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This year I am a turtle. I do not want to be a turtle.

“His tail’s between his legs,” Max notices, cocking his head. Worry spreads across his wonderful face. “You think the hat’s too tight?”

We are on the porch, and the strange pumpkin is smiling at us – the one Max carved last week, scooping out its guts. I ate the seeds, even though he told me, *No, Cosmo, no*. I find it difficult to stop myself when something smells so interesting and so new.

Max’s father, whose name is Dad, readjusts the turtle vest on my back. “Nah, he’s fine. He loves it! Look at him!”

This is one of those times – those infinite times – when I wish my tongue did not loll in my mouth. Because I would say, in perfect human language, that

turtles are inferior creatures who cannot manage to cross roads, and I have crossed many roads, off-leash, by myself. This costume is an embarrassment.

At a loss, I roll gently on to my back, kicking my legs in the air. An ache creaks down my spine; I am not young like I used to be. But hopefully Max will understand the subtle meaning in my gesture.

“Dad, I *really* think he doesn’t like it.”

Yes, Max! Yes!

Scratching the fur on his chin, Dad says to me, “OK, OK, no hat, but you’ve gotta keep the shell.”

And just like that, a small victory.

Emmaline bursts on to the porch then. She is all energy. She glows. “*Cosmo0000.*” Her little hands ruffle my ears, and it reminds me why I am a turtle in the first place – because Emmaline picked it out. Because it made her happy. I’ve long accepted that this is one of my roles.

Max grabs Emmaline’s hand and spins her around, like they’re dancing. Her purple superhero cape twirls with the movement. Last week, I helped Mom make the costume: guarding the fabric, keeping watch by her feet, and every once in a while, she held up her progress and asked me, “Whaddy think, Cosmo?”

A wonder, I told her with my eyes. It is a wonder.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Mom?” Max asks. He is dressed in dark colours, patches on his shirt, and I suppose he is a cow or a giraffe, although I do not like thinking of him as either. Giraffes are remarkably stupid creatures, and Max is very, very smart. He can speak three languages, build model rockets, and fold his tongue into a four-leaf clover. He can even unscrew the lids off peanut butter jars. I’d like to see a giraffe do *that*.

Dad replies, “She’s late. Don’t want to miss all the good candy.”

Max says, “I just think—”

But Dad cuts him off with “Ready, Freddy,” which he is fond of saying, despite the fact that Max is called Max. After a pause, the four of us set off into the bluish night. Our house is a one-storey brick structure with plenty of grass and a swing set that only Emmaline uses now. Paper lanterns line the driveway, lighting up the cul-de-sac.

The fur on the back of my neck begins to rise.

Halloween is the worst night of the year. If you disagree, please take a moment to consider my logic:

1. Most Halloween candy is chocolate. My fourth Halloween, I consumed six miniature Hershey’s bars and was immediately rushed to the emergency vet,

where I spent four hours with an incredible tummy ache.

2. Young humans jump out from behind bushes and yell, “*Boo!*” This is confusing. One of my best friends, a German short-haired pointer, is named Boo.

3. Clowns.

4. Golden retrievers, like myself, are too dignified for costumes. I am not entirely opposed to raincoats if the occasion arises, but there is a line. For example, Mom bought me a cat costume once, and I have yet to wholly recover from the trauma.

5. The sheepdog is let loose.

Allow me to elaborate on this fifth point. I have never had an appetite for confrontation – not even when I was a puppy. But I make an exception for the sheepdog.

Five Halloweens ago, on a night just like this, Max and I approached a white-shingled house at the end of the street. A big, blocky van idled by the mailbox, and a roast-chicken smell wafted from two open windows. I knew immediately that we had new neighbours – the old neighbours were strictly beef-eaters. An eerie quietness settled over the street, a dark cloud moving to block the moon. So quick that I did not even see it coming, the sheepdog emerged from behind a massive oak tree

in their front yard. It was wearing an ominous pink tutu and fairy wings, its grey-and-white fur standing on end.

My immediate reaction was empathy – hadn't we both succumbed to the same costumed fate? I began to trot over in my bunny outfit, intent on bowing in commiseration, and then welcoming it to the neighbourhood with a friendly sniff of its butt. What happened next was not friendly. I have never seen anything like it in my thirteen years.

The sheepdog bared its teeth, a menacing snarl directed straight at me... And I swear its eyes glowed red.

I was horrified.

There are few things that truly frighten me: trips in the back of pickup trucks, the vacuum (the sound, the sharp smell, the way things disappear inside it), and anytime Max or Emmaline are in danger. That night, as the sheepdog cast a final red-eyed glance in my direction, its ears back and incisors gleaming, I added one more thing to the list.

Previously, I took great pride in knowing the name of every dog in the neighbourhood. Names mean something: they are how we present ourselves to the world. Take "Cosmo", for instance. Mom once explained that Cosmo means "of the universe"; then

she pointed up at the sky, and Max got out his long metal tube that allows you to see the stars up close. It made me feel important, like I was part of something bigger than myself. I have intense sympathy for dogs named “Muffin” or “Scooby” or “Biscuit”. How can they hold their tails up? With the sheepdog, I chose to simply call it by its breed. I chose not to name my fear.

The sheepdog is normally trapped behind a wooden fence, but each Halloween it is let loose to greet the trick-or-treaters.

And I must face it.

Emmaline skips ahead of us, her light-up sneakers casting shadows on the sidewalk. I trot alongside Max, my leash limp in his hand. The evening is brisk but mild – “sweater weather”, humans call it. A breeze shivers through my fur, carrying with it a variety of wonderful scents. Apple pie! Squirrels! Rotten leaves! Momentarily, I forget about the sheepdog and my embarrassing costume, letting myself revel in the smells, my tail whipping through the air. I press my nose to the ground, and almost immediately – what’s this? Candy corn!

“Cosmo,” Max says, gently shaking my leash. “Leave it. It’ll give you a bad stomach.”

But I’m so overcome by the candy corn’s smell, by its

lovely symmetry against the pavement, that I make a second attempt. My tongue has almost scraped it from the ground when I'm pulled in another direction.

Max glances down at me, picking up the pace. "Sorry, Cosmo. I'll give you a cookie when we get home, OK?"

I trust that Max will keep his word, so I lower my head and trail him down a brick path, where two women are perched on a stoop, garbed in black dresses with pointy hats. Behind the glass front door, a Maltese named Cricket yaps itself hoarse. My patience for small breeds is limited. According to the Discovery Channel, which I watch frequently when Max and Emmaline are at school, all dogs are descendants of wolves. But looking at Cricket, who barely makes it to my knees, I question the truth of that research.

"Awww," one of the women coos, dropping a lollipop in Emmaline's plastic pumpkin. "What do we have here? A superhero and a giraffe?"

A giraffe! I knew it!

Max stares at his toes – and I nudge the palm of his hand, digging my nose inside it; I do this to remind him that I am here. Around some humans, Max refuses to speak, and his heartbeat pounds in his fingers.

"Oh my *goodness*," the second woman says, spotting me. "And a turtle! Cosmo, you're a *turtle*! Come here,

boy, come here.” She pats her lap, as if I’m supposed to jump on top of it. Apparently she has not heard about my arthritis. The last few years, my joints have got sore: a burning ache that I lick and lick. Still, out of a sense of neighbourly duty, I partially oblige her, even though I feel – just slightly – like she is mocking me. Her fingers smell of those miniature sausages Mom wraps in pastry dough and pops in the oven on holidays. Last Christmas, I devoured seven when Dad left his tray unattended. I can still recall the way the sausages felt sliding down my throat: warm, salty, oblong. It was the fourth best day of my life.

“Getting many trick-or-treaters this year?” Dad asks the women, sticking his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

“Oh, loads!” the one scratching my ears answers. “We’ve had lots of ghosts, a few pirates, an avocado ... and the night is still young!”

The expression doesn’t add up. How can a night be young?

Old. Young. Usually, I am good with ages. Emmaline is five. Max is twelve. And I am thirteen – eighty-two in human years. In our neighbourhood, there is only one dog older than me: a yellow Labrador named Peter, who manages with the help of a cart strapped to his

hindquarters. I have heard rumours of the existence of doggy diapers, of pills that artificially prolong your life. I am uninterested in those options. But I also know that, as the eldest member of my family, I need to be there for them as long as I can, any way I can.

Good thing I have a whole lot of life left in me.

We depart from the stoop, kids giggling in the street, parents chasing them down with flashlights, and we repeat the process dozens of times: approaching the neighbours, begging for food. I've always found this interesting. When I beg underneath the dining-room table, my nose wedged between knees, the results vary. Sometimes Max passes me a corner of his sandwich, lets me lick the meaty juices from his plate. Other times, Dad scolds me with “No, *out*”, and I'm banished to the living room, where I chew self-pityingly on a rope toy. The rules are different for humans.

I am beginning to slow down, my breath more laboured, when – *we're here*. In front of the sheepdog's house. My hackles stand up.

But where is the demon dog? I can't see it! I can't even smell it!

Max answers my whimpers. “What's wrong, Cosmo?”

What's *wrong*? The giraffe costume must be infecting

him with its horrible giraffe power. Surely it's obvious: the sheepdog is plotting something!

Emmaline sucks in her breath and lets it all out. "I'm tired, Daddy." Her cape drags along the sidewalk, crisp leaves stuck to the bottom.

"You wanna go home?" Dad asks. "Your buckets are pretty full."

The sheepdog! Why is no one concerned about the sheepdog?

Max says, "I'm up for whatever Emmaline wants. I've got enough candy for, like, a year."

What's this? The three of them are turning to head for home. No! I plant my paws and refuse to budge. If the sheepdog is hatching a plan, it must be stopped.

Max tugs at my leash. "Cosmo, come on, please?"

No.

Dad says, "Cosmo, let's go."

No.

Emmaline rests her hands on my back. "*Cosmoooooo.*"

Eventually Dad takes the leash and pulls, slowly but hard, and I'm forced away from the sheepdog's house, the windows glowing amber in the autumn night. *Wait. Wait!* In the final seconds, directly on its yard, I lift my leg and release a stream of urine. As a signal. As a warning. *I'm on to you.*

I depart, on edge but mostly satisfied.

Back at our house, as promised, I get a cookie, and Emmaline and Max divide up their candy on the living-room floor: piles for lollipops, piles for chocolate, piles for the candy no one likes. “Yuck,” Emmaline says, tossing a box of raisins to the side. Her black curls whip back and forth as she shakes her head. “Yuck, yuck, *yuck*.”

I observe from my position on the couch, which is difficult to climb on to nowadays. Sometimes it takes several tries, several embarrassing topples. A long time ago, I was not allowed on furniture, which made little sense. Wasn't my dog bed constructed of similar materials? Why was I allowed on one, but forbidden to lie on the other? Eventually, Dad gave up his couch crusade, and the cushions began to form around the shape of my body. I've learned that perseverance is a powerful thing.

The TV is on in the background. A talking black cat parades across the screen. Why do cats always get to speak on TV? Where are all the talking dogs? The dog in the movie *Up* speaks, but only with a translation collar. Lassie, the most famous TV dog of all time, just barks. I'm puzzling over the inequity when the back door slams. It is incredibly loud, purposeful. And then

the voices begin.

Mom growls in the kitchen, “David, did you *really*?”

“What?” Dad says.

“You were supposed to wait for me! I told you I’d be working late! I didn’t even get to see the kids in their costumes...”

“They’re still in their costumes.”

“I mean out in the neighbourhood, trick-or-treating. I was supposed to go with you, remember? Or did you conveniently just forget?”

“That’s unfair. You were *late*.”

Mom throws up her hands. “I *told* you I was going to be late. That’s why I asked you to wait for me!”

I don’t like the way they’re speaking to each other. From the couch I give them a disapproving look. Can’t they see Max and Emmaline are happy, that their voices are ruining it? Emmaline slowly crumples to the side, laying her head on the carpet next to the raisins, while Max tugs his knees to his chest.

“Let’s just...” Dad says. “Let’s just get a picture, OK? That’s what you want, right?”

“What I want? You don’t *care* about what I want.”

But we take the picture anyway, the five of us crowded by the fireplace, smiling at a small camera. After a few moments, a flash fills the room, and Max says quickly,

“OK, I guess I’m going to bed.”

Mom glances at him hopefully. “You don’t want to stay up a little bit? Watch *Halloweentown* with me?”

“I’m ... I’m kinda tired.”

“Oh,” Mom says. “Sure, OK. Goodnight, sweetie.”

“Night.” He kisses Emmaline on the forehead. “Night, Em.”

As I do every evening, I follow Max into his bedroom. Posters of the night sky stare down at us from the walls. There’s also a large picture of Guy Bluford, the first African American in space. He flew four shuttle missions beginning in the early 1980s. I know this because Max shares things with me; being an astronaut is his dream.

Curling at the edge of his bed, I rest my head on my paws. Uneasiness crawls through me. Something is wrong. I’ve heard that dogs can sense hurricanes and tsunamis when they’re still miles offshore. This is similar.

Max closes the door – and immediately bursts into tears.

Crying?

Max rarely cries. Only when he’s fallen off his bike, or slipped on a patch of ice, or—

I don’t have time to think about it. I just react, standing as quickly as I can, rushing towards him as

his back slides against the wall, as he folds to the floor. I lick his face. His ears. His fingers. I wedge my head between his hands and rest my muzzle on his shoulder. Shaking, his arms wrap round me, and he whispers directly into my ear, “Never leave me, Cosmo. Never leave me, OK?”

Why would I leave? Why would I ever leave Max?

I nuzzle him deeper in response.

And we stay like that for a long, long time.