how nice it was out a second ago. Equally marvelous, the 1987 Dodge Dart which had previously been speeding down the road, but is now hovering in the air above it. It hangs for a second, maybe four feet off the ground, before flying into a SUV filling up at the gas station across the street. Where the car is now are the beginnings of flames and screams, but where it was stands a man, slowly walking across the street towards the Burger King.

Sipping your Coke with Raspberry, mixed specially at the Coca-Cola Freestyle Soda Station, you examine The Man. He has a cane, only you realize "cane" isn't the right word and "staff" is the one you're thinking of. You think he's wearing some sort of Orthodox Jewish robe, but then you see the stars and moons and alchemical signs stitched into it and wonder if maybe you're not as woke as you thought for making that little mix-up. You also wonder if those are shards of bone or spikes protruding from his back, and why he seems to be leaking darkness behind him. Then there's what can only be described as a "wizard hat" that he's wearing, so you have to take that into account as well.

The Spicy Chicken Sandwich on your tray is a rather particular shade of orange, coincidentally, the same color as the flames that the family walking outside in front of The Man burst into. The person at the table next to you spills their Froot Loops Milkshake in surprise, coincidentally, mirroring the flesh running off the family's bodies. The smell of this immolation, coincidentally, is indistinguishable from that of the restaurant's signature flame broiled meat. Reduced to skeletons, though still standing through some necromantic force of will, the still smoldering and much more pro-exposed bone family follows The Man towards the Burger King.

The doors open before him, but not in the way to which you are accustomed. They bend or warp around him as he walks into the restaurant and past the standee for Cheetos Chicken Fries, snapping back to normal behind him in a way you never learned in physics class. The skeletons following him open the doors exactly like how you imagine reanimated undead would, that being much like how the animated alive do. You're not 100% sure having of course, never before having witnessed this, but you make an educated guess based on first hand visual evidence.

As The Man walks towards the counter, several of the lights in the room dim or explode. Strange shapes move in the shadows, and something that looks like one of those creepypastas from the Internet pulls a woman into one with a shriek. Blood starts leaking out of the walls, but since it's a fast food place it might just be old grease. The soda machine shudders and expels a mass of water as though all the ice in its hopper was

instantly converted back into water. Good thing you had refilled your Coke with Raspberry minutes ago.

With a wave of his staff, the warmer full of food behind the cashiers cracks, snaps free, and flies forward, taking off the head of a minimum wage employee as it goes. The massive heating contraption crashes to a stop before The Man, and he grabs a box of 10 Piece Chicken Nuggets off of it. An excellent meal choice. You had gotten two containers yourself, because for \$1.49 a piece how could you not?

The Man pulls a Chicken Nugget from the container with fingers that are too long, too jointed, and too stained a mysterious dark color, raising it to his mouth. Teeth as yellow as they are jagged and broken part to receive the chicken, but pause. He lowers it, turning to the cashier that still has a head and is currently cowering behind the counter. While Tom Waits is pretty close, you've never heard an actual cinder block talk before, but by using your imagination you would guess that it sounds much like The Man when he says, "Zesty Sauce".

"He got the last one!" screams the employee, pointing out at a customer in the dining room. You are not a fan of how fast this minion of the Burger King snatched out, and even less of a fan that the customer being snatched on is you. Your stomach drops as you see The Man turn towards you, although the Spicy Big Fish Sandwich you had earlier (not to be confused with the Spicy Chicken Sandwich you are currently eating) may have a hand in that as well.

A baleful glare meets your normally beaming countenance and it's like beholding the void. Your skin doesn't so much begin to crawl as it does sprint, and you can literally feel the tumors growing inside you as he approaches. You spasmodically thrust your hands into the pile of dipping sauces in front of you, rooting through BBQ, Ranch, Sweet & Sour, Honey Mustard, and Buffalo, before finally landing on the Zesty. The Man stops in front of you, and you meekly extend to him the packet of sauce. He takes it, brushing one of your fingers in the process, and it instantly blackens and withers, never to heal in your lifetime. He tips the brim of his wizard hat at you and walks to an empty booth to sit and eat his nuggets, the skeletons following and taking a seat next to him. You and the other remaining patrons look on in silence as he casually eats his chicken.

Next door the gas station explodes, which is most unfortunate as it turns all the glass windows and doors to flying shrapnel. Worse, said shrapnel tears apart all the good people in the restaurant who had been enjoying their lunches mere minutes ago. Better, you are the one exception to this as you stare in shock at the dozens of shards of glass hanging inches in front of your face before they drop to the table. You turn to see The Man, a wizened hand raised in your direction, holding the Zesty Sauce packet and giving you a nod. You nod back. The other customers, both newly glass filled and newly corpsed, slowly stand to join the sitting skeletons.

The Man leisurely finishes his Chicken Nuggets, then stands and walks out of the hole where pre-explosion a door used to be, skeletons and corpses trailing in thrall behind him. You look around, probably in shock, but shock is just one of the things you've experienced today that you haven't before so you don't know for sure. The sky begins to brighten and the random fires to abate as The Man walks further down the street, flinging cars out of the road in front of him as he goes. Now alone in an empty shell of a restaurant, you look down and see your Rodeo Cheeseburger, still wrapped, devoid of glass, and uneaten. With shaky hands you remedy the latter. Yep, things are going pretty swell.

Credits

My name is RYAN VEEDER.
I'm @rcveeder on Twitter.
I am the editor and designer of *Halloween Zeen*.
Who else worked on *Halloween Zeen*, I wonder?
Let's see...

CAITLYN HARRIS BARDLE
@paperneverplain
illustrated "Bonelight," took the helm on the
classifieds, and designed the masks on the facing
page.

RICHARD BARDLE
@rbizzle4rizzle
did a drawing for "The Haunting at Sheumakkee
Creek" and worked on the classifieds.

NEALE BARNHOLDEN
@nealpolitan
compiled "Notes for a Future Restoration."

EMILY BOEGHEIM
@emilyboegheim
submitted that spooky photo of a ship.

NATHANIEL EDWARDS
@natemedwards
penned "Curse Your Enthusiasm."

CHANDLER GROOVER
castleprincessdragon.com
wrote "Little Jimmy's Artificial Nut."

PHILADELPHIA HANSON-VINEY
@Elph_Tath
gave us "People You Met on the Midnight
Train."

AINSLEY HARRIS
also worked on the classifieds.

ZACH HODGENS
@averyfinecat
compiled the "Tomb of Horrorscope."

DEREK SOTAK
nachonomics.com
is the author of "Things are Going Pretty Swell."

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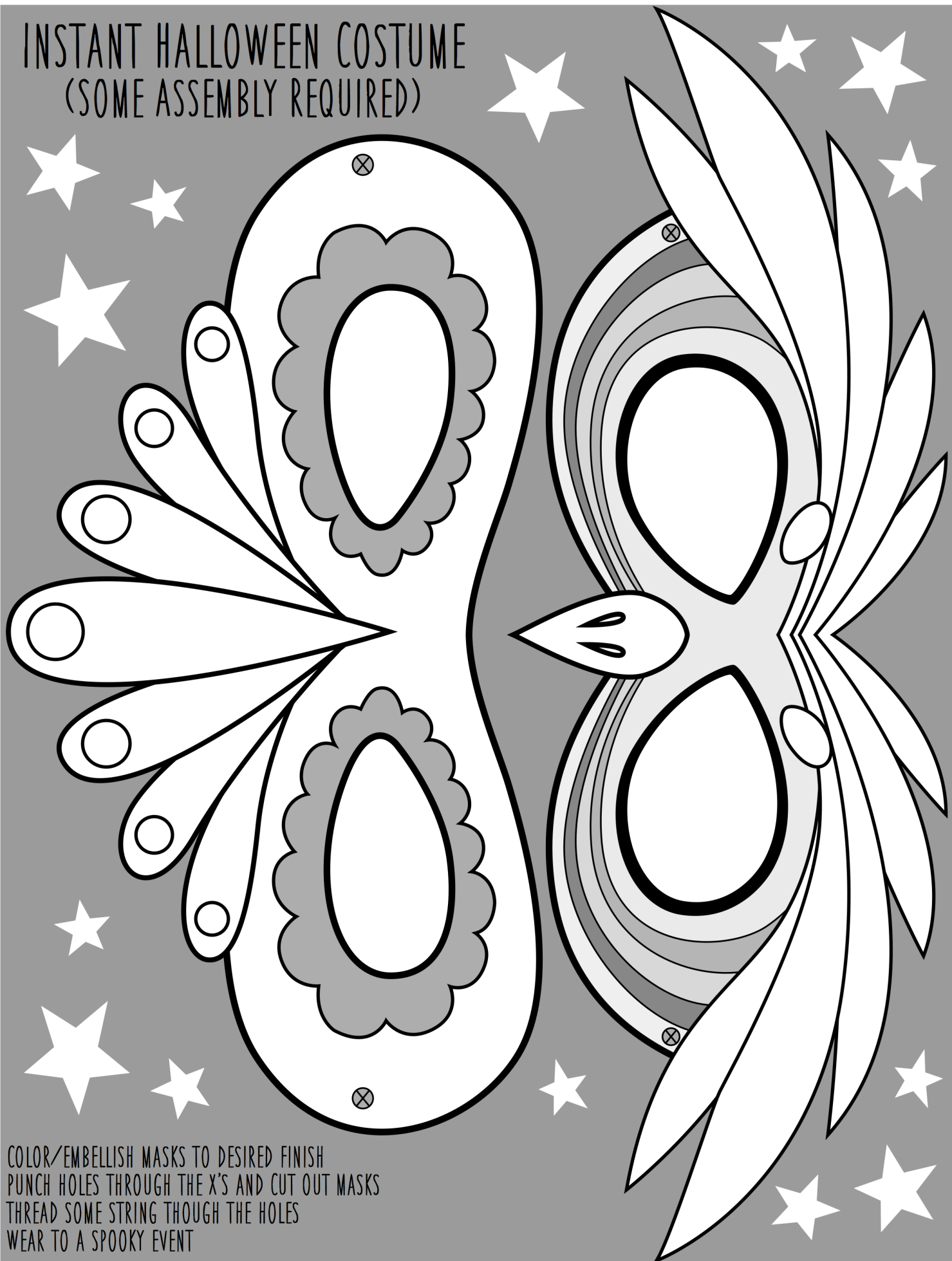
CALEB WILSON
@astrobolism
contributed "Bonelight."

This *Halloween Zeen* (like the 2016 issue) is available online at rcveeder.net/zeen, where you can read it, print it out yourself, or pay someone else to print copies to share with your friends. **You are permitted and encouraged to distribute this zeen however you see fit.**

None of the people above were compensated in any way for their contributions to this zeen. If you appreciated any of their work, **you have to let them know.** The only way they get **anything** out of this experience is if you hit them up on Twitter or something and **tell them** that you appreciate their work. **Go do that right now.**

Thanks. See you next year.

INSTANT HALLOWEEN COSTUME (SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED)



COLOR/EMBELLISH MASKS TO DESIRED FINISH
PUNCH HOLES THROUGH THE X'S AND CUT OUT MASKS
THREAD SOME STRING THOUGH THE HOLES
WEAR TO A SPOOKY EVENT

