

“Running from Anubis”

by T.D. Smith

I.

As I walked down the paved path next to the river on Halloween night, a brisk and chilly wind tossed leaves up and down and all about. The trees swayed back and forth and their red and orange and yellow leaves fell down softly head over end, dropping gently with a lulling flutter to the ground like feathers.

I clutched the rope loop of my dog's leash that was connected to her harness. She was far too energetic for 7 o' clock in the evening, after the sun had already set and darkness fallen. She pulled me this way and that with a strong tug so that she could sniff this flower, smell that rabbit's trail, drop down and attempt to rub her back all over some foul-smelling, decaying animal matter matted in the tall grass. She would cut me off when she darted to each spot ripe for her inspection, and many times I would nearly tumble.

Such was our walk that night as I frustratedly set out to work some energy out of her, and get some fresh air for myself. I half-tumbled and caught myself repeatedly, not able to remedy this obstruction to our progress or prevent it due to her coat's coloring, being both dark and brown like the night, and her orange-red brindle matching that of the fall scenery, she was quite camouflaged against it as the Earth swiftly moved and the light dimmed in the growing night.

Not many trick-or-treaters had come by. Two or three assorted ghosts and ghouls dropped in, an assortment of elementary and middle, at times escorted by high school aged kids, siblings by the looks of them, from some house far down the street just before dusk around 6 o' clock.

Another hour had turned no one up other than a toddler dressed as a pumpkin and her young parents, the mother with her face painted like a skeleton who was quite showing off her holiday spirit, while the father wore merely a fluorescent yellow hoodie (so they could be seen in the dark when cars came upon them) and jeans. Exasperated and tired of my dog's whining desire to be in the outdoors and walking, I turned off my front porch light and locked my door, then, harnessing up the pooch, departed my property, making a v-line for the wooded trail.

It was a shame really. I remembered my childhood neighborhood, (which I now lived in, having inherited the house from my mostly deceased family) booming on Halloween night when I was a child. We would take pillow cases with us, and go out into the night, without adult supervision, and my friends, brothers, and I would not return until those pillow cases were filled to the brim with candy. I would be sorely, sourly disappointed if my candy supply did not last me until my birthday in June. My brothers would quarrel over the types of candy they or I did or did not get; it was a difficult evening full of sibling strife when one of us caught the other stealing a coveted treat from the other's stash.

By contrast, there was hardly even a trickle of trick-or-treaters on the streets of that very same neighborhood on Halloween night anymore. For whatever reason, or combination thereof, times were changing and trick-or-treating was not as popular among the children (and perhaps more so their *parents*) and you simply did not have the wandering hordes of children dressed in a variety of expressive costumes, some self-made and creative, others store bought and cookie-cutter. All of them were fun.

As of late, “trunk or treat” had become more prevalent in my town, much to my personal disdain. In this venture, parents would fill the trunks of several cars full of candy, an alluring spectacle to most children, then park said cars in a parking lot, typically that of a church. Then for a couple of hours, at most, the children would walk between cars, supervised and manned by their parents, and get a bunch of treats to stock their plastic jack-o-lanterns.

This cheap imitation, this sterilized-for-your-protection, brief, overly simplified bastardization of the real, genuine trick-or-treating, lacked, in my opinion, the all-inclusiveness of everyone in the community, excitement it held for kids, who would anticipate the event for over a month, having something to look forward to that broke up the drudgery and monotony of school and routine. The very soul of Halloween itself was suffering, and in danger of being lost, not to mention the fact that “trunk-or-treat” did not include the vital walking exercise component that classic trick-or-treat did, and did nothing to combat the childhood obesity and diabetes epidemic. That matter aside, perhaps the more important aspect was the peril in which the spirit of Halloween had found itself.

I reflected on this last thought. The spirit of Halloween.

Presently, my dog reached a state of general (if sporadic!) calm and ceased tugging so incessantly. While still prowling and sniffing everything she could at inconvenient intervals, she now did so in a comfortable, relaxed trot, the stakes being lower for her now that she was and had been outside for quite some time, and had burned off much of her excess battery life. We walked with ease now and, closing my eyes and sniffing the cool air and its scents of falling Autumn foliage, whilst simultaneously listening to the trickling and pattering of the brook to the left and down a bank from the path, I began to feel myself relax and calm.

“The spirit of Halloween,” I spoke aloud to myself. What did it mean?

Well, All Hallows Eve began as a day that, knowing the darker days were nigh, and the earth would be in shadows for a longer part of each day than it would see light, the ancient people of the old country would gather together and wear frightening costumes to scare and ward off evil spirits who thrive in the night.

Suddenly, a spooky thought arose in my mind.

What if they were right?

What if they really did frighten the frighteners and put to flight evil spirits by dressing up in costume and dancing and partying together, ages ago?

And if so, had the trend continued throughout the ages, continued on unknowingly by the masses who celebrated Halloween each fleeting year? With the relevance and prevalence of Halloween diminishing more so with each passing October, who and what was holding those spirits at bay now? Had the Puritanical tirade on the part of so many prominent religious figures against the evils of such a holiday, had the grand, golden crusade to drive out the malicious spirits that allegedly pagan festivities harbored and festered failed, and coupled with the secular tendency to avoid offending and upsetting by any length or measure in fact, in irony, spurned the spirits on, *welcoming* them, even?

Had a beehive of stirring supernatural forces unwittingly, unintentionally been kicked?

What dark forces indeed were arising as a result of lack of trick-or-treaters and Halloween merrymaking? What if they had *already* done so, arising in the middle of some cold, dark, night, easily overcoming their bonds, weak and shoddy and brittle from years of malnourishment of Halloween bliss?

With this creepy concept fluttering about my brain and flipping a switch somewhere within the darker recesses of my skull that slightly provoked my senses, my awareness of every incongruous sound in the brush around us and the growing night cold became heightened, and a sense of deep foreboding filled me.

Coming to the very end of the path, where my dog and I normally turned around and headed home, some mile-and-a-half from my house, I found myself still uneasy, and contemplating the thoughts regarding Halloween's spirit.

My dog abruptly sat down on her haunches, began quivering, and whined. A shiver ran down my spine.

There and then, in the deep darkness of the forest at the end of that path, amidst the twisted, tangled flora, I came face to face with a demon.

II.

At least, I was pretty sure it was a demon.

Two beady, glowing, piercing red dots seemed to hover just behind the matted thorns and underbrush before us.

My dog, who normally would be wagging her tail, eager to greet a human, or darting and growling were it some woodland creature, did neither of these things and rather whimpered and pointed her head at the ground as if in shame or supplication. I tried to pull her away, but she would not move, for so startled was she by the presence of this unknown, red-eyed entity.

I looked again at the phantom.

It blinked.

I blinked and rubbed my own eyes, for I could hardly believe what my eyes were showing me and wanted to make sure I was not hallucinating, or misinterpreting information my senses were delivering to my brain. There was no mistaking it. He, or she, or whatever *it* was, was standing there, and I could now make out a dark silhouette behind the glare of the red eyes.

Mustering courage, I spoke to it.

"Who's there? Who are you?"

There was no response.

Instead, the figure moved forward towards me and my pup, making a crunching and popping in the brambles. Stepping out of the woods, I beheld its form, now fully visible in the pale moonlight and no longer standing in the shadows. Before me I saw a tall man whose head, to my surprise, was shaped like that of a dog, with a skinny snout that ended in a pointed nose, and tall, thin pointed ears that stood firmly perked up. His fur was black and his pupils still cut out, shining bright red in the night. His torso

was that of a man. He was incredibly muscular and his skin was brown. The man's lower extremities were covered by a tunic wrapped about his waist. He stood there, menacingly, peering at me, striking fear into my soul.

"Please, sir, what do you want from me?"

Nothing. Silence.

The creature breathed, and hot air shot in two foggy spindles from his canine nostrils. They shot up, rose, and disappeared in the cool air, then were followed in deathly procession by more, identical condensed breath shortly, but in intervals that seemed tiny eternities to me in my fear, as if time slowed and bent around him.

Without warning, my dog whimpered, and, trembling, rose from her haunches, wagging her tail profusely in anxious excitement. She turned and pulled away from the beast, tugging me along. Not ready to depart yet, wanting to know what manner of prank this was (though my suspicions were that it was no such, for I saw no seam on his costume, no evidence of a zipper, and no part at the neck where the doglike head was separate and therefore could not be a mask, and its features moved so eerily lifelike...) and trying my best to deny the dark reality in front of me, insisted on staying and learning, demanding from him what he wanted.

My dog would simply not allow me to linger, and pulled with such force that had I not gone with her, my meniscus in my shoulder might have torn. Stepping backward to accommodate her tug, I moved with her momentum, glancing behind briefly at her for the unconscious purpose of maintaining balance. My eyes darted forward once again in a mere moment, and what I saw sent shivers down my spine and moths a flutter in my abdomen.

The dog-headed man took a step forward. Then another. His eyes burned brightly, glaring out of his eye sockets and flashing and flickering like true, roaring flames now. A fell smile stretched across those canine lips, and then I knew truly this was some evil spirit, a creature of the underworld, for in smiling he revealed his sharp predator's teeth. This was no prank, no Halloween costume, but the real thing. The beast growled a guttural, deep, liquidy snarl as he slowly walked toward my dog and I.

I realized then that my pet's survival instinct was far stronger and prescient than my own, and obeying her beckoning in a surprising and sudden role reversal, I turned and fled, while she stayed ahead of me sprinting, easily 3 strides ahead of me at all times.

My dog and I turned on that familiar path that night and fled, and instead of walking at our normally leisurely pace, we both ran like hell.

III.

On and on we ran. Ignoring advice my father had given me when once, long ago I ran cross country and track, telling me never to look back when trying to outrun someone, lest you lose forward momentum and focus, and like Lot's wife and Frank Shorter of old, lose the Boston Marathon, or worse, your very life. I must confess I looked over my shoulder several times.

Each time I saw him.

He seemed to glide on the very air rather than take strides, the dog man, swiftly scooting along after us, keeping within some 10 or 20 yards of us at all time with ease, effortlessly.

As I looked back each time, when my head turned back around to what was before me, I swear I beheld odd things all about.

The first time I looked back, the dog and I were rounding a bend that traced the outer circumference of some softball fields, the paved trail with its leaning canopy of fall-firework colored trees encompassing a public park. We seemed to be gaining some ground between us and him, but this might have been an illusion of the gradual curvature of the trail's steady bend. Either that, or the great, dark, dog man was toying with us, I know not.

Whipping my head forward again, I saw in my peripheral vision what I thought to be a gangling, rail-thin figure dancing about in the woods to our right, his incredibly long arms flailing and wriggling protuberances of twisting and squirming fingers. Turning my head slightly right and narrowing my gaze, the figure disappeared.

I bore down, as did my dog, digging for energy. We pressed on, not letting up the throttle one bit.

Reaching a bridge, its expansive space beneath it dark and shadowy and muddy, caked with wetted soot and deep, mucky clay that had washed there in a recent flood, too recent to have been cleaned by the local government, I thought I saw a wide, toothy, grimace and an equally wide, dimly glowing set of green eyes hovering in the darkness, waiting for us.

Growing nearer the bridge, I beheld what I thought must be scales on this new figure in the sparkling light that reflected off it from the street lamp.

Could it be? A troll under the bridge?

Tugging on my dog's lead and harness, I diverted us to an alternative route, up a slippery grass hill, onto the now empty road and over the bridge, rather than passing beneath it on the normal paved path, with which we reconnected on the other side.

Glancing backward again, I saw the dog-headed man bound firmly then leap up some 30 feet into the air, coming down swiftly, having jumped over the bridge and down to the paved path again, landing lightly as a feather.

My dog and I took off once again. We were less than a half mile from our home.

The third and final time I looked back I really wished I had not, indeed, for I beheld a fell and wicked plethora of beasts, ghouls, ghosts, and other ungodly creatures, cackling, whirling, twirling, dancing, and encircling the dog-headed man, orbiting him like so many moons as he ran swiftly now behind us, with a powerful stride. Here a large, flaming orange Jack-o-lantern sailed and twirled through the air. There a host of ghosts flew, their sheetlike countenances swaying in the wind. Witches laughed with wickedness, spinning through the air and around him on their broomsticks, banshees hovered and howled, a host of the dead stood and muttered, mightily and eerily, in a pale green glow glinting off their bare bones. The troll emerged in full sight from beneath the bridge and grinned, taking special delight at the spectacle and laughing a deep, dumb laugh.

Hardly believing my senses I closed my eyes with a hard squeeze, and reopening them, squinted in the direction of the spectacle. They had all disappeared.

Except for our pursuer, the dog man. There he was running after my poor dog and I.

We ran on, my heart pounding, guts feeling ready to burst, hardly able to breathe. The man was nearly upon us now. He seemed inescapable.

A dark, deep, feeling of dread screamed within me. I knew we were doomed. Struggling up a hill away from the paved path now and onto the road upon which my house was situated, I slipped in the wet, dewy grass. Catching my dog's leash but barely, I struggled to my feet. Shaking and with an anxious feeling of impending doom shooting through every cell of my body, I pulled her toward me, caged her in my arms, and dropped to the ground, quivering, for I knew with my fall there was no getting away from him, no hope of outrunning him anymore. Indeed I could already hear his heavy breath just behind us.

He came upon us then, fierce, striking fear into our hearts even more so than before, his vile sounding breath panting and eyes practically leaping from his skull now, they were so bright. With my hand that was no longer on my dog's body, I covered my eyes and turned my face away, in one last, hopeless and desperate attempt to shield myself from him.

To the utter shock of both myself and the dog, the evil creature passed right by us. Onward down the road he continued. Through my neighborhood he ran, until he was at the steps of not my house, but my next door neighbor's, and passing directly through their door, he entered without a sound, going into their abode as if its walls and doors were nothing but vapor.

IV.

Finally reaching the inside sanctity of our home, I quickly de-vested my pooch, and free from her harness and the fear of the dog man, and evidently forgetting all about him, she took to chewing a rawhide, and wagged her tail without a care in the world, again.

Such sudden return to normality was not a blessing that my perception enjoyed.

Contrasty, alarmed and fearing for the well-being of my neighbors, I deftly dialed 9-1-1.

"We know! We already know! An ambulance is being dispatched already." The operator at the other end of the line assured me.

Practically panting, I pressed the operator for clarification. "You already know they're in peril? Then you know about the monster? The dog-headed man?"

"...what?"

Evidently, my neighbor, in her mid seventies and having suffered from a chronic disease these many years, had finally succumbed to her illness and collapsed some mere minutes prior to when I witnessed the dark beast enter her abode. Her husband, distressed, had already called the emergency line and when I phoned in with my concerns, emergency medical workers were already en route. No mention of the monster my dog and I had seen, heard, felt with our physical senses, and run from so fearfully was ever made by anyone else but myself. It seemed that this apparition, this ghostly ghoul, had not appeared to anyone but myself and my canine friend.

Did it really happen?

Was I crazy?

I pondered these things as my fear and stress de-escalated that Halloween night, sitting up and trying to clear my mind with Halloween specials on TV on late night, until finally I managed to repose after several hours of lacking ability to do so, and fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Next morning, I awakened to let my dog out into the fenced front yard. Watching her frolic for a bit, I turned to return inward to make my daily preparations for work. Just as it was about to cross the threshold of my front door, my foot slipped on a small, rectangular oddity resting atop the front stoop on my welcome mat.

Picking it up and examining it, an abstract, distant foreboding struck up in the pit of my bowels. The paper was not of any modern make or style. In fact, it was papyrus, of origin and composition indigenous to the Middle East. Upon it was etched in some sort of ink that came not from modern fountain pen, a message in pictographs I had the faintest awareness of being Egyptian, though I could not decipher them. Frowning, I took the note and placed it in my study, for later, further investigation.

Later, after I was finished at work for the day, I drove the note over to my professor friend at the local university from which I had graduated. He was an expert in antiquities, having a concentration in ancient linguistics and being well familiar with picture-based writing in Egyptology.

"Very interesting..." he said as he skimmed the lines of pictographs. "This is a dialect I don't typically delve in...but I will decipher it for you nonetheless and report back as soon as I have it translated!"

Two days later, and I was sitting in my Adirondack plastic chair in my back yard, sipping a fine cider from the bottle, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt in the brisk post-Halloween fall air, and throwing a tennis ball periodically as the dog fetched it back to me, when my phone rang.

"You're not going to believe this."

"What?"

"That message. It's written to you. I wasn't sure what a few symbols were, but once I got them, it translated quite easily. I'm emailing you the translation right now, and whenever you have time, you can come back over to my office and retrieve the note."

"Okay. What does the message say?"

"Well, it's definitely addressing you specifically. Mentions some personal details. It's- well, it's... it's difficult to explain, really, friend. Why don't you read the email, then call me back? I don't know what's going on, but it's something weird. I'm here for you to help you through whatever it is, though buddy."

"Okay...thanks..."

Following the phone conversation, I pulled up my email app on my phone. I scrolled and read the message and my blood ran cold:

My Dear Friend,

*I regret not being able to speak with you last night, but I am afraid
I was on my way to visit your neighbor, for so very close to death was she
that I had to hurry on my way to arrive there and bear her spirit away to the
underworld for judgement while her people embalmed her above.*

*I must admit that I was surprised to see you. I apologize for any fright
I might have caused you in whatever apparent chase I gave. The same goes for your
dog, I hate to startle one of my kindred so unnecessarily. I wish you well in all your
earthly endeavors in the numbered days you have left above on the earth. I know your
family well and must say I am quite fond of them.*

*May you be well until we meet again, which will be sooner than any earthly
person would expect!*

Yours Truly,

Anubis, god of death

I could feel the hairs standing on end on my spine as I read the last few words. Immediately calling my professor friend, I confirmed he was not, in fact, messing with me and this was indeed what the content of the note, written like a modern letter, but using Egyptian hieroglyphics, had said.

Troubled deeply by the ancient god's words, at first, eventually I breathed deeply and decided to let it go.

What else could anyone do? Everyone in the end will meet the same fate, and has only so many good years to enjoy and prosper before it above the cold ground. Such is true for us all, regardless of what kind or quantity our Halloween celebrations or lack thereof are.

I chose, therefore, to spend my precious hours thereafter on this afternoon outside with my dog throwing ball, running, then going for another of our long walks. My time was wisely spent doing this; to run from Anubis was silly, an exercise (perhaps quintessentially so) in futility. For he comes for each of us, taking us when it is time. He had been surprised to find me and my dog on the path in the dark that night because he knew good and well that it was not yet my time. Reflecting on this fact and becoming increasingly more comfortable with it as I did so, I tossed the ball to my dog once again. With each toss I knew I came closer to my death, but also I grew closer to acceptance, closer to greeting old Anubis as a well received and met friend. I knew not the time nor the hour he would come for me, so I spent as much time with her as I could thereafter, and cherished it all the while. May all my readers, to whom I leave this dying message, choose to spend their short and precious few hours alive, whatever length and sort they may be, so!

The End