

A secret far scarier than staged Halloween frights

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They scared trick-or-treaters by enacting horrifying scenes in the foyer of their old Victorian house in Newport. There was Mrs. Mesto (not her real name), draped across a table with her arm chopped off, a bloody ax on the floor, or Mr. Mesto swinging from a noose.

I took piano lessons from Mrs. Mesto, and Mr. Mesto worked at a shoe store on Broadway, but they inhabited other skins on Halloween, convincingly portraying vampires and ax murderers, mummies and zombies. Every year it was something gruesomely different, and we couldn't wait to get to their house, grab our candy from a table inside the door and run off the porch screaming!

The Mestos were older than my parents and didn't have any children. Mr. Mesto was slender and of average height, the kind of man whom you might call pleasant-looking, but without any memorable characteristics. He would fit me for school shoes every year, measuring my foot in the metal frame with a sliding scale that I doubt is used anymore.

I took piano lessons from Mrs. Mesto, twice weekly walking up the hill to their house. She was pleasant-looking also, black hair beginning to be laced with gray that she wore pulled back in a bun, a trim figure, a clear complexion. Her nose was very straight. Most notable were her hands, which I had ample opportunity to observe at each lesson. Her fingers were delicate and touched each key with a mesmerizing stroking motion. My attention was often diverted from the lesson to her hands, and she would nudge me awake with her shoulder.

The days approaching Halloween were warm and damp, rich with the fragrance of decomposing leaves on the still-warm earth. The Mestos hired a man to rake the big yellow leaves from their side yard that fell, big as pie plates, from a towering Nor-



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way maple. He did odd jobs, including going from house to house in the summer, a stone sharpening wheel leather-strapped on his back to sharpen knives and scissors.

The evening of Halloween, I went out early because the year before I'd missed out on some good candy. At the Mestos' I climbed the porch alone. The front door was ajar and I pushed it open. Mr. Mesto was dressed in a top hat and tails and Mrs. Mesto was a ballerina. She was bleeding from the mouth and Mr. Mesto took both her hands in his and squeezed them. Mrs. Mesto began screaming at the same time the bones cracked.

I grabbed my candy and flew off the porch!

When I met up with friends later and compared candy, I asked what the Mestos were supposed to be, and they said the Mestos' house was dark and they weren't giving out anything.

The next week, my mother told me Mrs. Mesto had to go away to take care of her mother, who was old and lived in Maine. She signed me up with another teacher, but I didn't like her and quit taking les-

sons.

I glimpsed Mr. Mesto once or twice after Halloween, but then I didn't see him again. The next time I went to get shoes, he wasn't there and somebody new fitted me.

The side yard to the Mestos' house went uncut and the leaves didn't get raked anymore. The paint began peeling and rainwater ran over the gutters. It was always dark at night. Nobody lived there that I could tell.

It was vacant for years. I went up on the porch once and peered through a parlor window. All the furnishings were there, including the piano where I'd learned with Mrs. Mesto, but everything was dusty.

Years later, I brought the subject up to my mother. "Whatever happened?" I asked.

"Such a sad story," said my mother. "Mr. Mesto accused her of having an affair with Neddy Sullivan, you remember: he used to come around and sharpen knives and scissors in the summer. But that was impossible."

"What do you mean it was impossible?"

"I went to school with Neddy's sister, and he was wounded in the war and came back, well, you know, he couldn't make love anymore."

"So, whatever happened to Mrs. Mesto?"

"Nobody knows what happened to either of them. They just moved away."

"How sad," I said.

"Yes. Very sad," said my mother. "She was a lovely person. And she had the most beautiful hands. I always thought that if she hadn't left, you never would've quit the piano."

"That's quite possible," I mused, also remembering Mrs. Mesto's hands and fingers, as I did far more often than one might consider natural. But then, I had good reason.

Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, is the author of the Rhode Island-based novel "Irreplaceable."