

## The End of Autumn

By Aric Sundquist

### Prologue

Halloween had finally come to the town of Sterling Springs. It was a time of costumes and laughter and childhood pranks. Every year from his window, Mr. Ridgecomb watched all the kids trot door to door, dressed as vampires or witches, and every year he opened his window to inhale the autumn air and hear the echo of “Trick or treat!” infest the streets. He watched silver-haired gypsies sing and dance, witches cast spells with a wiggle of a finger, and grim reapers swing plastic scythes at lampposts and fire hydrants and ultimately—unsuspecting friends. He watched goodies dropped in paper bags and smiled as the kids smiled, laughed when they laughed.

The wind had picked up outside, scraping leaves across the street, dropping them in the town square under Old McMurphy’s clock. It was under those ticking hands and oiled gears he saw three kids chatting and digging in their bags, brandishing candy apples and saltwater taffy. Mr. Ridgecomb recognized one of the kids.

The boy in front was dressed in a black cloak. Long incisors jutted from his mouth, bending his lower lip. His name was Christopher Sandstrom. Mr. Ridgecomb had worked at the

town library for over thirty years, charting and reading and recommending books to children and parents. That was where he had first met Chris. Mr. Ridgecomb had loved his job very much, but after hurting his back last spring, he had to retire. For the last six months, he realized how much he missed the smell of all those aged books, the feel of paper between his fingertips, drying his skin, page by page until his hands hurt. Of course, he missed all the kids, too.

“Hello, Chris!” he shouted, leaning out his window.

Chris took out his plastic teeth. “Hello, Mr. Ridgecomb!”

“That’s a nice costume you got there. Let me guess. Dracula, right?”

“I prefer *Prince of Darkness*.”

Mr. Ridgecomb laughed. “Actually, the *Prince of Darkness* is right behind you.”

Chris whirled, cape billowing.

His friend wore red makeup and pointed ears and leaned against a pitchfork, which bent under his weight. “I told you!” the Devil replied, glancing at the gypsy.

“Who are your friends?” asked Mr. Ridgecomb.

“This is Mitch,” Chris said, draping his arm around the Devil, “and this is Sarah.” He motioned to the blonde gypsy girl wrapped in red and orange linen, silver glittering on her smooth cheeks and nose.

“Well, it’s a delight to meet all of you! So, how is the evening treating you bunch of ghouls and goblins? Get a lot of candy?”

“Tons. My bag is almost full!” Chris held up his bag, and Mitch and Sarah held theirs up, too, and then they argued about who had more.

“Why don’t you three come on in for a while? Greta is gone for the evening. She baked some cookies and I can brew up some hot chocolate. You can be my ghoulish guests on Halloween!”

Three faces lit up.

Mr. Ridgecomb, cane in hand, closed the window and went to greet his three young guests.

#

Mr. Ridgecomb passed around a plate of sugar cookies and gave them each a cup of hot chocolate. They thanked him and sat on the living room floor, next to the fire. The sun was just beginning to set beyond the oaks and pines, and the sky was filling with reds and oranges.

“Mr. Ridgecomb is great at telling stories,” Chris said after finishing his first cup of hot chocolate. “Last year he told me a story about a town that doesn’t age. Everyone gets younger. And there is this shadow that collects their souls in a glass jar. You should tell that one again.”

“Do you know any stories about gypsies and Egypt?” Sarah asked. “That’s where I want to go when I grow up. I want to travel to the pyramids and find lost treasure and marry a handsome pharaoh and—”

“I like stories about sprites and leprechauns!” Mitch interrupted, fending off a push from Sarah. “They live in the woods and eat fruits and berries and hide pots of gold coins. You should tell a story like that.”

“Hold on,” Mr. Ridgecomb said. “One at a time. Now Chris, you want to hear the story about the Timekeeper, right?”

“Yes! The Timekeeper! Tell that one!”

“And Sarah, you want to hear about gypsies and fortune tellers, right?”

“Yes!”

“And Mitch, you like stories about sprites and good luck?”

“Yes!”

“Well, how about I tell a story with all three?”

Three kids stared back in disbelief.

Mr. Ridgecomb laughed and filled his pipe. With a wooden match, he lit the tobacco and blew out a few smoke rings. The sky outside was beginning to turn dark. He saw Old McMurphy’s clock across the street and pointed with one crooked finger.

All three kids craned their necks.

“See that clock?” he asked. “That is a very special clock. Some say it is the heart of Sterling Springs. There’s also a legend behind it. A prophecy. Some say the clock is haunted by a shadow called the Timekeeper. As legend predicts, one year on Halloween night, right at the stroke of midnight, the shadow will stop time and the clock hands will begin again in reverse. For each day in reverse, the townspeople will become a day younger.

“But there were three kids who didn’t want this to happen. They wanted to experience the world ahead of them, not what was behind. They decided to stop the Timekeeper before it could complete this transformation.”

All three kids were leaning forward, glancing at the clock, then back at him, waiting.

And then Mr. Ridgecomb began his quite unusual tale.

## Chapter 1. Clocks, Seasons, and Thereafter

The three kids waited under the old clock.

Chris watched the clouds swirl across the autumn sky. The land was pretty, especially this time of the year, with all those oranges and golds covering the parks and forests. Those colors were a sign of age, of decline, and he relished feeling the leaves in his hands, the crispness, the smell. All around, leaves rustled and scraped, and he loved the sounds they made. He buttoned up his jacket, breathing the moist air, and waited for the echo-chime to signal their departure.

Two minutes to midnight.

Sarah regarded Chris while twisting a strand of blonde hair between her fingertips, the edges of her mouth turned down, in worry. She had never been out of Sterling Springs before, but she knew what was ahead. And it excited her. She had read enough books to know there was an entire world outside. She wanted to travel throughout the world, to see beautiful lands and taste exotic foods. Not to remain grounded in this place—a cell made of forests and meadows. She glanced at the clock and couldn't help but smile in anticipation. Then she elbowed Mitch.

One minute and thirty seconds left.

Mitch snacked on a sugar cookie with creamy frosting, teeth and tongue stained orange. He said “ouch” under his breath from the little jab to his ribs, and then he glanced at the clock, stuffing the last of the cookie into his mouth. He loved cookies and cakes. He also loved hot fudge and chocolate, with or without nuts, caramel and pecan clusters, banana sundaes and chocolate chip cookies and just about anything else that tickled his sweet tooth. He had twenty-four of them. Twelve on top and twelve on bottom.

The second hand ticked past eleven-fifty nine.

They watched the clock hand circle, mechanical and lifeless, round and round. Then the clock, all moonshadows and gears, struck midnight and chimed once.

The clock stopped ticking.

On the clock face, a trap door opened and a progression of statues emerged. Old gears and pulleys dragged a sun and a moon and a dozen other statues across the clock foundation. The last shape was an hourglass.

The Timekeeper yawned inside the hourglass, wiping quartz from its eyes. It would be back inside within moments, in *un-time*. It peered through the clouded glass from its concave throne and laughed.

Then it stopped moving.

The Timekeeper pressed its face to the glass, saw each kid set an hourglass down on the ground, saw their displacement-sands sift, silver-moon flashes filtering through the funnel middle, separating two glass oceans.

It gouged at the glass with claws and smoke, counting the synchronized grains, three by three.

Because *un-time* had stopped for the three kids.

And the Timekeeper, trapped for the next hour, watched them ride out of the dark valley.

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The kids rode their bikes for close to an hour and stopped on a hill that overlooked the valley below. The cemetery walls rose out of the distance like an encompassing fog. They pedaled down the twisting road and halted in front of the creaking gates. Chris tried to open the gate, but it was locked. After studying the grounds, he decided they should climb over. Finding a suitable oak tree, they each climbed onto a thick branch, one by one, and lifted themselves over the barricade.

Here, the moonlight shone off the pale stones as shadows twisted and taunted them.

“You know what?” Sarah said. “This is the best time for witches to call upon the dead.”

Mitch covered his eyes.

“See,” she continued, “the night is the best time for the skeletons. They like to dance before dawn.” She wiggled her thin body around like a skeleton dancing. Her flashlight illuminated the stones in eerie flickers. “Then they go to sleep in cold crypts and catacombs. But not before dawn. And they like chubby little seventh-grade kids, too. Ones who eat a lot.”

“Stop it!” Mitch sputtered, hiding his chocolate bar. “You’re lying!”

And then they saw a small light down the path and heard a voice, far off. The light grew closer and bobbed up and down and then disappeared. Before they could run and hide, an old man emerged from the darkness, dressed in dirty clothes and black boots.

“So, what have we here?” he asked, stopping in front of them and scratching his thick beard thoughtfully. “Some vandals, eh?”

“No sir,” Chris said. “We’re on a journey. We’re looking for dirt from a grave.”

His eyebrows arched in amusement.

“We don’t mean any harm,” Chris added.

“The grounds are closed. Didn’t you notice the locked gates? We open at dawn.”

“We can’t wait,” Chris said. “We’re in a hurry.”

The old man laughed. “I believe you. Now, what do you youngsters want with dirt from a grave? Let me guess... a practical joke, or maybe for brewing a little potion?”

“We need it for a spell!” Mitch squealed. His eyes grew big as balloons and he covered his mouth with his hands.

The old man frowned. “Sounds like tricky business.” He glanced toward town. “I think you better come with me.”

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The Groundskeeper had a small house in the center of the cemetery surrounded by a garden of withered vegetables. A scarecrow with a grinning pumpkin face stared back at them. Green vines entwined around the red brick of the house, seemingly in an attempt to pull the aged stone into the soil, to rest along with the ancient coffins.

They followed him up to the rickety door. A silver key sparkled in the lamplight. The door creaked open. They entered and sat down next to the fire. The Groundskeeper, who enjoyed the late-night company, brewed them each a cup of hot chocolate.

“So,” he began, “what kind of spell are you looking to make?”

“It’s a secret,” Chris said. “We need the right spell components.”

“Of course. Spells are a serious business. I don’t blame you for not telling. But I might be able to help you. Is there a certain reason you’re constructing this spell?”

“Yes,” Chris answered.

“Is something following you?”

“Yes. But it’s also in front of us.”

The Groundskeeper nodded. “Ah...a *time* spell. You need dirt from the freshest grave in the cemetery.” He walked to the window and stared outside at the gravestones.

“In May the sun shines brightly. Flowers blossom and birds sing lovely tunes. School ends. Boys can’t wait to play that first summer game. Girls can’t wait to pick that first summer flower. But it’s not like this for some adults. Some look back to summer, not forward. They want simplicity in their lives because autumn makes them ponder each step. They trample the leaves and breathe the winter droplets. They see their gravestones silhouetted against the November dawn. And they are scared.

“But time is circular, like the moon orbiting the earth, like the earth orbiting the sun. Time can also spin in two directions. For some, autumn can come before summer and spring can come before winter. It all depends on the Timekeeper. And the town.”

“You know about the Timekeeper?” Mitch asked.

“Yes, I know of the Timekeeper. All manner of folk travel to Sterling Springs, from all over the world, begging to be let in. Why do you think this graveyard is so big? Now tell me...who taught you how to escape? Those who are bound to Sterling Springs cannot leave.”

Sarah spoke up. “I found it in a book.”

“A book?” the Groundskeeper asked.

“A book about Atlantis,” she continued. “It’s about how the people exist today, even though the ocean covers them up. They have a magical hourglass that repeats years over and over so they live in a...*stasis*...of time and memories. The only way to leave and collect new stories is through a portal, and you have to trick it, set up a decoy so you can travel outside in spirit form, and...”

The Groundskeeper stopped her. “Where did you buy such a book? Surely not in town. The Timekeeper would never allow it.”

“From a peddler woman with eyes like frost and hair long and black. She told me I should read it. That’s where I got the idea.”

The Groundskeeper turned to his three new friends. “You need something more than dirt from a grave to thwart the Timekeeper. You need dirt from a grave that *defies* time. And the only way to find magic is by using magic. I will show you where you can get what you seek. It’s not far, but you had better go now. Autumn is almost at an end.”

The Groundskeeper rummaged around in a desk drawer, and then handed Chris an empty glass vial.

“Take this vial and follow the path to the heart of the cemetery. You will come to a withered tree. Climb the tree to the top. This is the home of a grave-faerie. It will guide you to what you seek. But don’t be afraid. The spirit is my friend and keeps me company on long digs. It will not harm you.”

Chris obeyed the Groundskeeper’s words. He trotted outside and down the path. After a few minutes, he came to the tree hidden behind a concrete wall. Hopping over the squat barrier, he felt the aged wood with his fingertips, marveling at the strange etchings and pictures and poems. He even read a few lines. And then he climbed up the tree and sat looking at the beautiful countryside.

The grave-faerie soon bobbed around him. It radiated in green and purple hues. He watched it for some time, amazed at such a strange and wonderful creature. Then it flew away.

Chris climbed down and followed.

He traveled through the graveyard, hoping he wouldn’t see a ghoul or specter fleeing to a secret underground lair. On and on he walked, following the light, until the grave-faerie hovered over a bare plot of ground. There were no stones, no graves, nothing.

Chris thought he hadn’t followed the Groundskeeper’s directions properly. He thought hard and decided he did everything right. So, with glass vial in hand, he scooped up some dirt and capped it.

He thanked the grave-faerie kindly, wondering if it understood him, and ran back the way he had come, back to the Groundskeeper’s home.

And as Chris ran back to his friends, he never realized that the grave-faerie had used up the last of its magic. It nestled down in the hole Chris had dug, pulled a leaf over its body, and died. And when it stepped through the ancient Atlantean portal and was back home, all the other spirits rushed over to hear of new stories and marvel at new adventures.

Chris's friends were waiting for him when he returned.

"Did you get what you need?" the Groundskeeper asked.

"Yes. The grave-faerie showed me where to dig."

"It is the last of its kind in a world of dying magic." A trace of sadness crossed the Groundskeeper's face. Then it went away and he smiled and led the three kids outside. "Now, my friends, your quest leads to the traveling carnival, in the west. To the Fatekeeper. She will help you find what you need. You must travel quickly! Your displacement sands will soon run dry!"

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They all bade goodbye to their new friend, the Groundskeeper.

And he bade goodbye to them.

And just like a dream, they were gone.

And far away, the sands of their hourglasses finally stopped. The Timekeeper descended from the old clock and ticked through the countryside. It searched for three May flowers.

But first, one November blossom.

## Chapter 2. The Carnival and the Shadow

The three kids traveled for two hours before seeing the carnival fires glow throughout the valley. The wind echoed softly through the trees and numbed their faces. With cold fingers, they buttoned up their coats, dreaming of how fun it would be to join such a splendid show, to travel all over the world, to the sunken city of Venice, or the ancient temples on Mount Olympus, or even the fabled continent of Atlantis.

They heard laughter swell like a thunderstorm.

They inhaled cotton candy and peppermint taffy.

And they listened to lutes and dulcimers play haunting melodies, tapping their feet to the hypnotic scales, watching from afar as the belly dancers weaved their exotic craft within the shadows. Silver glimmered in their hair and over their linen-draped bodies.

Soon they were racing down the hill, as fast as they could, toward the warm fires and laughter of the traveling show.

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They halted just outside the edge of the flames and strolled cautiously into the light. The air was sick and sweet at the same time: sulfur and perfume, ash and candy. Crowds of performers and workers passed around mugs of ale. They glanced at the youngsters with smiles and hugged the kids tenderly, inviting them to join in the festivities.

The kids sat on the cold ground and were each handed a drink. The liquid was warm to the touch and sweet to the taste. Sarah drank and watched a trio perform their dance. Silver chains dangled and slapped around the dancers' waists and thighs like the ticking of a dozen clocks.

She wanted to dance with them.

Soon, the music ascended an octave, gaining in speed. The dancers' hips gyrated and swayed with the notes. The flames licked the heavens and burned bright green. And before she knew what was happening, she was dancing along with the women, hand in hand, laughing and drinking the green liquid.

The two boys joined her.

Chris's vision shifted from the green flames to the dancer, who held his hand and kissed him on the cheek. He arched his arms high over his head and floated above the red clouds, like a midnight dove, weightless and free. Sarah swam through an ocean and breathed the droplets as if she had gills, circling the multicolored fish that bobbed and weaved around her. Mitch tobogganed down a mountain of fudge, his scarf billowing out behind him, down and down the peak overflowing with peppermint ice-cream glaciers.

Soon they were curled up next to the fire, and dreaming.

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The fire was gone when they awoke.

An old woman sat next to them. She was gray-haired and wore a purple gown. Her eyes were December.

Mitch gave a little squeak.

Chris rubbed his eyes, doubting his vision.

"Are you the Fatekeeper?" Sarah asked.

"Yes, I am."

"We've come to find you."

"And now you have found me. Come, my friends. It is cold out." She strolled to a wagon and threw back the cloth door. "Please, come in and have a seat."

They entered and sat on a small couch, waiting.

The Fatekeeper set a circular table in front of them. In the center was a black needle the thickness of a pencil lead. She grabbed a glass sphere and positioned it on the needle. With one triumphant spin, the glass ball was set in rotation, perfectly balanced.

Her dead eyes flared with green light.

“You’re being tracked by something.” She concentrated hard. “It’s Time. Look and see for yourselves.”

The three kids leaned closer.

A green mist melted and bounced inside the sphere. Out of the haze, they saw their friend, the Groundskeeper. And out of the mist emerged another shape, a very dark shape, right behind him.

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The Groundskeeper felt the dark presence.

He whirled around just in time to see a cloaked figure descend from the old tree. It glided toward him and sat perched on top of a gravestone.

The Groundskeeper stuck his shovel in the ground and leaned against it. “It’s been a long while.”

“Yes, my friend,” the Timekeeper said. “Perhaps too long. I’ve forgotten about you, all alone up in these hills, caring for the dead. It’s a mistake I’ll soon remedy.”

The Timekeeper extracted an hourglass from its pocket.

“These are your sands,” the Shadow said. “See how they filter through, grain by grain? How would you like me to tip it over? How would you like to wake up tomorrow a day younger? A year? Ten years? I can do that for you. All you have to do is tell me where they are.”

The Groundskeeper laughed. "Can't find them, eh? Surely you must know. You're the Timekeeper."

"Your sands will soon run dry, my friend. Tell me where they are and you can run in summer again, like the others in Sterling Springs. All you have to do is tell me who is hiding them."

"Memories are meant to die. They're designed that way. I have no inclination to become a young man again. No, I don't want it. My time here is at an end."

"Don't think you can get out of it that easy."

The Shadow held the hourglass to its hidden face. It counted the grains aloud:  
"Five...four...three...two and..."

The Timekeeper tipped the glass on its side.

One grain remained.

The Groundskeeper gasped. He threw his shovel and ran, trying to outrun the Timekeeper. He dodged amongst the gravestones and shuffled across the wet grass. But the last of November's heat seeped from his body. He fell over and looked up at the dark sky, at the harvest moon, at everything, completely motionless.

Dead leaves blew over his body.

The Timekeeper leaned over him. "There you shall remain in life for the rest of your death. There you shall gaze at the heavens as each day passes, as each season goes by. Soon, the ground will welcome you into its grave, inch by inch. Grain by grain. And there you'll breathe dirt forever, amongst the worms and rotting corpses."

A single teardrop formed in the Groundskeeper's eye.

The Timekeeper continued: “This is your tree, is it not? It represents your life, from the roots all the way up to the top. Strong roots. But you have never gone away from this place, have you? You have remained in this cell of gravestones and ghosts with only dying magic and poetic words from forgotten books to keep you company. Why is that? Have you been waiting? Hoping one day I would take pity and let you in?”

The Timekeeper glided up the slender hill and over the wall protecting the enchanted tree, past the rings of faerie dust and decaying spells. With a flash of black fire, it inserted the hourglass into the aged wood. And there it remained, tipped on its side, for all to see.

The Timekeeper walked back to the fallen Groundskeeper. “No one may pull that hourglass out. No one but yourself. Not even me! Good luck, my friend. You should have taken my offer.”

It was then that the Timekeeper saw the tiny grave-faerie frozen to the ground, right next to the Groundskeeper. And for the first time in a long time, it wondered about something beyond its ability to rationalize.

*A grave that defies time...*

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The glass ball turned black.

The three kids wept.

“I’m sorry,” the Fatekeeper whispered. “But he gave his death to save all three of you. It wasn’t in vain.” She stood and motioned out the window, toward the woods. “Now you must travel toward the Hollow Woods, and then beyond, to the Lake of Mirrors. This will help you on your journey.” She handed Sarah a compass. “It will guide you through the woods, to death’s door. Keep the arrow north, at twelve o’clock, for the time that once was and what may be again.

Now you must go. Quickly! Run toward summer! Run toward autumn! But beware...death lurks in both directions. Even under a baby's crib!"

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The three kids thanked her, sadly.

And they rode off into the night.

And the Fatekeeper watched over them through her glass ball.

And far away, the Timekeeper loomed over the fallen Groundskeeper. It felt the kids' presence bear down on its cold heart. But it also felt something else. Something watching over them, guiding them, protecting them.

And then it knew.

The traveling witch.

The one who walks in winter.

### Chapter 3. Visions in the Morning Night

They entered the Hollow Woods.

The night sounds haunted their thoughts and moisture condensed in quiet speech and breath. The oak and elm reached toward the barren sky. Leaves spiraled through the evening air, red-appled birds. Ivy dripped along the ground, mint colored with blue, palmated veins. The glossy bulbs watched them pass, breathing through kidney-shaped leaves that swayed in the wind.

Overhead, the sun rose in the west.

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A mist encompassed the Fatekeeper's sphere.

Her enchanted vision left the three kids temporarily as she ran her fingers over the warm glass. She tried to pinpoint where the strange beacon was coming from, a ticking sound that rose with the sun.

She searched the mist and fluorescence, traveling like the wind through the countryside, past the abyss of woods and lakes, rivers and thickets, past the hills and deep valleys, seeing only death under her sightless stare.

She searched for the pulse that rose and sank like a piece of chamber music echoing through fog and time.

On and on, she looked, following the notes across the dark summits and plateaus.

Her eyes blazed emerald with longing.

Her mind soon wrapped around flamboyant tents and wagons and she inhaled the odor of candy and carnival animals. She passed them all and loomed over a wagon. Then she was in the wagon. A green glow bounced off an aged face.

She was looking within herself.

And the music she followed was the music of her own heart, a dissonant and haunting tune, mourning the loss of time and death, abandoned years ago for a talent she no longer wanted.

And then the Timekeeper had her.

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The compass needle spun in circles, jerking Sarah's arm.

"What's happening?" Mitch asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "The compass is acting strange."

Mitch grabbed the compass and watched the needle spin. Confused, he handed it back and saw a squat little man sitting on a tree branch, legs dangling. His clothes were apple green.

“Hello,” Mitch said.

“Hello yourself.”

“I hope we aren’t disturbing you.”

“Why yes, you are,” he replied. “You’ve been stomping and bashing and smashing around these woods for the past two hours! Don’t you know the woods are haunted and won’t let you through unless you have a guide?”

“Yes, we know,” Sarah answered. “The Fatekeeper gave us this.”

The little man jumped off the branch and grabbed the compass. He held it up in the air, tapped the glass and turned, then tapped and turned again, repeating the process and gaining in speed.

The little fellow grew dizzy and fell over.

“Your compass is broken,” he said. “Pity. It sure was a nice one, too.” He stood up and handed the compass back. “So, the Fatekeeper sent you here? Let me guess...to eat ice cream? No, hot fudge sundaes? No! Strawberry and vanilla pudding with hot apple cider and cinnamon sticks! Mmmmmm! My favorite.” He turned to Mitch. “I bet you like snoodleberry and whippletart?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch began. “I never...”

“They’re my favorite,” he said, slipping his hand inside of Mitch’s fingers. “You should come over my house. Here, follow me. I’m called the Forestkeeper.”

They followed the Forestkeeper deeper into the woods.

The compass needle raced in circles.

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The Timekeeper threw the glass orb in the air.

It spun, black as night, and just before it hit the floor, the Shadow caught it with an extended foot. “I have to be more careful,” The Timekeeper groaned, wiping imaginary beads of salt from its brow. It tucked the orb under its arm. “You almost fooled me with this, old witch. I commend you. Now, tell me...how does it feel to see death every time you look into this? Was this sight a fair trade for your eyes all those years ago?”

The Fatekeeper didn't respond.

“Don't be angry with me. You've spent years showing people when their hearts will stop. It was time to taste your own bitterness. Now, if you'll help me, I'll give this back to you.”

The Fatekeeper still didn't respond.

“Could it be that you don't want it back? How interesting. Remember, death trembles in only one direction, like the arrow of a compass. I am its only measure. But it doesn't have to be like this. I could give you the power to see in every direction. You would like that, wouldn't you? A direction for each day of the year? You could tell people about romance, who they'll marry, or how many children they'll have. You could tell them everything they'll ever want to hear. Not just the time of their demise.”

The Fatekeeper's lips trembled.

The Timekeeper loomed over the frail woman. “I see the place that makes tears doesn't work anymore. Was that taken from you, too? How would you like that back as well? To shed tears of joy and sorrow with your visions?”

The Fatekeeper cried out in anguish.

“I know where they’re going,” the Shadow continued. “I don’t need you to tell me. They’re traveling to the Dreamkeeper. You were guiding them. No doubt, they are lost, by now. But still, my offer stands. Help me and I will help you.”

“They’ll pass the test,” the Fatekeeper hissed.

“No, they won’t. They will see what it’s like to grow old, to see the world crumble and die. And they won’t like it! They’ll run back to me. They’ll plead to grow young, like everyone else! Not to ponder directions. Yes, they will come to me and I will give them what they want. I will give them back their fading youth. I will turn their hourglasses over so they can once again breathe the spring air.”

The Fatekeeper laughed. “What do you know about feelings? All you know is clockwork. How to count the seconds in a minute. The minutes in an hour. The hours in a year. You know nothing. You are nothing. You exist because we allow you to exist. We are born without the knowledge of time. As we grow old, we fight against the acceptance of our mortality. We fight against you... a materialization in our system of order. You don’t breathe air, you breathe erosion. Your heart is the ticking of gears. Your blood is oil. Your face consists of numerals. You exist to make us aware of our impending death. That’s all.”

And the Timekeeper heard the ticking of its own heart.

And it knew what was said was true.

And it smashed the ball on the floor, in rage. Shards scattered and a green mist seethed and evaporated through the ceiling.

The Fatekeeper gasped. She saw the top of the wagon, the sky, the clouds. Then everything was gone, lost forever.

“Now,” the Timekeeper said, “you have no place in this carnival. You will be blind and lost in this ravine, with only the grass and worms to feed upon like a dirty animal. You will be alone with only your memories of all those you have hurt.”

The Timekeeper pulled back the cloth door and walked out, noticing high above, the green mist drifting toward the horizon like an escaped dream.

The Timekeeper followed.

#### Chapter 4. A Gold Coin

The sun was high in the sky by the time they came upon the Forestkeeper’s home. They halted in front of a mountain with a huge tree on top, a hollow silver tree that echoed in the wind. With a little shake of the Forestkeeper’s hand, the ivy vines parted, revealing a secret passage that led deep inside.

They parked their bikes and followed their new friend into the darkness, marveling at the stalactites dipping from the ceiling like January icicles. Deeper and deeper they walked, lanterns guiding their way, until they came to a door. The Forestkeeper opened it, revealing a room chiseled into the metamorphic rock.

The room looked just like the forest outside. The floor was soft moss, and in each of the four corners were trees planted in clay pots, branches drooping with berries that smelled of wintergreen.

They sat down at a table molded out of marble. The Forestkeeper poured them each a cup of water from a decanter and placed a plate of gingerbread cookies on the table, close to Mitch.

“Spring water,” the Forestkeeper said. “There’s a fresh creek that flows through my closet.” He kicked the bottom of a nearby door and it swung open, revealing a waterfall that splashed down into the depths of the mountain. “So, where are you kids traveling?”

“We’re traveling to the Hall of Mirrors,” Mitch answered.

“So,” the Forestkeeper said, thumbing a gold coin in the air, “are you seeking the wisdom of the Dreamkeeper?”

“Yes,” Mitch said. “Do you know the Dreamkeeper?”

“I saw her once, in a dream, walking in the forest. She was extremely beautiful, black hair, eyes white as snow.”

“That’s who gave me the book!” Sarah exclaimed.

The Forestkeeper laughed. “Yes. She told me you were coming. That I had to help you. And that’s what I’m here to do! But just remember one thing. The path of dreams is the first step to the world of the dead. There are many names for the Dreamkeeper—the Reaper, the Harvester. Be very careful about what she will show you. But if you truly believe in your quest, you will have no problems.” He threw the coin up in the air for the fifth time. It spun, a blurred halo of gold, and landed in his palm. “Heads. That’s five in a row. What great luck!”

Then Sarah’s shirt pocket began to glow. She didn’t realize it at first, until she noticed Mitch’s eyes widen. Reaching inside, reluctantly, she pulled out the compass. An amber mist swirled in threads, like smoke from a candle. The needle stopped and pointed toward the door, then toward Chris, then the Forestkeeper.

“I’m sorry,” the Forestkeeper said, grabbing the compass. “It seems the Fatekeeper has lost her sight. Too bad. Hopefully she can find peace, wherever she is.”

He handed the compass back.

“Why are you still so young?” Mitch asked. “You look like you are as old as us.”

“That’s because, my friend, I’m a sprite of the forest, a guardian of this land. Time doesn’t influence my actions. I don’t look forward to summer, or back to winter. I don’t think about tomorrow. That causes wrinkles—too much thought. I am free to run in spring for as long as I wish.”

The Forestkeeper laughed and threw the coin in the air. Just as he was about to catch it, it bounced off his finger and landed on the table. The coin rolled and hit Mitch’s mug of water, stopping on its edge.

“Something’s wrong,” the Forestkeeper said, picking up the coin.

“It’s the Timekeeper,” Sarah whispered, holding her compass. “It’s followed the Fatekeeper’s sight!”

The three kids jumped up from their chairs and backed away from the door.

The Forestkeeper held his hands high up in the air, thumbs touching, fingers wiggling. He inhaled deeply and stood on his tiptoes. The potted plants began to grow from all four corners of the room. The clay pots broke and large brown roots unfolded, as if awakening from a deep slumber, shattering pieces everywhere. The roots spread across the floor, entwining around the table, pushing the marble with incredible strength.

The trees deposited the heavy table in front of the door, blocking the entrance.

“That should do it,” the Forestkeeper said. “There’s a secret passage behind the waterfall,” he continued, opening the closet door. “It leads to a trail outside. Follow me.”

“What about our bikes?” Mitch asked, peering into the closet.

“You’ll have to leave them for now. I’m sorry. We don’t have much time.”

The Forestkeeper wiggled his fingers again and a green vine swooped out of the darkness and wrapped around his body. Three more vines followed and grabbed the kids, lifting them gently down into the lair.

On all sides, they heard the roar of the waterfall as they plummeted down through the misted chamber. Soon, their feet struck ground. Sarah held the glowing compass over her head, lighting the chamber. They stood on a white bridge that arched over a black pool. The bridge led through the waterfall and into the darkness beyond. They ran through and climbed a long staircase that led out into the bright sunshine.

“This is the heart of the woods,” the Forestkeeper said. He pulled out a silver flute and blew three piercing notes. A robin swooped down and landed on his hand. “This bird will guide you to the Dreamkeeper’s lair.”

“Aren’t you going to come with us?” Mitch asked.

“No. I will create a diversion. It’ll slow the Timekeeper down. Take this, my friend. It will help you overcome your greatest challenge.”

The Forestkeeper handed Mitch a gold coin.

“But anyone who’s fought the Timekeeper has failed!” Mitch said. “I don’t want to lose another friend! Please! Come with us.”

The Forestkeeper rested his little hand on Mitch’s shoulder. “Don’t grieve over what’s to come. Everything is inevitable. Have a good journey. And don’t look back.”

The Forestkeeper held his hand up and the bird launched high in the air.

The three kids followed the beautiful bird through the woods as the trail closed in behind them.

The Timekeeper emerged from the cave and glided through the forest. It stopped in front of the Forestkeeper, who sat perched on the bow of a tree, biting into an apple.

“Want a bite?” the sprite asked. “It’s quite good.”

“I don’t eat fruit with worms in it,” the Shadow replied.

“Worms?” he laughed. “Why there are no…”

A huge black worm wiggled out of the apple’s core.

The Forestkeeper threw the apple and wiped off his hands.

“It seems your luck has just run out,” the Timekeeper said. “Have you ever eaten of a fruit that had a worm in it?”

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

The Timekeeper picked up the apple. “Yes, it does. It means everything! Now when you pluck a fruit, you’ll rationalize whether or not it has a worm in the center. Or maybe if all of them are infested. It will force you to reason, to pick a better fruit. This will alter your reality, and your luck will perish. Now, tell me…which direction did they go? One o’clock? Two? Five? Tell me and I will give you back your luck by leaving these woods forever.”

“I will not tell,” the Forestkeeper answered. “But there are an infinite amount of possibilities. Choose one, and maybe you’ll have good fortune!”

“Enough of these games!” The Timekeeper clenched the fruit, and threads of smoke engulfed the stem and pulp. “Your power doesn’t work on me! I have altered your luck by entering your forest. Now we dwell in repetition and reality. Your luck is now clockwork. Go ahead and pick another fruit off the tree. See if this transformation has not yet begun!”

The sprite regarded the fruits hanging off the branches.

“See,” the Timekeeper hissed. “Have you ever thought about which fruit to choose? Or was it instinctual?”

The Forestkeeper plucked a fruit and held it in his hands, turning it repeatedly. “This is funny,” he said, laughing a merry laugh. “You can’t trick me!” And he bit into the fruit. But it was ripe, a taste he was not accustomed to.

“And now, my friend,” the Shadow said, “you’ll wonder whether or not each fruit will be ripe, and you’ll have to think about that, too.”

“Please! Stop it!” the Forestkeeper cried.

The tree branch he was sitting on broke and he fell to the ground, breaking both arms and both legs with sharp cracks. All around, the forest changed. The trees turned to deep reds and oranges. Huge pale worms wiggled out of the soil and danced in the rotting foliage, basking in the moistness of the dying land.

The Timekeeper knelt over the wounded sprite and put one cold hand on his forehead. “I am sorry, but autumn has caught up with you, my friend. Do not fear. It was meant to be.”

The Timekeeper took the sprite’s coin and thumbed it up in the air. “Heads or tails,” it said, grabbing it in mid-flight. “If you can guess which one it is, you will remain in spring. But if not, you’ll perish with your forest. It’s up to you. Choose your fate.”

The Timekeeper inserted the coin into the Forestkeeper’s mouth, placing it on his tongue, then it chose a logical path and disappeared into the woods.

#

“What’s wrong with it?” Chris said, kneeling next to Sarah. She was on her knees, holding the robin in her hand. It had fallen out of the sky and toppled to the rocky slope.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It just fell.”

The bird went cold in her hands.

“It’s dead,” she said, sobbing. “The bird is dead.”

Mitch and Chris helped Sarah bury the bird that had helped them through the woods and up the mountain cliff. They nestled its body in a limestone hole and put rocks over it. Then they all said their goodbyes.

Behind them, the woods changed from lush greens to bright reds.

“The Forestkeeper has failed,” Mitch said, sadly.

They continued down the mountain pass and came to a lake with a rowboat. The water was glass. Mist swirled underneath in lavender and emerald. In the center was an island with a single purple spire that twisted toward the heavens. Everything was still and hushed.

They were finally at the Dreamkeeper’s lair.

## Chapter 5. The Dreamkeeper

Chris hopped out of the little rowboat and tied it to a peg. Then he helped Mitch and Sarah out and they set out on foot, slicing through the dense fog.

Soon, they were lost, groping and feeling their way through the mist. They weren’t aware of walking, only weaving amongst the clouds, feeling the vapors stick to their skin, the prickly goose bumps rising on their arms, the cold air forcing breath out in gasps.

Then their feet struck ground and the mist dissipated.

They were at the front door. It creaked open and light splashed on their faces.

Inside the room was glass. Mirrors on all four walls. The floor and ceiling were covered with ice. Rows of bookshelves spread in every direction like a maze. In the center was a woman

with dark hair and a long black dress. Her skin sparkled silver in the moonlight. She sat on a glass chair and read a book.

They halted in front of her.

“And the three kids came to the Dreamkeeper,” she said, “on the morning of the sun’s ascent in the west.”

She flipped a page, glanced up. Her eyes were white. “You’ve made it,” she said to them, “but you still have to pass the Test of Mirrors. Only then can you break the spell of your hometown by reversing the reversal of time.”

She motioned toward the far wall. It shifted and turned into three doors.

She read from her book: *Three doors awaited them...*

*One for the Child of Wisdom.*

*One for the Child of Travel.*

*One for the Child of Mirth.*

And the Dreamkeeper motioned for them to go inside, and one by one, they did, not knowing what was ahead.

#

Leaves crunched under Chris’s feet.

He was in the lonely graveyard.

The Groundskeeper stared up at the stars. He didn’t move. A teardrop had frozen to the side of his face.

Chris knelt down.

A grave that defies time? he thought. What do I do? How can I save him?

#

Sarah stood before a vacant carnival.

She walked up to the last remaining wagon and withdrew the curtain.

The Fatekeeper sat on the floor, head in her hands. The frail woman glanced around the spherical room. On the floor was the shattered orb.

“I can’t see,” the witch whispered. “I need to travel.”

Sarah knelt down and put her hand on the fortuneteller’s shoulder. How can I help her? she thought.

#

Mitch pushed a branch out of his way.

He was in the dying forest.

The Forestkeeper was on the ground. His legs and arms were bent at strange angles, and the forest was full of bright autumn colors.

How can I help him? he thought, kneeling down next to his friend. Why doesn’t he say something?

#

The Timekeeper stepped through the doorway and slipped on the ice and fell. The sound of a thousand clock springs chimed in the hall, receded.

“Watch your step,” the Dreamkeeper said. “Time doesn’t work properly here.”

“So I noticed.” The Timekeeper stood and walked to the Dreamkeeper. “Where are they?”

“Leave them be,” she warned. “They don’t need your offer.”

“Don’t tell me what they need. They are just too young to realize. Now, I need them back in town so all can benefit from my power.”

The Dreamkeeper put down her book. “You are a fool. You know nothing of life or death. You have no soul, and therefore, no capacity to dream.”

“What have dreams done for anyone, besides give false hope? No, they will live in despair and disappointment and right before the end is near, wish it all back. Correct their mistakes. Get it perfect.”

“Can’t you see how you’ve already failed? That they’ve already turned you away? They have won. Now they just have to realize it for themselves.”

And just then, a winter wind blew from the lake and rocketed through the doorway and around the Dreamkeeper. She smiled demurely and closed her book. “Just a reminder, in case they get lost.” It blasted down the Hall of Mirrors and split into three tendrils. One for each room.

#

The wind sliced against Chris’s face.

He peered up at the trees and watched the remaining leaves fall. He laughed and held his hands up to the heavens, smelled the familiar aroma of wet leaves and grass and the aged smell of wood and all the fragrances of a thousand graveyards. He was in the eye of a hurricane, the world speeding around him. He was in control like a sorcerer blasting the countryside with ancient invocations.

Suddenly, the wind died and all the leaves went motionless.

Now that’s how one should live! Chris thought. Powerful and poetic!

And then he had an idea.

He crept up the hill, over to the aged tree, and extracted the hourglass from its tree-grave. He pulled out the glass vial from his pocket and dumped the dirt inside.

This should give him enough time to put things right, Chris thought.

Crossing his fingers, he tipped the hourglass upright.

Sand flowed through the concave tributary, once again.

Chris ran back and knelt down next to his fallen friend.

The Groundskeeper blinked. "Chris," he said through parched lips. "You've come back?"

"I've come back to save you. I've given you more time. See? The hourglass has some grains left."

"My shovel," the Groundskeeper said. "Start digging."

"But, I have your hourglass. The Timekeeper made it for you. You can turn it over and become young again!"

"No, Chris."

"No? But why?"

"Because everything that begins must have an end." He smiled sadly. "Life is about experiences. About making mistakes and living passionately. About making friends and falling in love. It's about finding peace in the end. I want my ending to be right, like in a story. I want you to see that all who come here get a proper ending. Promise me?"

Chris nodded, slowly.

"Thank you. And now I will live my last few minutes looking up at the autumn sky." The Groundskeeper's brow creased in deep thought for a moment. "Funny. The Timekeeper told me no one could pull the hourglass out, except..." He trailed off.

"Except who?" Chris asked.

And then the Groundskeeper knew.

But December had caressed his aged heart. Vacant eyes stared up at the moon as his last breath dissipated up to the heavens and into the void beyond.

Chris wept at the passing of his friend. But he kept his promise. He dug the old man his grave and lifted him into the dark hole. He even nestled the hourglass in his hands. He climbed out of the grave and noticed something peculiar at the top of the hill.

A single flower sprouted out of the ancient tree.

#

Sarah felt the wind caress her shoulders.

She shivered and knelt down close to the frail woman. The Fatekeeper's eyes didn't glow anymore. Nothing but dark pools stared back at Sarah. And sadness. Suddenly the wind gusted cool and sharp and shards of glass kicked up in the air like a snow globe.

"Look!" Sarah said. "It looks like December morning!"

"I can't see anything," said the Timekeeper. "My vision was taken."

"Try," Sarah pleaded. "Maybe if you just try."

The Fatekeeper closed her eyes and concentrated hard.

Soon, a green glow crept over the glass shards and lit the room like a small sun. The emanation came from Sarah's pocket.

Of course! Sarah thought. There must be a little bit of magic left.

Sarah pulled out the glowing compass and handed it to the Fatekeeper. "Here. It has some of your magic in it. But the needle only points in one direction."

"North," the Fatekeeper stated, taking the compass. "No matter where you go in life, there will always be one direction in the end."

The Fatekeeper stood.

“Where are you going?” Sarah asked.

“I have a long journey,” she said. “The final journey. It’s a road I’ve traveled close my whole life, into winter and beyond. Now is the time I must see it to the end. No more cheating. Everything I own is now yours. But you must hurry! The traveling show is miles away. You must catch summer, my dear.” She smiled for the first time and looked younger and prettier. “There is a whole beautiful world out there. Go see some of it.” And then she was out the door.

Sarah walked outside and watched the old woman shuffle down the path. Suddenly she disappeared in a wisp of green mist, like a ghost, and was gone.

#

Mitch buttoned up his jacket from the autumn cold.

The large worms crawled toward the fallen Forestkeeper. They were vicious worms, large and white, with rows of teeth spiraling down their dark throat cavities. But they were slow. Something Mitch put to his advantage.

At first, he picked up rocks and knocked them away. He had a good arm. Mitch’s parents had a camp near a lake, so he spent his summers skipping rocks and playing catch with his dad. He stopped a few of the worms dead in their tracks, but more tunneled out of the earth—violent and frenzied.

“Well, if you’re not going to say anything,” he said to the Forestkeeper, “then I’ll just have to save you myself. They’ll keep attacking unless we move.”

Mitch grabbed the motionless sprite by his jacket and pulled him away from the burrowing worms, away from the ripe foliage and rotting leaves. He did it very carefully.

“There,” he said, after a few minutes, bringing his friend to a small beach. He knelt down and realized there was something in the Forestkeeper’s mouth. “So that’s why you couldn’t talk!” he said, pulling out the coin.

“Yes,” said the Forestkeeper. “A trick from the Timekeeper. Tell me, was it heads or tails?”

“Tails,” Mitch responded. “Why?”

“Interesting. I would have guessed heads.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It doesn’t matter, my friend. What you have to do now is help me. Don’t leave me here alone. I want a better death than this.”

“What can I do?” Mitch asked.

“The lake. Let me drift along the currents. Let my body succumb to the fate of the water. Not the logic of the grave.”

Mitch pulled the sprite into the lake. The water was cold and numbed Mitch in waves. The Forestkeeper floated on top like a piece of driftwood. A strong wind blew fiercely, trying to propel the sprite out amongst the waters. Mitch had to hold onto him with every ounce of strength. Soon the wind subsided.

“I want you to watch these woods, Mitch. Protect those who dwell here.” The Forestkeeper coughed. “And now I die. Hopefully the Ferryman will find me. He will want passage, no doubt. My coin, Mitch?”

Mitch handed over the lucky coin. He placed it in the Forestkeeper’s hand.

Mitch thought for a second. “I have the other coin you gave me!” he declared. “I can...”

The Forestkeeper stared up at the open sky. His little arms flapped in the strong current. Lifeless.

Mitch held the Forestkeeper for a long time and wept. When he was done, he placed the two coins over the Forestkeeper's eyes and finally let go of his friend.

The wind took the Forestkeeper far out on the horizon.

#

And far away, the three doorways in the Dreamkeeper's lair began to shift. Fog branched out in tendrils and blanketed the ice in the Hall of Mirrors as if a thousand fog-spirits were unleashed and haunted the barren wasteland.

"They have returned," the Dreamkeeper said to the Timekeeper. "I'm sorry, but you have lost. Not all want perfection in life."

The Timekeeper said nothing.

And from out of the first door, the Groundskeeper exited. "Am I dead?" he asked, wiping dirt from his clothes.

"Not yet, Chris," the Dreamkeeper said. "You are in the void between worlds." She took the hourglass from his hands, handed it back to the Timekeeper. "The path to the world of the dead," she continued, "is through the mist. Your last journey. You will not be alone anymore in this life. Do you have any regrets before autumn is at an end?"

"Plenty," Chris said. "And they are mine. I wouldn't trade them for the world!"

And out of the second door, the Fatekeeper emerged. "I made it!" she exclaimed. "The world is much colder here. I must be in the right place."

"You're in the right place, Sarah," the Dreamkeeper said, taking the compass. She cracked the glass open and released the remaining magic. Sarah's eyes burned in bright amber,

then became a normal green. “You know the direction,” the Dreamkeeper said. “Go now and walk in winter with your true sight once again.”

And finally, the Forestkeeper emerged. Soaking wet. He didn’t say anything, just smiled and placed two coins in the Dreamkeeper’s hand.

“Mitch, do you accept your life?” the Dreamkeeper asked.

“I do. Gladly.” He hugged his two friends who he hadn’t seen in ages. “But I missed my friends the most.”

“But wait!” the Timekeeper shouted. “You can come back with me! I will let you. I have one hourglass here even! Who wants it?”

But they didn’t hear.

“Going once!” the Timekeeper said. “Twice!”

They still didn’t hear.

“Three times! Four!”

The three ignored the Timekeeper.

And as they walked through the void between worlds, ignoring the Shadow’s pleas, they entered the realm of the dead. They laughed and chatted about faraway lands and exotic foods and books of poetry. Stories upon stories. A whole lifetime full. They realized that friends pursued their own lives and interests, but in the end, they always found a way to come back together.

And then they argued about whose stories were better.

## Epilogue

Mr. Ridgecomb ended his quite unusual tale.

The three kids clapped for at least a minute and then hugged him kindly and said their goodbyes. Mr. Ridgecomb walked them to the entryway. He opened the door just as a burst of wind rocketed through the streets and into the house, bringing with it the smell of jack-o'-lanterns and pine needles and moist leaves.

"I'm glad you liked the story," Mr. Ridgecomb said. "Now, hurry home! Your parents must be worried sick!"

"They might," Chris began, "but they know I'll be out late. Last year I was out until midnight. I was grounded for two weeks."

"Wait a minute," Mr. Ridgecomb said. "You're going out for more candy?"

"Of course!" Chris fitted his plastic teeth into his mouth and twirled his black cape around his body. "The night is still young for a vampire!"

Sarah slipped on her gypsy cap and linen shawl. She regarded Mr. Ridgecomb with pretty eyes. "Why don't you come with us? We have two more streets to hit before we go home. It'll be fun."

"You want me to *take* you trick-or-treating?"

"No, we want you to *come* trick-or-treating."

Mr. Ridgecomb laughed. "I couldn't do that. I'm too old!"

"How long has it been?" she asked.

"Well, let's see." He thought for a moment. "My goodness! Over sixty years!"

Sarah mouthed the word "sixty" in disbelief. She grabbed his hand. "That's too long! Come on!"

"I don't think so, Sarah."

“Your story is about living life to the fullest, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, let’s go!”

“But I don't have a costume. And I don’t walk too well these days.” He motioned to his cane.

“He could be one of my minions,” Mitch said with a grin. “Imps kind of hobble like that.” He fingered his pitchfork and thought of the possibilities.

“How about a zombie?” Sarah asked. “They don’t walk too well, either.”

But Chris already had Mr. Ridgecomb’s costume figured out. He held up a roll of toilet paper with a mischievous grin, and then began wrapping it around Mr. Ridgecomb’s waist.

“There,” he said when he was done. “The Mummy has awakened!”

Sarah laughed and pulled out her own toilet paper roll, hidden inside her bag. She wrapped up Mr. Ridgecomb legs. “You better not smoke your pipe,” she said. “You’ll go up in fire like a chimney!”

Finally, Mitch added his roll to the costume, wrapping it around each arm and his forehead. He handed Mr. Ridgecomb his cane and pointed to a mirror.

“That’s how old I feel,” Mr. Ridgecomb said and then laughed. “But not tonight. Let’s go, while we still have time left!”

#

The moon was high in the sky by the time they arrived at the last house. Since it was so late, most of the adults wanted to get rid of the extra candy, so they unloaded on them. Mitch pocketed handfuls and left trails like Hansel and Gretel. Sarah ended up using her hat because her bag was so full. And Chris used his black cape. Of course, it didn’t help that Mr. Ridgecomb

gave them all the candy he received, too. Most of the parents recognized him. The cane gave him away instantly. And his costume didn't hold up to much abuse, either. Half of it dragged on the street behind him.

Right before midnight, they found themselves back at Old McMurphy's clock.

"Did you have fun tonight Mr. Ridgecomb?" Chris asked.

"I did!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't change it for the world!" He sat down on a bench, out of breath. "I forgot how much fun it is to walk outside at this hour. The air is so crisp. I can feel it in my lungs like icicles."

A few other trick-or-treaters sprinted by.

The park grew quiet.

Mr. Ridgecomb listened to the kids talk about school, about science reports and what they were going to be for Halloween next year. Soon the minute and hour hands kissed and the soft echo-chime drifted through the streets.

Midnight had come.

Mr. Ridgecomb felt the chime ring in his chest, listened to it echo, farther and farther.

As if in answer, a ticking rose in its place, causing his heart to skip. He thought he was hearing things, but it came again. It was a sound he had never heard in all the years he sat in the park.

For a split second, he thought he saw something descend from the clock above, something silhouetted against the night sky. He shook his head in disbelief and then nudged Mitch, who nudged him back, albeit more gently. Mr. Ridgecomb pointed to where he saw movement, but Mitch didn't see.

Mr. Ridgecomb listened to them talk for some time. He stifled a yawn. It was getting late. Greta would have seen the note he left her, but still, it was after midnight, and she would no doubt worry.

He stood with the help of his cane and told his new friends to stop by for another story and hot chocolate the following weekend.

They all accepted, graciously.

#

And one by one, the kids hugged Mr. Ridgecomb.

And he hugged them back, lovingly.

And as Mr. Ridgecomb made his way back home, he realized how much he wanted to spend the rest of the night with his wife, reading a book in the warmth of his bed next to the woman he loved for fifty years.

Tonight was his last night. And he wanted his ending to be perfect.

The End

*(Originally published in Evil Jester Digest, Volume 1, 2012)*

