

**Candy Tampering**  
*By Alexander Saxton*

When I was growing up my mom would get very anxious every year around Hallowe'en. It started with the news stories that always seemed to roll out October first. Local police on the local news solemnly warning parents to check every piece of candy their children got; to be on the lookout for razor-blades in apples and powdered bleach in the pop-rocks: as if these were the things that killed kids, and not guns or cars or poverty.

But my mother was the sort of person who was looking for a reason to be afraid. She didn't like us riding our bikes past the end of the street, because she was afraid 'a Stranger might come along'. At night she would check every door and window twice, and then check every closet in the house. Twice she called the police on the guy from the telephone company, because he was hanging around the telephone pole in our back laneway.

And so October always came as a kind of relief to her, because it came as an excuse to let her worst fears run rampant, because the local police and the local news were telling her: *you're right, it's scary, it's dangerous, so be afraid.*

I say 'always', but I think I just remember those last few years of childhood when she'd gotten really bad. Dad says it started small, got worse as she became more religious. The year I was nine we got back from trick-or-treating and my Mom was sitting on the couch, her eyes red, and with red streaks all down her face, and it was clear she'd been crying from the moment we left. She made me and my sister put down our bags, and we weren't allowed to have any candy until she'd gone through each and every piece. She took so long with each one, checking the wrappers under a bright light and grandma's crossword magnifying glass, that she wasn't done until hours after we'd gone to bed enraged. Must have been three in the morning. When we woke the next day, half our candy was in the garbage because it hadn't passed muster. I pulled a lot of mine out, and when mom found out she screamed at me and cried and tried to ground me. Afterward my dad had a talk with her, and I wasn't grounded, but he apologized and threw the candy back in the garbage. He promised to buy me more, and he did, but bought candy just isn't the same as trick-or-treated, for a kid.

The year I was ten, things came to a head. Mom didn't want us to go out trick-or-treating at all. She had seen it in the news. Satanists were drugging children through the candy. My dad sent us outside to play, but we could hear them arguing inside: her voice raised, her tears, and the low calm rumble of his voice slowly rising to match hers.

They fought for three hours. My sister and I just sitting out back on a pile of old bricks, wearing our halloween costumes as the day faded. My sister quietly crying as she told me every few minutes 'we're missing hallowe'en.'

At last the back door slammed and my father stormed out. He had a red mark on his cheek, and his jaw clenched. When he saw the two of us sitting there his eyes filled with angry tears and he flung out both his arms toward us and said, 'Come on kids, we're going trick-or-treating.'

We each held his hand and he walked us around the house and when we got out front my mom was standing at the door shouting '*what are you doing, Frank, you're going to get them killed.*' He told her very calmly 'I'm taking the kids trick-or-treating, Linda.' At that she ran out of the house after us, reaching for my sister and I, but we both hid behind our dad, and he put out his arms protectively to either side. '*You don't want to stay?*' she howled at us. '*You don't want to stay with mommy?*' But we were both so afraid of her red face and her wide, wild, shining eyes that we just shook our heads and clung to dad's jacket.

At this she shrank to the pavement.

'You don't love me,' she told us. 'You don't love me. You don't know what you're doing. You don't know what you're doing.'

Dad just put his arms around us and steered us away.

'We'll be back at 8,' he said.

When we were down at the end of the block he told us, 'I'm sorry about your mother, kids. She's going through a really tough time right now, and I don't know how to help her.'

'Is she going to be okay?' my sister asked.

He put his arm around her and said,

'Yes honey; it's all going to be okay.'

She believed him. She was just a little kid. But I was just old enough to realize from the way he said it that he was trying to convince himself, as much as us.

Fuck.

Well, it was halloween and we were still kids, and before long we were having fun running up to the houses and being as cute as we could, and being as scary as we could, and being as silly as we could, and each time we ran back down to the sidewalk, our dad would be standing there with a big sad smile to tell us how great we were doing. By the end of the night we each had a full pillowcase, and my sister was half-asleep being carried in the crook of my dad's arm.

We got home after dark, and I was afraid that mom would still be lying on the pavement crying out front, but she had gone to her room, and didn't come out to bother us, even as we sat on the

living room floor and counted all out spoils and dad told us 'you can have two pieces, then it's bed.'

But when I went to bed, I couldn't really sleep. All I could see when I closed my eyes were the red tearstreaks running down mom's face; the bright black rings of her tear-clogged eyelashes; the terror blazing in her wide eyes. I pulled the covers up over my head and I cried for a long, long time.

Eventually you run out of tears. That blessed, numb calm came over me, and I lay there for a while, just watching the patterns of the popcorn ceiling.

After a while, I still hadn't fallen asleep, and I decided I was hungry. All those tears had left me hollow, and now I wanted to fill myself with something sweet. Something that when I ate it would remind me of the feeling of happiness.

Well, I had halloween candy just out in the living room.

So I got up quietly. Crept to the door. Opened it as softly as I could, then padded down the carpeted hall toward the living room. I could see faintly by the moonlight which drained down the skylight above the couch. There was a faint rustle in the living room ahead.

Of course, my first childish thought was that a burglar had come to steal our candy.

But as I slowed, and peeked around the corner, what I found was the dark mass of my mother, piled up in her blankets on the couch. Her hair was wild, and she wasn't crying anymore, but her shoulders were shaking a with little suppressed sobs. And yet, despite her trembling breaths, she was intent as she hunched over something in her hands, and her movements were purposeful, deliberate.

My sister's trick-or-treat bag was on the coffee table. There were a few full-sized bars we'd gotten from the rich house down the street. My mother had carefully unwrapped one of them.

Keeping her fingers cold with a bowl of ice-water and a kitchen towel on the couch-cushion beside her, she was fiddling with the chocolate bar. I wasn't sure what she was doing until something in her fingers caught the dim moonlight from above.

A razor blade.

I watched, in stunned silence and confusion as she slowly, slowly worked the blade into soft chocolate and nougat until it was mostly hidden. Then, carefully... carefully... she closed the wrapper up, using a dab from a gluestick to almost make it look as though the mylar had never been opened at all.

After that she drew a new razor from the pack, and reached for my bag of candy.

I took a trembling half-step forward. I said,

“...Mom?”

And I'll never forget the brightness of her eyes in the dark.