

Death Takes a Holiday

Halloween in L.A. is a lot more interesting from behind a mask By Pamela Freundl Kirst

I grew up in small-town Iowa and got tired of everyone knowing my business. I hated that news of the argument I had with my boyfriend at high school preceded me home at the end of the day. The expanse of Los Angeles was a soothing contrast when I first ventured here years ago. Back then, this large, embracing city widened my world. I grew dizzy with the scent of freedom.

One Halloween I was taken back through time, reminded of that gleeful feeling. I was graciously allowed to tag along with my child and some friends who were trick-or-treating. The proviso was that I had to go in costume, fade into the background and stay there. I had played this "supervising mom" role often in the past, but I had never been so extraneous or so thoroughly cloaked.

Wearing a cast-off hood from a dismembered costume of Death—a faceless black nylon mask with cobwebby straggles of gray cheesecloth—and a long, black witch's cape, I was a passable, mildly idiosyncratic ghoul, the serene, ob-servant embodiment of Death.

It was hot and smelled faintly of Krispy Kreme doughnuts inside my faceless garment. Though the black nylon dimmed my vision, I could still see an indistinct world. We were embedded in a North-of-Montana-Halloween-Trick-or-Treat-Specialty-Event, a Westside spectacular of lights, decorations and costumed figures of all sizes. The sidewalks were crowded like Manhattan's on a workday morning. My altered view affected me profoundly. I watched the world, distant and diminished. Who was I, hidden in here, peering out? How I saw and how I was seen had shifted, literally. I felt as if I'd been dropped onto a dark and entertaining alien planet.

From time to time I lifted the fitted veil and blinked at evening, and the world would slowly shift back to normal. But normal wasn't nearly as interesting.

A group of small children stopped on the sidewalk, eyeing me. A little girl demanded, "Aren't you supposed to have glowing pink eyes?" (Yes, in the costume's original version.) Without them, I was only mildly disconcerting.

I passed a male version of Death, and he theatrically proclaimed to his friend, "I looked in the mirror and saw myself, Death, staring back at me." Apart from his glowing pink eyes (which he had, unlike me), our heads were mirror images. Was it random coincidence, these words uttered as Death passed Death in the Halloween parade?

I watched motionless in the thickening crowd. When I finally moved, a grown-up and handsomely outfitted witch shrieked, then explained that she thought I was a statue. Altogether satisfying, I thought. Death scares the Witch. (Of course, Death scares everyone, my child later pointed out.)

The high point of this adventure happened next. I was standing on the sidewalk, Death minding her own business, when a bold young man approached and began flirting: "Are you with me?"

"No," I told the young man.

"Would you like to be?" he persisted.

Again, I said "No." He wasn't easily discouraged.

"Why not?"

Then he conjured a plausible reason. "Are you a guy?" he wondered. I looked down at myself, appreciating for the first time the genderlessness of Death. I lifted my foot, sexless in sneakers, and said, "You can tell by my shoes." We both stared for a moment at my feet.

"No, you can't." Pushy, imperious, aggressively male, even at about 14 years old.

Then a genuinely hideous thought occurred to him: "Tell me you're not a mom."

So I was outed. My rusty flirtatiousness had failed me. "I'm Death," I said, too late. He was moving on, fleeing the Mother, as well he should.

It tickled me enormously—this encounter, this whole evening. I was a thousand different ages and a host of new personas. Who am I when I can't be seen? What remains of who I am, and what do I become inside the mask of Death? Does how I move and speak create or reveal a character? What is the shape of my soul—buoyant, playful, bold, spirited, imaginative? What do we know of our Death-defying selves inside our daily dress? Inhabiting Death was freeing. What else is inside us longing to be found, explored, lived, but doesn't get the chance?

And that's just my side of the story. What about my child, perplexed by the disappearance of mom? What about the brazen young man? Who or what characters is he trying out?

So there it is, my Halloween tale of the worlds inside disguise. Faceless and anonymous, ageless and genderless, my 14-year-old and 80-year-old-selves surfaced and I enjoyed the ride. Free to move about in a new way, emboldened by disguise, my spirit and my soul expanded. And the world took an unexpected interest.

There is a touch here, too, of the art and craft of acting—bringing to life new (or old) parts of your being inside the character of another. It's the soul of this city. When we take back parts of ourselves, once cast off into the world, we become bigger, more fearless, more creative, more truly ourselves.

That Halloween helped me understand better what fuels my love for this place. Many years ago I fled the Midwest for the mecca of the external and the superficial, the land where appearance is all. And what I have found here is deep and internal—room to live more fully.

For me, Los Angeles is an antidote to the small and stifling. Like the delight of disguise, L.A., accepting and immense, invites the larger self. The polarities alive here—anonymous and known, seen and unseen, shallow and deep, inventive and bland—give us a sizable stage upon which to dance, and our psyches space to be.

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