



Hallowe'en Changes.

Adam ran quickly upstairs. Time had passed while he was putting the finishing touches to Ewan's costume for the Hallowe'en party tonight and he hadn't noticed, lost in considering how to attach the tail and horns so that a six year old would be unlikely to dislodge them. He was due at the school gates in ten minutes and Ewan would cry if he was late again. Then the other parents, mostly mums, would tut and frown and mutter about children with two dads having problems. Mentally slapping himself for being such an irresponsible parent, he dashed into the bedroom and grabbed his coat. It was still October for just under twelve hours, but the temperatures were threatening frost, and since the hour had gone back it was almost dark when the children came out of school.

Oh no! He simply had to post the birthday card he'd made for his mother last night and it was up in his craft room in the attic. Two at a time wasn't really an option on the steep narrow stairs from the spare bedroom but he did try to hurry.

And came out into a loft space full of strangers. Strangers working at cramped benches in an atmosphere of smelly chemicals and damp felt. Well, the house wasn't called Hatters' Court for nothing and he was tired. Maybe his brain was taking liberties. He knew the loft had been part of a communal workspace, accessible from the whole terrace. The previous owners had found a hat form and bobbins when they were renovating. Maybe the card could wait till later; there was a post at 5.30. He and Ewan could go for a walk to the postbox. There'd be plenty of time before the party.

He backed but didn't quite make the stairs. A fatherly looking man in shapeless clothes took his elbow and ushered him to a bench.

"I know you've just lost your wife, dear, but you really must try to be at work on time. Those kiddies of yours depend on just your wages, now, don't they?" It wasn't a question so much as a threat, made softly but very firmly. And the man was all too solid. Not, definitely not, a figment of an overwrought imagination.

The other men at his bench were busy, their fingers impossibly entwined in felt and thread and needles. He watched them for a moment then gasped as a hat, or rather, the makings of a hat, was thrust into his hands.

"Come on, Timothy. Stop day dreaming. And get a move on." The words were rough but spoken quite kindly and Adam stared at the speaker. About his own age. Badly dressed and careworn, but pleasant looking, with blue eyes and fair hair, a bit like his friend Mike. Very like Mike in fact. A joke? A hoax for Hallowe'en? Surely not at hometime. Mike would be there now. Maybe he'd pick Ewan up, take him home to wait for his idiot father. The other parents never looked critical when they regarded Mike, but then they didn't know he was gay, too, just that he was a writer, and worked at home, and was therefore free to pick up Callum. Mike's partner Dave had died in a road accident when Callum was a baby.

So, play along. Suss out what was going on and avoid making waves till he had more information. He worked carefully but rapidly, watching the others and picking up the intricacies of the task with growing confidence. For someone with experience of a variety of sewing techniques, it wasn't too difficult. Once, he'd been a fashion designer and now his main contributions to the world of clothing were the costumes he made for Ewan, and some local garment repair jobs but it was, he thought, like riding a bike. However, he was soon tired, fancying a coffee or just a loo break. His fingers hurt. Nobody moved from their appointed workstations. No drinks were forthcoming. When he tried to get up there was a gasp of shock and he sat again, pretending he was just making himself more comfortable.

The windows were smallish and not at a height to let the workers see out but he could see that daylight was fading fast. What on earth would Richard think when he got home and there was no one in. No husband, no son, no dinner. There would be a row later for certain. People who gave up their high paid city jobs to be at home with their children were expected to cook and clean and wash instead, even if their card creation and tailoring skills were still pulling a respectable income. Richard had encouraged him to stay at home but he sometimes thought the price was steep.

"You can do your job anywhere," Richard had said, coaxingly. Had he just been keen to have a house-husband waiting on him hand and foot? Sometimes, it seemed that way. To be fair, Richard's work in the bank demanded a physical presence, though more and more of his financier colleagues were taking advantage of flexi-time and job sharing.

His fingers faltered as he mused and the overseer, the man who had greeted him, frowned and rapped on the table.

"Timothy, dreaming again! That's no way to make a living! If finishers don't finish, hats don't sell." His voice was sharper than that of the younger worker and Adam looked across the table for sympathy but the young man's face was intent on the hat in his hand.

"Look, this has gone far enough." He sounded as exasperated as he felt. "This hoax or whatever. It's beyond a joke now. I'm out of here." He threw the hat on the table and made his way to the stairs. To his surprise, others were following him. The overseer was saying,

"Time to knock off. Same time tomorrow morning. Expect a shake if you sleep in."

And with that, they all trooped downstairs. Except that they didn't come out into Adam's spare bedroom. It could have been, he thought. It was about the right size. But there were three narrow beds crushed into the space that usually held one double and a dressing table. And the cheerful crimson and mushroom colour scheme had melted into brown and dirty white. The carpet was gone.

He looked out of the window and got the biggest shock yet. Now he could no longer pretend that this was a joke or a trick. The Fold, as the tucked-away lane was called, was there all right, but beyond the last house there was nothing but fields and there was no sign of the car park.

Mike's house at the other end of the terrace was in darkness. There was what looked like a candle flicker next door. Adam's house was the short leg of an L-shape. All present and correct. Only not correct. Not correct at all.

The other men took no notice of him as they made their way through the house and down to the ground floor. Not all of them. He could hear footsteps above his head, fading as they reached the corner where the lofts joined. They shouldn't, he reflected, be able to get through the walls erected for fire safety. But they evidently did. The men in his house seemed quite at home. One of them went straight to the lounge. Adam's lounge. Richard's lounge. A kitchen in this reality. Heavy blackened pans and a fly covered ham hung from the beams. There were empty hooks, too, as if food were scarce. A woman was already stirring a big pot over the range where Richard's expensive woodstove ought to stand.

"What's for dinner, Sal?" The questioner didn't sound hopeful.

"What d'you think?"

"Pea soup, I s'pose. It's always pea soup. Did you put a bit of ham in it?"

"Naw, that's got to last us, that has. Till Christmas, any road."

Adam was shell-shocked. Confused rather than frightened. They didn't seem to mean him any harm but surely they couldn't be real? Or at least, they probably had been real once. He must be seeing the house as it had been a hundred and fifty years ago. But they could see him, talk to him, hand him things. He shook his head and tried to stop the sense of panic that was rapidly overtaking him.

Someone handed him a dish of greyish liquid. Pea soup, presumably. And a heel of bread. That was greyish too, and very stale. He was hungry, however, and curious. He dipped the bread in the soup, as the others did. It helped to soften it and he had soon polished off his helping. There was, apparently, no more. The others were washing their 'pots' as they called them, at a sink in the corner. Using a jug of cold water to pour over the dishes which they then left to drain on a sloping wooden board. Adam followed suit, grimacing inwardly at the lack of hygiene. Richard would be horrified; Ewan would be ill. He tried to think about them and shook his head to clear the fog that was forming in it.

Even in this once-upon-a-time world, surely hygiene mattered? He tried to recall period dramas he'd watched.

"Is there no hot water?" he asked of no-one in particular.

"Not for washing up." It was Sal who spoke. "Can't afford the wood any more." He heard mutters from some of the others and realised there was the same slight disapproval here that he'd sensed among the mums at the school gate. He sighed. It seemed altogether too easy to annoy whatever group he found himself in.

There was little conversation, but he gathered these people were related. A sister and three brothers, plus himself, of course, and a couple of small children in a cot, in the corner opposite the sink, under some sacking. He glanced at them and was thrown by their resemblance to Ewan and Callum. One of the boys opened sleepy eyes.

"Papa," he said. Shocked but touched, Adam kissed the little upturned face and replaced the sacking. He whispered a tentative goodnight and followed the others upstairs.

Two to a bed. That seemed to be the rule. And only one candle, guttering. It was quite dark outside now. He would have to sleep here and hope to wake in his own bed in the morning, next to Richard rather than this stranger. Unless he woke in a hospital ward which seemed increasingly likely.

The woman had a bed to herself of course. But that didn't last long. A large man came up the stairs and joined her then turned straight over and started to snore. Adam sat on the edge of 'his' bed, staring at the candle. Nobody had undressed. It was quite cold and he was glad to keep his clothes on. Thank goodness he was wearing his warm jog pants and sweatshirt. Except that he wasn't. Where on earth had he got the woollen trousers and the knitted jersey? And when?

"Come on, Tim." His bedfellow sounded sleepy. "Moping won't bring your woman back to life. Get to sleep now." He turned over and Adam joined him in the narrow bed. He didn't sleep much; he spent most of the night clinging to the edge so as not to fall out. There had to be a knack to this but he hoped he wasn't going to have to learn it.

The next morning, after a cup of something that could have been either fruit tea or a vaguely alcoholic drink but was too weak for recognition, and another hunk of bread each, two of the men set off up to the workroom. The other looked set to follow, tying his shoe laces and draining his cup.

"Don't just stand there, Tim. See to the kids then get yourself up there as soon as you can! Him in charge'll get mad if you're late again." It was Sal speaking.

Adam helped the little ones out of bed. There was nothing to give them except water.

"Don't be daft!" Sal was speaking again. "They can't drink that! Haven't you been listening? There's cholera in town. Give them some ale like we had."

Frightened by the mention of disease, as he had not been by the whole situation to date, Adam did as he was told. He might be immune to the cholera, if that was what it was, but the children wouldn't be. One of them spoke.

"Is it time to go to Sairy's, Papa?" he said. He let the children pull him out of the door and down the lane to the house where, in normal times, Mike lived. The woman who opened the door was not Mike, nor even some kind of female replacement. She was old and huge and exactly like Adam's mental image of a witch. There were half a dozen listless children huddled round a small coal fire and Adam's pair joined them without looking back.

He returned to the house and climbed up to the loft. The hats were waiting.

As he worked, he tried, haltingly, to explain what was happening to him, but even to his own ears it sounded mad and unlikely. The others seemed to think it was mad, anyway. There were mutters about hatter's complaint, the mercury poisoning that sent so many of the workers insane. But his brother, if he was his brother, Bob spoke up for him. Losing his wife that way was turning his mind for the moment. What way? He couldn't exactly ask but it couldn't have been the cholera or someone would have been sharper with him about the water. He'd soon be back to normal, said Bob, grinning at Adam with a mouth full of rotten teeth; not quite full - there were a number of gaps.

They did knock off at lunch time. Adam had wondered if they would and had not felt hopeful. Someone brought some stewed tripe and it was shared out eagerly. He tried to eat it and almost gagged. Being hungry evidently didn't extend to tripe. Bob was eyeing his plate and he handed it over without a word.

"Not hungry, our Tim?" Bob didn't wait for an answer but tucked in.

After lunch the work stretched on into the afternoon and early evening. He was aware of sounds below. Sairy had brought the children home and put them to bed. There were noises in the lane. A horse and cart and a man whistling his dog. Older children playing. The sky was growing duller and still the hats filled his time.

About half an hour before 'home' time, he needed to pee. Desperately. Caught the overseer's eye and asked for permission. Made his way downstairs and...

... found himself in the spare bedroom. The phone was ringing and he answered it automatically, reaching the landline handset in their bedroom before the rings could stop. It was Richard. Breathlessly he stumbled his story out to him and became aware of an ominous silence.

"Adam, it's nearly hometime and I know you have to pick Ewan up. I haven't time to listen to your trivia." Trivial! "I'm phoning to say I won't be home tonight. Or tomorrow for that matter. Or ever, apart from coming to pick up my things. I'm only telling you so that you don't contact my firm. Or the police." Adam held the phone away from him, not sure if it was real. He looked around at the turquoise carpet and aqua bedspread, chosen so carefully a lifetime ago. And yet he thought he'd been waiting for this and it was almost a relief.

He heard himself asking faintly what day it was and Richard's puzzled reply that if it mattered, it was Hallowe'en and he'd have to go to the party without him if he wanted to go at all. Ewan would be disappointed. It seemed Halloween would be a joyless celebration this year but he would make an effort for Ewan's sake, and he wasn't quite as upset as he'd thought he would or should be.

He put the phone down and picked up his coat. The card for his mother was already lying on the bed beside it. The clock said 3.01. The children would only just be leaving the classroom.

He hurried and was at the school gates before they came piling out. Ewan was clutching a 'Hallowe'en card', a gaudy thing with a witch and glitter. Callum was behind him, sucking his thumb, all big eyes and untidy hair. Adam looked round for Mike then heard a teacher saying something about Mike not being able to pick Callum up and would he...?

Still in a daze, he shepherded both children home, made hot Vimto and opened a packet of Rich Tea biscuits. The phone rang again and it was Mike, a troubled, nervous Mike, who seemed to be apologising for something and hoping that Callum wasn't rubbing salt in the wound. He became aware of Richard's voice in the background telling Mike to put the phone down. Then everything clicked into place and sent his world spinning into uncomprehending mist and white noise.

Later, a minute later or an hour, but more likely a minute since the children hadn't finished their Vimto, he was aware of Ewan pulling at the hem of his sweatshirt.

"Daddy, there's a man at the door. He's doing a pro - pro - well he wants to know about the hatters who used to live here, and did you get my devil horns for tonight and what time are we going?" Listening to a six year old could be confusing but Adam knew the man at the door didn't want to know about the horns.

Adam pointed to them, attached to the hood of the red velvet onesie on the dining room table, and thought quickly that he'd have to dress Callum as a ghost; sheets were easy. Next time there was a fancy dress party he could send them as twins, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. Appropriate for people who seemed to have fallen down a rabbit hole.

The he crossed the room and opened the door.

Sebastian, tall, red-haired and handsome, was a researcher for television and his admiring first look at Adam turned to real interest when he found he could tell him a lot about the hatters. Adam wondered if he had it all absolutely right. After

all, there was no proof that he'd gone back to a real situation. But then it probably didn't matter since television histories were often full of inaccuracies and nobody really cared. Besides, it would be really hard to prove him wrong. Sebastian seemed conscientious and very, very interested. So interested that when Adam pointed out that he had a ghost costume to pluck from thin air and a party to attend with two small children and no significant other, Sebastian seemed to think that was an invitation for him to join them.

He was still interested when Adam told him about the cards and the sewing, briefly sorry about the loss of the high-powered fashion lifestyle but only for Adam's sake.

"You're well out of it," he said. "It's a rat race out there. And if you get itchy fingers we can always do with someone to help with costumes for shows."

So there was a glimmer of permanence, maybe? Adam smiled. Maybe Halloween was going to prove joyous, after all.