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On Halloween, the amazing Toast Man

By Charles Pinning

At the end of October, New England became a stained glass window of glowing colors and pieces of two seasons, the light of the shortening days amplified by the bright yellows and oranges of our trees.

And behind it all, death. The celebration of Halloween was greeted in Newport with the same gleeful fervor of children everywhere, a chance to try on something new, and be someone or something new. To have scary power and score candy.

The Newport Halloween of this story found me at 14 years old and no longer trick-or-treating. My father was away for several days, thanks to his career in the Navy, and my mother was uncharacteristically so sick with a stomach bug that she actually took to bed, something I had never seen before.

My younger brother was 6, and raring to go trick-or-treating.

On Halloween day, my mother called me into her bedroom and confessed to something horrible: she had accidentally tossed out the devil costume she'd bought at Woolworth's for my brother, and



was too sick to sew anything, so I would have to help him come up with something.

I had no idea what to do. A hobo? I'd been a hobo once. A zombie? I could burn a cork and put dark circles around his eyes.

"I don't want to be a hobo," he cried, "and I don't want to be a zombie! I want to be the devil!"

"You can't be the devil. Get that through your head. The costume is gone! Mom's sick and she tossed it by mistake."

"Why?" he howled.

Cripes. I was getting my first taste of what it was like to be a parent, and it wasn't pretty.

"OK. Listen. You like 'The Wizard of Oz.' How about being the Scarecrow? I can get some

straw and stuff it in your pants and shirt and—"

"No!" he wailed.

"Hey. Hey. OK. You can't be the Lion because I don't know how we could do that. You can either be Dorothy or the Tin Man. I can borrow a dress from Connie next door."

Oh, the tears, the tears.

"All right, knock it off. You're gonna be the Tin Man. That's all."

As twilight fell, I had the kid wrapped head to toe in aluminum foil. I washed out a big funnel from the garage and put that on his head.

"What about my face?" he whined. "Doesn't my face have to be silver?"

"I can't paint your face. Wait." I dug through my mother's purse and came up with a tube of bright red lipstick. "Hold still," I said grabbing his jaw. "The Tin Man had red lips. I think. There. Wow. You look great! Here's a bag. Let's go."

After about the third house, the aluminum foil started slipping down his shoulders and his legs. I'd used cellophane tape and rubber bands to hold it in place, but it just wasn't working with the walking. Crap.

"I look stupid!" he wailed.

I balled the foil up and tossed it behind a hedge.

"What are we gonna do?" he cried.

"You're going to have to be somebody wearing lipstick with a funnel on their head."

"Is that something?" He asked.

"Of course it's something," I answered.

"What?"

"It's ... it's Mr. Funnel Head. He's a character in a book I'm reading in school."

"You're lying to me."

He took the funnel off his head and threw it to the ground.

"Fine," I huffed. "Be a piece of toast. Be a rain cloud. I don't care. Let's go home."

Suddenly, he put his arms straight against his sides and stiffened his whole body.

"What the are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm a piece of toast," he said through clenched teeth.

"Very good," I muttered.

"There's hope for you. You're obviously my brother. Onward, Toast Man!"

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, is a Providence novelist.