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A SPECIAL HALLOWEEN

There was just over a week to go before Halloween and the two sisters were sitting at the kitchen table preparing for it. They were making the Jack-o-Lanterns from pumpkins. Being the older sister, Fran was using the knife and had already sliced the top off one of the pumpkins which had been passed to Angela who was using a spoon to scoop out the inside. "Remember to keep the seeds separate," advised Fran, "We don't want them in the soup."

"I know what I'm doing," grumbled Angela irritably, "Granddad showed me."

"I was only saying..." Fran had a feeling that something wasn't quite right. Turning to glance across the table she noticed her sister's head was bowed and she was sobbing. "What's the matter Ange, did you hurt yourself?"

Angela said nothing, just shook her head; then she was up from the chair and rushing for the door. Fran followed closely behind and found her sister in their bedroom face down on her bed crying her eyes out. Sitting next to her she placed a comforting hand on her head. "What is it; why are you so upset?"

It took over a minute before Angela's crying had slowed enough for her to speak: "It's Halloween: I don't want to do it anymore. Without Granddad it won't be the same. Why did he have to die?" And with that she began sobbing again.

This was one of those subjects that many prefer not to discuss and Fran wasn't sure she had the right words, or any really that would help her sister to understand. "No-one lives forever, Ange. People die eventually like Granddad did..."

"But why?" Angela retorted, "He wasn't sick."

Obviously this wasn't going to be easy. "No, but he was very old; and we should be grateful that he died peacefully in his sleep."

Angela sniffed. "Well I miss him, and if he can't be here for it, what's the point of Halloween?"

Unbeknown to the girls, their grandmother had been passing and had paused to listen outside in the hallway. Entering the room she walked to the bed and moved a chair so that she could face her granddaughters. Placing folded hands on her lap she said: "We all miss your Granddad, Angela, and it's always sad when someone we love has passed on; but rather than just thinking about what we've lost, we should also remember the good times we spent with them."

Angela had turned over and was sitting up. "That's what I was doing, Grandma," said the little girl. "Halloween was fun when Granddad was here, but now he's gone it won't be."

"It still could be," offered the old lady. "If we made this Halloween really special it would be like a tribute to his memory." It seemed apparent that Angela wasn't convinced, so her Grandmother tried again. "We always used to get lots of trick-or-treaters coming to our house, and I'm thinking we could give them an extra treat by decorating the garage like a spooky grotto..."

"What's a grotto, Grandma?" asked Angela.

Her grandmother explained it was a sort-of magical cave and began to outline her ideas of how they could all contribute something to put in it. "It will need to be empty, of course, which means the car will have to be parked on the lawn; and I'm sure your Dad will be able to rig up some eyrie coloured lighting..."

"But Granddad still won't be here," insisted Angela. "The trick-or-treaters will expect him to open the front door in his ghost costume."

"This year could be even better," put in Fran, "With him ghosting his way from the back of the garage..."

"Why won't you *listen*?!! demanded Angela. "He won't be ghosting anywhere – he's gone!" Spinning over, she buried her head in the pillow and began sobbing again.

Fran and her Grandmother looked at each other in silence for a while, neither able to think of anything to say that could ease Angela's sorrow. Everything the little girl had said was true: no matter how spectacular they made the grotto, the person it was really for wouldn't be present; and for Angela the memory of him wasn't going to be enough.

It seemed best that Angela be left alone. Fran and her grandmother returned to the kitchen where they carried on preparing the Jack-o-Lanterns. "I don't reckon Ange will want pumpkin soup for tea," commented Fran.

"Probably not," said her grandma, "And I don't think it's a good idea for us to have it either. If we put the pulp in the fridge we can cook it up tomorrow. In the meantime we need to have a think about how to dress up the garage like a grotto. Maybe Mum and Dad can come up with some suggestions."

When the problem with Angela was explained to them the parents were only too willing to contribute to the special Halloween. The girls' mother, June, offered to run up a few curtains on the sewing machine. "I recall you've got some glow-in-the-dark paint, Fran," she said, "And you're good at drawing so you could paint spooky faces on them. I'll leave you to think about it while I check on Angela." She was back in a matter of minutes and reported: "She's sleeping."

"While you were gone, Mum," said Fran, "Dad came up with an idea. He reckons he could dress up in Granddad's ghost costume and do the trick-or-treat bit."

"I'm not sure I can mimic his scary cackle," admitted Henry, "But I can try."

Angela woke up later and joined them for tea. Conversation was kept away from the subject of Halloween until she said, rather surprisingly: "I've been thinking about it and I'm sure Granddad would have really liked the grotto." When told about her Dad wearing the ghost costume she actually smiled. "He'll probably make a mess of it, but it'll give the trick-or-treaters a giggle." That caused everyone to laugh.

Henry smirked. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Over the next two days all of the family were busy making things like scary masks and lanterns to hang in the garage. Fran did a really good job with the glow-in-the-dark paint; and Henry rigged the lighting using different-coloured globes to give the whole area an eyrie mood. Once they were satisfied that they'd done the best they could, all bar Henry stood on the driveway and waited. The garage was in darkness until he switched on the lights. It was an amazing sight and really did look like a magical grotto. Even Angela was moved by the scene, but in a sad way. She had tears in her eyes and sniffed. "It's lovely. I only wish Granddad was here to see it," she whispered softly.

Her grandmother put an arm round the little girl's shoulders. "This is one Halloween he wouldn't want to miss; and I have a feeling that he is up there in Heaven looking forward to it."

The closer it came to Halloween individual members of the family made the odd change to the grotto when they thought something wasn't quite right. "I'm going to shift those curtains at the back," said June. "If some of them hang over there," and she pointed to the rear exit door, "Dad could come out of the house unseen and ghost his way through the drapes, maybe moaning and groaning." She turned to her husband. "Could you do that, Henry?"

"What? Something like..." and he made a few sounds.

Angela rolled her eyes and whispered to herself: "Granddad would have done it better."

Fran overheard and spoke a quiet aside to her grandmother: "At least she didn't get upset."

So, it seemed everything was set for the big night. June put the bag of treats behind the drapes so that Henry could pick them up when he left the house and drifted into the grotto. Then, as night began to fall, they watched through front windows for the first of the trick-or-treaters. A small group of four were approaching along the street. Coming to the front gate, they were about to open it and head for the front door. June said: "Now, Henry!" Her husband was waiting by the switch and flicked it on. The grotto was suddenly ablaze with coloured lights. The children gasped and their eyes flew wide. Hurrying to stand before the garage they stood gazing in amazement. June called out: "Have you got your costume on, Henry?"

"Not yet," came the reply.

His wife groaned impatiently. "Well, be quick about it. The children are waiting."

Knowing there would be a bit of a delay while Henry put on his costume, June ushered the rest of the family out through the front door. "We'll keep the trick-or-treaters occupied until Dad's ready."

They were no sooner on the driveway than there was movement at the rear of the grotto. "That was quick," muttered Fran under her breath. Then they all watched.

The ghost came on, moaning and groaning, pushing aside the curtains, closer and closer. The children were truly amazed, the youngest appearing a little afraid, especially when the ghost uttered a scary cackle followed by a booming laugh and a friendly greeting: "Hello, children. And why might you be here?"

"Trick or treat, Mister Ghost," said the oldest, and added: "If you please."

"Well, now," said the Ghost placing the bag on the floor and opening it. "I may just have something in here for you," and he dipped into the bag and brought out some packets.

That was when Henry appeared from the front door saying: "I couldn't find the costume..." He fell silent on seeing the ghost that should have been him. "How...? Who...?"

Undeterred by the interruption, the Ghost proceeded to give all of the children treats and waved to them as they left. Looking from the ghost to Henry the family members were totally baffled; all except for Angela who went straight up to the Ghost and hugged him. "It's you, isn't it, Granddad?"

If a ghost could smile, this one did. Placing a gentle arm around the little girl he said: "It's Halloween, precious. Who else would it be?"

"But you're supposed to be dead," Angela said bluntly. "Does this mean you've come back to us?"

"Well..." the Ghost started.

Once they had recovered from their initial shock, the others moved close; and before the Ghost could say more, the girls' grandmother asked: "Is it really you Richard?"

The Ghost chuckled. "You were expecting someone else, Marion? And how could I possibly miss out on this wonderful spectacle you've created here?"

"We did it for you, Granddad," said Fran.

"And you came," added Angela. "Does this mean you'll be staying now?"

There was a brief pause. Finally her grandfather replied: "Only for tonight." He felt Angela cling to him even tighter. "But I will return next year on Halloween; as long as you make it as special as this one has been."

"I can assure you it will be, my love," said Marion. "I promise." Hearing excited chattering coming down the street, she turned to see a group of children approaching. "More customers, Richard. No rest for the wicked."

"When was I ever wicked?" asked Richard; then laughed and said: "Hmm... when was I not?"