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Fiction

LET IT GO

Halloween night is falling into place. It's already dark out. There's a crisp chill in the air. My last client of the day rescheduled his portfolio review, which allowed me to leave the office early. I just pulled into the driveway, and in a few minutes I'll be taking Ricky trick-or-treating.

This year he's going as a Velociraptor. I found the costume at *Party Emporium*. It's a perfect Velociraptor replica, right down to the toe-claws. He just turned 10, but I know how much he still loves dinosaurs.

When I walk in the front door, my cousin Nicole and her husband Trey are glued to the TV in the living room. *The Fear Channel* has been running a marathon of *Nightmare on October the 31st* movies all day in celebration of Halloween and now they're on Part 12, which for my money is the best one of the entire franchise. It's the one where Buzzkill, the football-helmet-wearing serial killer, heads up to Salem for a Halloween night party and methodically decapitates victims wearing Bill Clinton, Paris Hilton and Brett Favre costumes, among others.

Just as the climactic showdown between Buzzkill and a scream queen dressed as Sarah Palin is about to begin, Ricky the Velociraptor comes bouncing down the stairs.

"I'm ready! Let's GO!!!" Ricky shouts.

"Will you SHUT UP?" Trey shouts back. "We're trying to watch a movie. You always run your mouth when we're trying to concentrate!!!"

"YOU shut up," Ricky fires back.

I grab him by his Velociraptor beak and tell him, "Stop. We'll be going out trick-or-treating in a sec."

Ricky calms down. Trey, however, can't let it go.

"You know, that's your whole problem," he says. "You just can't keep your mouth shut for two seconds. When we're trying to watch a movie, shut UP!"

While I appreciate that Ricky interrupted a critical scene of one of the greatest movies of all time, this is when I get pissed and start giving people death stares. But it doesn't do any good. Trey keeps turning up the heat, and I escort Ricky out of the room before things get out of hand. That doesn't stop Trey from continuing his tirade.

"You little brat," Trey says. "You wonder why nobody likes you. You keep mouthing off to people, one of these days you gonna get your ass…"

Ricky tries to turn back into the room, but I block him. "You shut up!" he says.

"How about if both of you shut up?" Nicole yells. She's had three glasses glasses of wine and is already starting to slur her words. The only thing worse than her slurring her words is having to listen her slurring her words when she babbles incessantly. She means well, but all she does is get on everyone else's nerves.

"This is a great scene," she begins. "This reminds me of the Halloween party I went to when I was a junior in high school…and some guy dressed up as Michael Myers… and, well, the thing you have to know is that…I didn't get along with my step-mother…and we got into a huge fight that day…and I told her that when I was 18…I was outta there…and I had just gotten a job at the bank…and, well, it was actually a cool place to work…some days I wish I still worked there instead of doing social work, and…."

Oh my God, please, just, shut, up. Or shoot me.

I tap Ricky's shoulder and try to end the conflict.

"Come on Ricky, let's go."

The scary part of the night is over.

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I don't know why I take Ricky trick-or-treating every year. He's Nicole and Trey's kid, not mine. His parents have never taken him out for Halloween in his life. Someone has to take Ricky out for trick or treats.

They've had a Halloween party every year since they got married and they'd rather entertain their friends and get shit-faced on wine and beer than take their only child out for tricks or treats. It's a moot point. This will probably be his last year trick-or-treating, and I want to make the most of it. Halloween has always been my favorite holiday, while my girlfriend hates it. She stays at my place and gives out candy to the kids in our neighborhood while watching chick flicks with her friends. I go to Nicole and Trey's, take Ricky trick-or-treating and then come back for his parents' party.

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We start walking down the street when Ricky drops the question on me.

"Why do my parents have to suck?" he asks.

I try to change the subject.

"OK, so let's go up and down Massasoit Road again this year," I say. We sort of have to take that route. Nicole and Trey live on Wormwood Lane, but Ricky's reputation precedes him and he doesn't get along with any of the kids on his street. And none of the kids' parents get along with Nicole and Trey. So if we trick or treated along Wormwood everyone would give

him the Charlie Brown treatment and dump rocks in his bag, or just slam the door in our faces. The funny part is, when we go down Massasoit every Halloween, Ricky is the most personable kid in the world and the folks on that street treat him like a celebrity.

"Seriously, why do my parents suck?"

I'm still trying to ignore him.

"Why?" he asks.

"Look." I'm not sure I wanna say what I'm about to say. "Your parents don't suck. They just, well…."

I stop. I don't complete the sentence, but I'm hoping I've said enough.

"Well what?" he asks.

I take a deep breath.

"Look, when your parents first got married, they agreed not to have kids. But after a few years, your mom changed her mind. She talked it over with your dad, and he said no. So your mom went off the pill without telling your dad. And…"

I'm such an idiot. Why can't I just keep my mouth shut? Now he'll be scarred for life. The years of therapy won't work, and one night I'll see him on the news being led away in cuffs from a building wrapped in police tape while a reporter refers to him as a "disgruntled employee."

I look at Ricky for his reaction, but it's tough when his head is stuffed between a Velociraptor's toothy jaws. He's not saying anything. But I'm relieved. Silence is better than the alternatives. He doesn't stop walking, or start crying, or get all angry, which sometimes he's prone to do.

"So that's why my dad hates me," he says.

"He doesn't hate you."

"Yes he does."

I sigh. There's a long, uncomfortable pause. Ricky cuts through it.

"So, is it true what Mom says?"

"What?"

"Mom says I'm going to be living with you from now on."

Ricky always says he wishes I was his dad. Nicole says it a lot too. Maybe it was the time DSS stopped by at 8 p.m. and inspected her house. Or the time she took him away to spend a week at Hampstead, which is one of "those" hospitals. Or how she always wanted to send him off to boot camp. She never said what he did to warrant that, or how DSS got involved.

I never realized she was serious about trying to have me adopt Ricky. For years, whenever I came over to visit, she would ask me if I wanted to take Ricky home with me, usually after her sixth or seventh glass of wine.

"So, am I?" Ricky asks.

As much as I appreciate Ricky for who he is, this is a bombshell. I'm speechless.

"Look. Just let it go. We're out on Halloween. Don't worry about who your dad is tonight. Just go knock on some doors and have fun."

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We turn on Massasoit Road and knock on the first door. A middle-aged woman answers.

"OOOH! Look at you, you little T-Rex," says the woman.

"Velociraptor," Ricky corrects her. The worst thing you can call Ricky is a Tyrannosaurus rex. He still has a tough time watching the scene at the end of *Jurassic Park*

when the T-Rex kills the two Velociraptors. This woman clearly doesn't understand dinosaurs are serious business.

"Sorry, he's a little sensitive," I say.

"Oh, it's OK. Here," she says. The woman dumps a few peanut butter cups, Milky Ways and Starbursts into one of his bags.

As we walk down her driveway and back onto the sidewalk, Ricky says, "You know, it's bad enough us Velociraptors don't have opposable thumbs. We don't need people making fun of us by calling us T-Rex."

"I know, man, I know," I say. "She's a bitch. But don't worry about it. She loaded up your bag with candy. It's all good."

Usually, the first house on Halloween sets the tone for the entire night. This Halloween could be a windfall for Ricky.

We knock on the next door, where a husband and wife are waiting.

"Oooh, you're so cute," says the wife. "That's a great costume."

I'm proud to say I had a lot to do with that. Last year he cut up the sleeves to an old hoodie of Trey's and went as Bill Belichick (which was great until Trey found out it was his favorite hoodie and called him a "stupid fuck"). He's also gone in years past as Freddy Krueger, SpongeBob Square Pants and Barack Obama. This one seems to be a new high point.

I'm responsible for his affinity for the Velociraptor. Back when he was five or six, Nicole bought him a T-shirt from Target with the dinosaur on its chest while shopping for a party. Ricky had no clue what it was, but every time I came over he had it on and I would say, "Hey, Velociraptor, what's up?" And it stuck.

After the woman gives him another big grab of candy, Ricky says, “This is fun. It’s fun trick-or-treating with you.”

“That’s the spirit, kid.”

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While most people on Massasoit Road are friendly, The Flatley household has historically been less than sweet to us. I think they know someone on Wormwood so they have a preconceived notion of Ricky.

“Reeeaaaaaaauuuur,” Ricky roars and pretends to swipe at Mrs. Flatley with his talons.

She’s not amused. Mrs. Flatley has resorted to dropping a single Mounds bar into his bag. That’s the Halloween equivalent of kicking Ricky in the nuts. Yecch! Coconut. Ricky and I both hate coconut. I think trick-or-treaters should have the legal right to egg the house of anyone who gives out Mounds bars for Halloween, or to summon Buzzkill from the dead to pay them a visit.

Ricky agrees, but takes it to an extreme. Without provocation, he does exactly that, goes over to her shit box Oldsmobile and starts kicking it. His hissy-fit reminds me of my client Bill every time his AIG stock tanks. It’s a good thing the toe-claws aren’t real.

“Ricky! Stop!” I have to grab him and pull him away from the car.

He’s so frustrated he’s holding back tears. Sometimes I got crappy Halloween candy as a kid and the worst thing I ever did was give the person an angry glare. I have visions of a future with adopted Ricky, meeting the police as Ricky’s been hauled into the station for setting someone’s house on fire.

“Stop. Let it go,” I tell him. “It’s just one house.”

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Ricky rebounds quickly. We walk by two neighborhood high school girls, who are waiting for a friend to pick them up for a party. Ricky's started to notice girls recently. I can't blame him, they were pretty hot.

They stop and chat briefly with Ricky. He stops what he's doing and asks me to hold his sack of candy. He then starts tap-dancing for everyone, which is quite a feat when you consider he's dressed as a Velociraptor and he's got toe-claws.

"Hey check out the Velocirpator." "WOOHOO!" "Go Velociraptor."

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We've knocked off most of the street now and Ricky has hit the mother lode. Everybody shoved all their candy on us because there weren't a lot of people out tonight, and we got so much that Ricky needs to use a second bag. He always carries a second sack because one year some teenaged punks snatched his bag from behind and ran off with it. This year is the first year he's actually had to use the second bag.

It's almost 9 p.m. and we've gotten to the end of the cul-de-sac on Massasoit. The last house is always the coolest. They really do it up style, with sticky spider webs and bones out front, eerie sights and sounds, and random people who troll around the porch and look like monsters. When we were kids there was a rumor the guy who lived here was Stephen King. He's really just a big guy with a beard.

"What's up?" he says as he opens the door. As he says this, some girl runs across the foyer with a plastic ax wedged into his head.

"TRICK OR TREAT!" Ricky says. "Reeeeeeeaaaaaarrrrgggghh!"

"No!," the Stephen King lookalike pleads. "Please don't slash open my belly with your toe-claw, Mr. Velociraptor."

Holy shit! This guy's emptying out a candy jar that looks like a 50-gallon drum. Enough peanut butter cups, fat Twizzlers, M&Ms and chocolate chip cookies to last him through puberty. Ricky whips out Sack Number Two and it's starting to fill up.

"This is the awesomest Halloween ever," Ricky says.

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Ricky and I are walking back toward Wormwood.

"Do we have to go back home?" Ricky asks me.

"Well yeah. We can't stay out all night. Even Stephen King has to go to bed at some point. People aren't going to want to answer their door at 2 a.m. to hand out more candy. They'll call the cops on us, or we'll get attacked like you did by those punks that one year."

"That sucks. Now I have to deal with my parents. They fuckin' suck."

"Look don't worry about it. They'll be tired. They won't have the energy to deal with you tonight."

"They SUCK."

"Just let it go. You have to go home at some point, Ricky."

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We arrive, just in time to catch the tail-end of *Nightmare on October the 31st Part 14: Buzzkill in Space*, and listen to Trey bitching out Nicole.

"Go ahead, have another fucking glass of wine," he tells her.

Nicole's slurring pretty badly now, and I'm trapped into a conversation with her – or, to be more accurate, trapped by her. It's not the conversation I'd like to have, which is why she told Ricky I'm going to adopt him, without running it by me first.

"You'll never believe what happened…I was talking with Jane…and she was being a real bitch tonight…and then Trey told me I was drinking too much…and I threw a chair at him….and now he won't talk to me…I don't understand why he keeps saying I drink too much…everybody else has been drinking all night too….I'm not the only one."

"STOP!" I say. "I just wanna let Ricky settle in, get out of costume and take his candy out of the bags."

"So what kind of trouble did he get in?" Nicole asks.

"None," I say.

"None?"

"Nothing. Why, what did you think was going to happen?"

"He didn't threaten to take out a knife and kill anyone?"

"No."

"He didn't take his costume off and start running around naked?"

"Umm, no."

Nicole looks at me as in disbelief and shakes her head. Suddenly I imagine DSS at the front door after someone drops a dime on Trey and Nicole doing something fucked up. Starving him. Forcing him to run around in his underwear. In my world, most parents just inspect the sack of candy for possible tampering, give their kids a hug and chalk up another safe and successful Halloween.

I don't know what the truth is. The Ricky I know may enjoy being a Velociraptor, but he's not likely to do anything to warrant an appearance from DSS.

Ricky puts his two candy sacks on the table. He sorts the goods into categories – chocolatey stuff in one pile, candy and other fruity stuff in another, chips in a third, then cookies,

then crappy stuff to throw out (thanks Mrs. Flatley, you bitch). He takes out four peanut butter cups. Then he comes over and, knowing how much I enjoy peanut butter cups, hands them to me. Then Nicole and Trey come over with an eye toward scavenging some of the goods. He surrounds the pile with his arms and hisses at them.

Trey yells out, "Hey! Give your dad some candy."

Ricky doesn't give an inch. The pecking order is well established.

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I'm sitting on the couch in the living room, shooting the breeze with Trey. He's normal when he's not dealing with Ricky or Nicole – friendly, personable, with a sharp sense of humor. We're talking about the election, sinking deeper into an intoxicated buzz, when we're interrupted by a horrible sound from upstairs.

"THUMP! THUMP!!! THUMP!!!!!"

Trey remains attached to his couch, continuing to guzzle his beer. I reach the top of the stairs and see Nicole leaning all her weight against the bathroom door. Ricky's banging on the door in a desperate attempt to get out.

"You're not coming out until you brush your teeth! I don't care if it's the last thing you do," Nicole shouts at the door.

"NO!" Ricky yells.

I march over to Nicole and try to ease her away from the door.

"Listen, let me talk to him, Nicole," I say.

"He's spent all night since he got home eating candy. He's gonna get cavities if he doesn't brush his teeth," Nicole says.

"Good. Let him get a mouth full of cavities. Then, when the dentist has to drill his head full of holes, he'll learn his lesson. Sometimes kids have to learn the hard way."

"No!"

"Let it go, Nicole. It's not worth it. Is it more important for you to be on good terms with your only child, or is it more important to win a power struggle?"

"No!"

"That wasn't a yes or no question."

"No! He needs to brush his teeth," She crosses her arms before storming into her bedroom and slamming the door shut, allowing Ricky a chance to emerge from the bathroom on his own.

I yell at her through her bedroom door. "You know, you wonder why Ricky hates you. It's not the end of the world if he doesn't brush his teeth for one night, even if it is Halloween. You'll never make him brush his teeth every night. Let it go. Stop being a fucking idiot, Nicole."

I have to get it off my chest now.

"Why did you tell Ricky I'm going to be adopting him?"

Nicole shakes her head.

"He looks up to you," she says. "I just can't…"

That's all she can get out before her eyes tear up. She runs into her master bath and slams the door.

I go into Ricky's room.

"I hate her," he says, fighting back tears as he walks from the bathroom to his bedroom. "She treats me like a 6-year-old because I'm so small. She sucks. And she just drinks and drinks and drinks."

"Ricky…"

"And when she gets drunk, all she does is talk. Blah blah blah. I'm sick of it."

I don't know how he does it. I'd have run away years ago.

"Look, it's getting late," I tell him. "You should be in bed anyway. They'll leave you alone if you're asleep. Let it go, OK? Now get some sleep."

I go back downstairs. Trey grabs a bananarama shot from the fridge and goes back upstairs. He won't be seen again tonight. Nicole will probably come down soon and pour another glass of wine. For now I'm in a roomful of people I don't really know.

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Morning comes. The house is relatively peaceful. I jump out of the shower and put on a change of clothes. I shake Trey's hand and he tells me not to get into too much trouble. I give Nicole a hug, grab my overnight bag and get ready to head home.

Alone.

Ricky's upstairs. I walk into his room and say goodbye. He's tearing up again. Nicole really sold him on this going home with me thing. I tell him I'll be back sometime in the not-too-distant-future. Then I pat him on the back, walk downstairs again and get in my car.

My girlfriend is itching to get married and have kids, and I'm still lukewarm about it. She asks why, and I try to explain the situation with Nicole and Trey and Ricky. She doesn't get it. She never comes here so she doesn't see it firsthand. Because of that, she'll never understand. Eventually this will doom our relationship.

Sometimes I wish Ricky could stay with us. Who knows? Maybe I would become jaded and start to treat Ricky like shit, the way his parents do. And I have hundreds of clients at work whose egos I need to massage, a girlfriend who I'm not getting along with, bills to pay, weight to lose, the list goes on. I have plenty of problems in my life besides worrying about a kid who's stuck in a messed up home. I'm not a superhero. I can only do so much.