



Pranks

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

The energy for good or ill was always stronger around Halloween, and this year he decided to accept it into his spirit and form himself a body, instead of jumping from one to another of the people already running around dressed as people they weren't. He chose to become someone small, a child; that made a good use of the energy he could gain without too much trouble. He would spend it all before the night was over, causing mischief, but first he would look and listen.

He made himself small and dark and then drew fire from air to dress himself in clothes like flames. He made the flames settle into solid, streamers of spider silk, quieting their heat, light, and appetite. When he had drawn enough fire to cover himself except for head and hands, he ran down out of the forest on the hilltop and into the neighborhood, where children in costumes dashed from one lighted front door to another, while adults in normal dress waited on the sidewalk, watching.

The flame child joined a group of children who had separated from their grownup. He slipped among them as they climbed the steps to a front door. The pirate girl he stood beside noticed him; she lifted her eyepatch to look, but she didn't say anything. The boy dressed as a dog on his other side was too busy knocking on the door to pay attention. The others, a ghost, a zombie, a witch, pressed forward, sacks held open.

A woman answered the door. She also was dressed as a witch, only an ugly witch, with stick-on warts and ragged gray hair, more cobweb than homegrown. All her clothes were dark green or black, and she cackled at them. "Trick!" she screeched before the children could yell the usual question.

Dog boy stumbled backward, confused. The other children looked at each other. Jack, the name the flame child had decided to call himself, moved up a step and gestured toward the witch. He set her tall pointed hat on fire. "Trick," he said.

She shrieked and snatched the hat off her head, dropped it, and stomped the fire out. "What was that?" she yelled. "Do you want me to call the police?"

“No,” said the pirate girl. “You told us to trick you. We did. Happy Halloween!” She grabbed Jack’s arm and ran down the front path toward the street. The other children followed.

“That was the coolest,” said the pirate girl. “How’d you do it?”

“I used up my little finger.” Jack waved his left hand, showing that it only had three fingers and a thumb left.

“Ewww!” said three of the children.

“What happened?” asked the grownup waiting in the street for them.

“She told us to trick her!” said the dog. “She didn’t give us any candy,” yelled the zombie. “She was trying to scare us,” said the witch, “but then her hat burned.”

“Really?” asked the grownup, a tall slender woman with long dark hair, wrapped in a big dark coat with a collar lined in brown fake fur.

“She said she’d call the police on us,” said the pirate girl.

“That doesn’t sound good,” said the grownup. “Let’s get out of here.” She switched on a flashlight and led the flight down the street.

They ran until they turned the block, passing a number of groups of other kids, some of whom cackled at them or shrieked things.

When they slowed, the pirate girl said, “What’s your name?”

“Jack,” said Jack. “What’s yours?”

“Nell. The dog is Ben, and the witch is Amber. The ghost and the zombie are friends of Ben’s. I don’t know them.”

“Do you not like them?”

“That thing you did with your finger,” said the witch, Amber, joining them. “Was that a magic trick?”

“I guess,” said Jack.

“Did you set the fire by magic?” asked Nell.

“It was all part of the same trick,” said Jack.

“Can you do it again?” asked the ghost.

“I don’t like to repeat myself,” said Jack.

“Wait a sec,” said the grownup. “You set the fire? Who are you, anyway?”

“This is my friend Jack,” said Pirate Nell. “I asked him to join us.”

“Jack,” said the grownup. “I’m Ben’s big sister Sandra. I’m supposed to be in charge here. I’d prefer to know who is in the party. Did I hear right? You set the witch’s hat on fire?”

“Yes,” said Jack.

“I’m not sure that was a good idea.”

“I’m not about good ideas. I’m about doing things that make me laugh,” said Jack. He thought back. He hadn’t laughed about this one yet, though it had struck him as funny. The look on her face—

He laughed, enjoying the trick in hindsight. In a moment, the rest of them were laughing too, though the zombie looked confused. Maybe he didn’t get the joke. Even the grownup laughed.

“Let’s do another,” said Jack. He led them up a path to a front porch and rang the doorbell. The other kids were close behind. As the occupant of the house opened the door, all the children screamed, “Trick or treat!”

The bald man laughed and held out a bowl of candy. “Help yourselves,” he said.

Jack lifted a hand, but Nell took his arm. “You don’t trick them if they offer you a treat,” she whispered.

“But I want to,” he said. While the other children selected candy from the bowl, Jack spent a finger and a thumb convincing the man’s hair to come back, wildly. Dark brown hair waved up out of the man’s scalp.

“What?” he said. He set the bowl of candy on a nearby table and reached up as hair grew out of his scalp and flowed down around his shoulders. Jack spent another finger to inspire the man’s beard and mustache to grow out, too. “Hey!” The man didn’t seem so much angry as astonished. “What the hell?”

All the kids had gotten candy except Jack. “Run away,” Nell said, and they pelted across the man’s lawn back to Sandra.

“Now what?” Sandra asked.

“He was nice and gave us candy, but Jack played a trick on him anyway,” said Ben.

“Did you?” Sandra asked. “I guess we better run again.” They ran around another corner.

“It was a good one!” Jack said when they stopped running. He laughed, and again the rest of them laughed too. They couldn’t help themselves.

“How’d you do that?” Ben asked when they had laughed themselves silly.

“Used up some more fingers.” Jack held up his hand. He had only an index finger left.

Sandra gripped his hand. “Oh my god oh my god oh my god, we better get you to a hospital,” she said.

“No,” said Jack, and he spent his index finger and palm turning Sandra into a child, younger than the rest of them, swallowed by her grownup’s clothes.

“What?” she cried, her voice much higher than it had been.

Jack laughed. They all did. Nell stopped first, and said, “Jack? I don’t know if I like you anymore.”

This troubled Jack, because he liked Nell. He spent his other hand making her like him no matter what he did, but some hard part of her fought that. It made it even more fun. He liked that she was hard to convince.

Sandra strode up to him, elbows out, hands on her hips, her clothing bagging around her and almost tripping her. She was a head shorter than he was. “Hey.”

Nell gripped his shoulder. “Be nice.”

“You need a costume,” Jack said, to be nice. He spent a forearm spinning Sandra’s clothes into a tight-fitting black cat costume, complete with whiskers growing from below her nose. Even her eyes changed, yellow with slit pupils.

“Rowr,” she said. “Why does everything look different?” She studied her forearms (black), flexed her now-black fingers and watched claws emerge from her fingertips. “Hey.”

“Let’s get candy,” said the ghost, and before Nell or Sandra could object, the rest of them ran up a front walk to another front door, this one decorated with a glow-in-the-dark skeleton. The zombie pressed the doorbell.

“Well, aren’t you the cutest little monsters I ever did see,” said the large smiling woman who opened the door. “I have just the thing for you to polish your fangs with after you eat all that candy.” She gave them each a toothbrush.

“Trick.” Amber nudged Jack.

He spent a toe giving the woman long, pointy teeth so large she couldn’t close her lips over them. She lifted a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide, and Ben ran, the others following. They laughed so hard they couldn’t breathe. “I bet she bites through the floss,” said the ghost.

Sandra tugged on Jack’s streamers. “How long do these tricks last?”

“Always.”

She narrowed her yellow eyes. “I’ll wake up tomorrow as a dwarf cat?”

“The costume will come off.”

“But her teeth—?”

“I might be lying,” Jack said. He didn’t think he was.

"I'd like it if you turned Sandra back into herself," said Nell.

"Maybe later." Should he spend some more body parts to make Nell stop telling him what to do?

"Candy!" Ben yelled, and they approached another house.

"Trick," Amber whispered to Jack before anyone rang the bell. She had laughed the hardest of them all. Jack wondered if he liked her more than he did Nell.

A woman wearing a short black dress and black-and-white striped stockings opened the door. Her hair was big and green. She smiled while the children yelled, "Trick or treat!" and offered them candy bars. As Jack leaned over the bowl, she snagged his shoulder and said, "Trade you treats for a trick!" Her hand was sticky; he couldn't shake it off. "How silly you are to walk around like that, such a tempting little powerball," said the witch. "I know what to do with you!"

"You can't have him," said Nell, who liked Jack no matter what. "He's mine."

"Finders keepers," said the witch. She wadded Jack up as though he were a bundle of rags and stuffed him into a silver bag she wore at her waist.

Nell lunged forward and bit the witch's hand, snatched the bag from her belt, and ran.

"A curse on you!" cried the witch, but Nell ran so fast the curse was lost before it reached her. She ran so fast she left all the other children behind. She stopped in the forest on the hill, and then she opened the bag and pulled out what was left of Jack.

He uncrumpled into the form of a boy missing parts, and lay on the ground looking up at her. He was glad to be rescued, though he was sure the witch would have made more mischief with him.

"Can you take back the things you did?" Nell asked.

"No, only do different things," said Jack. He felt tired now, less inspired.

"Never mind, then," Nell said. She sat on the fallen leaves and looked down at the neighborhood. Jack pulled himself together and decided to spend the rest of himself on Nell. He seeped into her skin and made her into someone who would play tricks on others and laugh.

Nell, itchy, irritated, different, rose to her feet and headed downhill. Her fingers tingled with trickery.