

## **Put your Toys Away - PT1**

“Trick or treat...!” It was a groan and drone of three collective voices.

“Oh! Look at you all dressed up!” The umpteenth housewife with her bowl of candy smiled at the door, only just beginning to fully open her eyes. “You’re all such adorable...! Such...”

“Look—” Roxy interjected with an already annoyed huff. “Yeah, we get it— we’re sexy, not cute,” she roughly shook her garbage bag sagging with sweet morsels already. “Can we get the candy now?”

And right beside the haughty and bothered-looking nurse with a hem far too high for standard hospital regulations, a much more demure-looking schoolgirl with a low-cut polo vest over her bulging button-up at the chest whispered in. “Uh...uhm... Please?”

The woman with the candy looked as skeptical as ever, staring down the trio. As the night had gone on, courtesy of the feistiest of the trio, Roxy, eliciting candy from any of the adults was trying to act more like a shakedown than a simple give-and-take.

Michelle, dressed in her snug, form-fitting spandex suit, fake tail, black face paint on her nose, artificial whiskers, cat ear headband and all sighed with her pillowcase of candy sagging in front of her.

“Candy?” Roxy impatiently shook her bag again. “You got to see our costumes, so how about it?”

The woman was obviously intimidated, and only one of them on that porch was willing to deal with any of this at all. At this point, all Michelle could be thankful for was Roxy being satisfied enough to only get a small handful of candy.

“Thank you...” Michelle and Alice thanked the woman they’d just robbed, scampering down the steps after their pack leader.

“Jeez, Roxy, why do you have to be like that with every house?” Michelle nudged her friend on the shoulder. “We’re trick-or-treaters! Not candy bandits!” Bandits maybe not, sure, but trick-or-treater was a title in and of itself belonging to a demographic much younger than them.

It was a cool, Halloween night in the suburbs of their small town. Their final year of high school was finally upon them and colleges were on their plates as the next big adventure. An adventure they’d all be departing on separately.

“Mitch, you could *hear* it in her voice!” Roxy kept the lead, waving her bag annoyedly, just missing a cute little train engine and bottle of mustard walking by. “Believe me, I wanna do this too, but it gets so annoying having to deal with those stupid looks all the time! So what if we dressed like this? We put on costumes, didn’t we?”

“I guess...” Michelle conceded, somewhat, looking down at herself. Her bodysuit was certainly conforming, accentuating her curves to a point that made it quite clear she was no immature kitty. Awkwardly, she used one of her black nail-polished fingers to adjust the lip of her catsuit that was cutting into her bum... Why couldn’t she just have worn leggings...?

Michelle looked over at their other quiet friend. “Alice?” she paused to adjust her fluffy collar, jingling its bell incidentally. “How you holding up?”

“Good...uhm...” Alice murmured, trying for the thousandth time of the night to either somehow close her shirt more and add length to her impossibly short skirt. Poor girl. All the brains and body in the world, yet none of the charisma and confidence to use it... “Roxy...did we have to wear stuff like this?” the shy girl asked.

Quietly, Michelle recounted previous Halloweens spent together. Typically Alice’s favorite choice was the ghost underneath the sheet... Obviously she was out of her element.

Roxy stopped in place, nearly making the other two girls run right over each other. Pivoting on her heel, Roxy said, “What? Don’t tell me you two are actually letting those people get to you?” Hooking the point where her nurse’s pseudo-dress met at the first button beneath her chest, Roxy pulled low and bent low.

“We’re *graduating* this year, ladies! Didn’t we agree we we’re gonna take advantage of this stuff as much as we could?” she stood back up, averting her eyes. “We...we won’t get to do this stuff again, you know...”

Instantly the mood had plummeted.

“We...we’ll still be able to do stuff when we’re all home on break?” Alice helpfully suggested. Michelle perked up at that.

“Yeah, I mean, she has a point...” Michelle smiled, nudging her quiet friend’s shoulder. “Even better, Miss Valedictorian over here is gonna get to tell us all about her wacky adventures at MIT!”

“Stop that!” Alice bashfully smiled. “We...we don’t know that yet...!”

“Alice,” Roxy sighed, “you really gotta work on that whole confidence thing of yours. Maybe if you put your back– mm,” she pretended to clear her throat, “Sorry, put your *BREASTS* into it, maybe you could seduce some of these dads into giving us a little more candy!”

Michelle couldn’t help but crack a grin, yet Alice was immediately trying to hike up her schoolgirl vest again, like she had a snowball’s chance in hell of covering anything up. The one thing about her looks that wasn’t explicitly risqué were the simple maryjanes she wore underneath her baggy leg warmers.

But finally coming to her friend’s aid, Michelle groaned. “Look, Roxy, I get the whole desire to dress up all cute and stuff, but maybe normal costumes would’ve gone better?” She noisily rustled the small amount of candy that could’ve been much more in her pillow case.

Roxy crossed her arms. A point had been made that she couldn’t refute. Though she could deflect. “W-well, it’s not my fault so many stupid houses won’t open up their doors to us! It’s just cleavage, like what? Do they think we’re keeping guns in there or something?”

“I wanted to be a ghost...” Alice quietly added.

And yet ghosts were just sheets, which is why Roxy had taken full control of the night’s wardrobe.

“Well too late for that,” Roxy glanced down at her phone. “Crap. Halloween’s almost over, too...” As forceful and mouthy as their headstrong friend could be, she for the most part respected rules, though only the ones that did not inherently inhibit her own interests. Candy was an interest, sure, but neither girl would disagree with wanting the memory of one last Halloween’s eve together more than anything else.

“And I think we’ve seen just about everybody in the neighborhood willing to give us candy...” Michelle panned the houses aligning their sidewalk and the one across the street. They’d certainly gotten stares; passive comments, even. Whatever was left they hadn’t directly tried, soccer moms with their elementary sons and daughters were likely spreading rumors of their arrival to unsuspecting candy-givers. That was at least something Michelle could get rightfully annoyed over.

“So what?” Roxy dropped her hands at her sides. “There’s still like fifteen minutes left. We need to get at least one more place, right?”

Alice was turning in place herself, absentmindedly tugging down at her skirt. “I don’t think I see any...” Thankfully there was no breeze tonight, otherwise not only would Alice’s massive GPA be public knowledge, but so would her turquoise panties and the apple-bottom hiding behind them.

“Not around here, at least,” Michelle blew a gust of air into a strand of dangling hair. “Better get moving if we’re gonna get another house willing to take us...” They collectively looked around, finding that an invisible force field was starting to form around them.

The trio trudged on.

It was an unfortunate silence amongst the trio, having their collective grief be drowned out by the sound of speeding cars and periodic flashes of passing headlights.

“It’s the main road...” Alice muttered disappointedly, as if the other two needed reminding. Candy simply didn’t exist on streets like this. Hardly the Halloween atmosphere of going door to door if it meant having to yell over all the things that were just a part of normal life; ruining the magic of a time that comes just once a year.

“Yep,” Michelle popped her lips glumly. “Better turn around...”

“Before we get flagged by a cop...” Roxy mutally miffed. “The way Alice looks, they’d think *we’re* the ones selling out treats...”

“Hey...!”

Michelle groaned with a glance at her own timekeeper. There really wasn’t much point at all now. With just a few minutes left and porch lights previously once lit already beginning to die, the signs of a holiday well-celebrated were starting to show.

Swinging her pillow case aimlessly, Michelle chose on herself to be the bearer of bad news, “Why don’t we just call it a night?”

“What?”

“Michelle! Really?”

In unison both members of the trynamic trio had accosted her, even Alice with a much more dampened demeanor.

“W-well...yeah? There’s no time left! Everybody’s turning off their lights?”

Judging by Roxy’s eyebrows, she didn’t like her friend’s words one damn bit. “Well *I’m* not ready to give up. People don’t *actually* stop at 8, do they?”

“That’s when parents start taking their kids home?” Michelle gestured to the desolate sidewalks with a wave.

“But that’s not when people have to stop giving candy,” Roxy countered. “What if we make a second trip? Hit up a few more of the same houses? Bet they still have candy they want to give out? We’d be doing them a favor!”

Objectively it had some basis, but it didn’t stop Michelle from her own frown. “Roxy, I don’t think anyone wants a ‘second time’ from us...”

“W-well, at least I’m *trying* to think of something!” she spat defensively.

“And I’m not?” Michelle scoffed, “Who do you think even took us to the main road?”

“Yeah, the absolute last place to waste our time!”

“Guys...?” A third voice murmured, but was promptly ignored and spoken over.

Michelle, offended and hurt, was yelling right back at her equally fierce friend.

“*Sorry* I didn’t have a fucking GPS to take us to candyland! Maybe we wouldn’t have had to do so much searching if you didn’t make us all dress like strippers!”

“Excuse me?” Roxy’s head reeled back. “So my costume wasn’t good enough for you? My bad, I didn’t realize you were such a prissy bitch!”

“Guys...!” Alice tried once more. Alice failed once again.

“Why did you even pick *these*? My ass has been hanging out all night!”

“What ass? Please! If you think you have anything, you’d be better off taking a look at—”

“Guys!” Still far from a raging yell, but loud enough to indicate that their demure friend meant business, Alice was already panting, now right between the two. “Can...can you both just shut up?”

It wasn't quite a cus, but Alice's tongue was known by them to be cleaner than the silver spoons Michelle's grandmother kept in her china cabinet. And that was saying a lot. So needless to say, both Roxy and Michelle had gone silent from sheer surprise.

Alice didn't need to say anything further. If it was enough to make her shout, it was enough to make the girls reflect. But she did say more.

"Why...? Why are you two fighting? This is our *last* Halloween for a while!"

Roxy without her bark could only rub her arm and look the other way. Michelle had resorted to admiring the homes with pitch black interiors. They'd been put in their place and they knew it.

"Look..." Alice tiredly pointed at a block some ways down the street on the other side. "We haven't gone there yet, right?"

"...No." Roxy dejectedly muttered.

"Don't think so..." Michelle spoke slowly.

Alice took her time with each embarrassed friend, pushing them from the back just to start their engines. "Well come on! We're gonna try one more spot at least!"

And so they did. They walked but they hardly talked, both Michelle and Roxy magnetizing to either side of the concrete slabs that they walked on, held together by the glue that their third friend was.

"No porch lights are on..." Michelle kept to her frown. "Does this take us back to the main road?"

"Don't know..." Roxy was turning her head, looking all over. "Not really from this area..." and only here because legend foretold where to score the big candy bars. "...Maybe a GPS would've been smart..." And finally with a sign of humility, Michelle was quietly smiling again.

"Oh, right there," Alice pointed out a sign. "Dead End."

"Dead end?" Roxy kept walking.

"Yeah, like, there's an end. No connection to another road?"

“It could be a cul de sac? Alice suggested.

And yet there was hardly a collection of houses. Merely one, actually. “Oh. Weird.”

Dead end certainly was a dead end. The road came to a sharp end, multiple houses away from actual ones built on the sides. Bushes, trees and dirt sloping off the road covered everything in between, fashioning the old, light-purple painted home as a peninsula among a sea of dark, night-stained green.

All it took was a mere glance at the rickety wooden porch for Michelle to squint her eyes uncomfortably. Alice was the furthest one from the home and the closest to leaving. Poor girl was probably regretting that she even suggested this route.

“Yeah...” Michelle was already turning the other way, “Let’s not.”

“Let’s not? Are you kidding?” With a long arm and extended finger Roxy put a spotlight on the first floor bay window. They had all seen it, which is exactly why Michelle and Alice were even more eager to leave. “Look! See? A light is on!”

“It’s a *TV*, Roxy!” Michelle moaned, “They’re busy! No candy! Shoo-shoo!”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea either...” Alice kept half her face behind the black catsuit. “They probably aren’t giving any out...”

“Come on! Where’s your sense of adventure! It’s the *last* house! Can’t we just try it! Alice, don’t let this *scaredy-cat* bother you!”

If only Michelle’s furry ears were real, because her fake whiskers sure as hell were twitching. Courtesy of her mouth, of course.

The home’s vinyl siding was starting to show its age in places where it hadn’t held up. A narrow stone path was visibly touching the porch, yet it didn’t stop all the unkempt grass from bleeding over. Save for the glow of light through the one window, it didn’t excuse the eerie darkness that radiated from each one on the second floor. Maybe by this point it was confirmation bias just to get them out of there and somewhere safe and warm, but the home did seem unsettling.

“*No*, Roxy!” Michelle vehemently denied. “Go up by yourself if you want, but there’s no way Alice and I are going!”

Truly believing she spoke for the pair, Roxy in disbelief tried to single out the bashful schoolgirl.

“Alice? Are you serious? Come on! Just go up with me! Then we can remember this as the night Michelle actually dressed the part for how scared she was!”

“I’d...rather not...I got enough candy anyway, so...”

And before Roxy could fire another verbal shot at her friends, Michelle doubled down.

“Roxy, no means no! Ugh, it’s already late and that house gives me *and* Alice the creeps! Enough! We’re turning back! That’s like, Halloween 101! No porch light, so no—!”

And her voice went quiet the moment it flashed. A dull, distant fluorescent hum was coming from down the street. And just before it was a widening, cheshire grin from their local nurse just back from her lapdance.

Roxy didn’t even need to look. The reflection of her friend’s faces said plenty enough.

And after a moment’s pause,

“Nope!” Michelle suddenly declared. In a single second she was already turned and briskly walking away. “No-no-no-no-no-nope! Abso-fucking-lutely nooot~!” she jovially hummed her terrors seething from the heart, wanting so desperately to be back home just then.

Alice was already chasing after Michelle and Roxy, as disgruntled as ever sprinted up to and past them, sliding right between them and their escape.

“Whoa-whoa! Where do you two think you’re going?”

Trying not to let the fear show, Michelle’s eyes drifted to the side. “...Home.”

Alice’s expression couldn’t afford the same subtleties.

And with the haughtiest, shit-eating grin the upcoming college student had ever mustered in their decade-long friendship, Roxy looked nothing short of absolutely pleased as punch. “Oh? What’s that? Awh! Poor baby scared of getting some candy?”

“No!” Michelle spat out. “Poor baby’s scared of getting her head chopped off by some psycho!”

“Roxy...can’t we just go?” Alice tugged on her arm with a plea. “Yes, we’re scared...!”



“Well we can’t! Look! They specifically turned their light on for us! Probably because they heard you two shaking in your shoes so badly!”

“Yeah, and she’s not gonna hear any more because I am *leaving!*” Michelle tried walking forward, but Roxy held her in place.

“Come on...!” Roxy shifted from her mighty-tude to her own form of begging. “*Please!* I promise!” she laughed, “It’s just some normal house with probably a normal granny in it! You know how they get! They’re just too old to take care of their houses! But not old enough to stop giving out candy!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’m not falling for it...”

Maybe not Michelle, but Alice?

“Oh...what do ya bet everyone’s been scared like you, Michelle? Poor granny over there hasn’t seen *one* kid in a costume tonight! She’s probably still got an entire bowl of candy left!”

Alice was smart. Book smart. Body blessed. Also candy gullible...

“R-really...?” Alice spoke up, and by that point Michelle regretfully knew that her gears were already turning. The moment the possibility of sweets had been mentioned, Alice was working to evaluate the plausibility of her hypothesis. Sure, they were all there that night for memories, but candy wasn’t exactly a nonfactor either.

Alice’s intrigue was the blood in the water that sent Roxy in their minds like a swarm of sharks.

“Of course!” Roxy insisted with her chest puffed out. “Believe me, whenever my grandma does Halloween she’s *always* giving out those giant chocolate bars! Snickers? Twix?”

And of course, Alice’s favorite was twix. True or not, a buzzword was a buzzword and Alice was looking thoroughly buzzed.

“Michelle...” her one and only ally drifted to the other side twiddling her thumbs, “Maybe Roxy’s right...?”

“Alice, not you too...?” Michelle outwardly groaned. She glanced over at the haunted house once more, wishing the front light would just go off, or that old noisy bulb would just burn out. Anything to keep them from going. It surely was all superstition, but precisely because of the way it felt, the cat girl had zero qualms listening to her fears.

“Then it’s settled!” Roxy jumped to the end, pushing Michelle forward on her heels. “And once we get all this yummy candy, we’ll have a grand old time laughing at Michelle for being so scared all the time!”

“Being scared is what keeps you alive, you know!” Michelle tried to control her shaky tone, but was frankly too busy being a hypocrite for letting her friends supersede her emotions.

Of all people, Alice was the first one to mount the rickety wooden steps, creaking with each shoe on each old and weathered plank. Michelle was the second, albeit forced, finally with Roxy from right behind, bulldozing the whole way.

“Alice? Can you ring the doorbell?” Roxy asked with her hands plenty full of a frightful and skittish friend.

“M-me?” Suddenly Alice wasn’t so high on her imaginary sugar rush anymore.

“Well I can’t because our fraidy-cat Michelle is gonna go running if I let go of her.”

“No I won’t!” Yes she absolutely would.

“Uh-huh,” Roxy’s pupils were doing circles.

“Alice, please?” Roxy begged with a cute look in her eye, but not too cute. Not kitty cat cute. She didn’t have the costume for that. The one who did looked like she was ready to use her claws. “Chocolate bars? Big...chocolatey ones?”

And with the extension of her pointer finger, Alice plunged the entire group into terror the moment the plastic-shelled silicone button moved inward on its small plastic housing. The walls of the old home were thin enough for them to hear the ring-ding-dong of the bell inside.

Michelle was nearly ready to close her eyes, trying to shift out of her friend’s grip. “Please don’t come...please don’t come...!”

And in the dead of night, hoping for the absolute best, they all waited in sheer silence beyond the dying echo of the bell. Alice sidestepped to the edge of the porch just to peer through a tight angle in the bay window.

“The TV is still on...”

Michelle couldn't contain her sound of glee. Thank God! Yes! Nobody is coming! No candy! No scary murderer!

"That can't be right," Roxy scoffed, looking up at the humming and buzzing bulb. "Their porch light came on for a reason?"

"Maybe they are actually old and just accidentally flipped the switch?" Michelle frantically reasoned while she thrashed, finally breaking free of her friend's disheartened grip. Quite giddily she pranced off the steps, ever so glad to be touching pavement again.

"Sorry girls!" Michelle in her victory laugh drooped her tongue and pulled down her eyelid, "Maybe next year! No spooky houses for—!"

Then the front door in a creaky goan swung on its rusted hinges.

"Oh...! Oh my! And what are you girls supposed to be?"

An old woman, of all people, stood in the doorway with thin wispy hair, echoing memories of a shade that might've once been blonde. Her wrinkles were as prominent as her slouch; a collective byproduct of her well-lived years into senior citizenry.

And with but a single look, Roxy's smile just about etched in stone how funny a tale this was going to be at subsequent meetups. Michelle the scaredy-cat, dressed like one too, forever known as the baby college girl too afraid to go trick-or-treating with her friends at night. The future was writing itself in Michelle's aggravated brain that very moment.

It was the first time that night Roxy so proudly casted her magic spell.

"Trick-or-treat!"

"Trick-or-treat...!" Alice added excitedly, likely fully buying now into Roxy's still-baseless promises about some treasure trove of candy awaiting them.

There wasn't fear anymore, yet purely out of spite and sore loser-y behavior, Michelle stayed on the sidewalk.

"Oh goodness!" The old woman marveled. "Don't you two just look *darling!*" Huh. Their first actual compliments of the night. Real-sounding. After all, no one was blunt enough like Roxy to criticize their life choices directly in front of them.

“Such a cute nurse!” she remarked, and Roxy, overjoyed to simply be on a winning streak, let out a prideful ‘hmmf!’

Alice came next. “Oh! And are you supposed to be a student? Awe, you remind me of when I went to grammar school!” the old woman chuckled.

Alice giggled back bashfully, giving the indignant Michelle quite the view of her upskirt from standing so many steps above her.

“Oh? And is that your friend?” her boney finger traveled between both young adults and down at a voluptuous black cat shrouded in the night.

“Oh, her?” Roxy remarked with joking disdain, “She’s nobody! Just a scaredy-cat!” How childish of Roxy to cling to a nickname like that, but also how fitting.

Michelle quietly grumbled to herself.

“Wh-what is she dressed as? Oh...my eyes aren’t what they used to be...! E-excuse me, sweetheart?” she called out. The woman could have been calling on anyone. Anybody. Maybe even Alice or Roxy? Old people had bad ears, so that meant bad volume control as well. Right?

“Sweetheart?” the woman called again. “C-could you come up to the steps, please? I’d love to see your costume!” Then she pulled Roxy in for a random aside. “I-I have a granddaughter, but she lives in the next town over with my daughter... I couldn’t see them tonight, but I get to see her costume tomorrow...!”

“Michelle...” Alice dogpiled on, sympathetic both to the old and her desire for candy.

Michelle didn’t want to simply out of pride now. Just so she didn’t have to look at her stupid friend’s face. And yet, giving into that momentary frustration meant being remembered as the bitch that wouldn’t make some random, lonely old woman happy for probably the rest of her dang life.

And just a few creaky steps later, the bell on her cat collar jingling all the way, and the woman was openly elated.

“Oh goodness! Look at you! Such a cute kitty cat!”

*A kitty with B cups...*

“And do you have a tail, too?”

Roxy from the unseen side nudged her head, telling Michelle to spin.

With a less than subtle sigh, Michelle did turn, showing off her fur-covered wireframe tail that was poised just above her pronounced bum where the rest of her catsuit stopped.

“You *do* have a tail!” she chuckled. “Aren’t you all just *darling!*”

Three collective voices, all giggling, all with different feelings and intentions.

“Oh!” the woman’s wrinkly hands wiggled in self-surprise. Her body turned one way and her head the other. “You girls must want some candy, right?”

Roxy grew smug, Alice looked giddy, Michelle stayed indifferent.

“Let me...just...” the woman muttered to herself as she stepped deeper into her home, looking both ways for a bowl of candy that visibly did not exist. “Now where did I...? Oh shoot.”

Shoot? No candy? Go home? Finally? Admittedly this was far more tame than Michelle’s wildest fears had expected, though that didn’t change them being on the dead-end of a neighborhood they didn’t live in, standing on the porch of an old home that some random old woman lived in, all in the dead of night.

A quite sorrowful looking granny turned back to face them, sorry as ever. “Oh I’m sorry...! I forgot to bring the candy up from my basement...!”

“Oh...” Alice quietly voiced from the sidelines.

“Alice,” Michelle impatiently spoke up. “We’ll just stop by a convenience store on the way home...”

“No, it’s fine...” AKA, it simply was not the same. As Michelle’s grandfather liked to say, ‘free food is good food.’

“If you girls would like, you could come and get it?”

It was an instant reaction from the socially awkward scholar. “Really?”

“Wh-what?” Michelle went wide-eyed and Roxy furrowed her brow as well. She had a double-take, looking between the smiling woman and her best friend. “N-no,” she quickly turned her down. “Look, we really appreciate the offer, but we should really get going...!”

“What? No!” Alice fired in a sudden outburst. Quite literally the loudest she had been all night. Both Michele and Roxy looked at her in surprise. “We *can't* leave! She has candy!”

“Yeah, Alice, in her *basement*. Come on! We'll buy something on the way home! You can have some of my candy too!” Why was she acting like this? Getting candy from a stranger's basement? Alice may have excelled in the books and flunked in the streets, but common sense was called just that for a very good reason...!

“Alice, it's probably not a smart idea...” Finally, Roxy was willing to be her co-conspirator for the sake of reason. Even *she* wasn't hot-headed enough to throw themselves in the dangerous unknown just to prove a point.

“So you aren't coming in...?” the old woman asked, just hinging on a tone of disappointment. “Well...that's alright,” she offered a weak smile. “I'm sure my granddaughter will take some with her tomorrow.”

“Michelle! Roxy!” Alice kept raising her voice. She was fidgeting and for some reason her sudden lust for candy cared not for the bounce in her revealing chest and flimsy skirt. Was she about to stomp her feet?

“Alice! *No!*” Both girls of a saner mind erupted in unison.

“Thanks, granny, but we're all set. Happy Halloween,” Roxy bid the stranger goodbye, stepping down the porch first and then Michelle second. And then...

“Alice?” Michelle called after her stationary friend. “Come on? We're leaving?”

“...Just a second.”

“What?”

“Just a second!” she whined. And in yet another shocking turn of events, Roxy and Michelle shared a look of complete bewilderment as they watched their friend step inside the house.

“*Alice!*”

“What are you doing?!”

She was gone. Inside the stranger’s home with the door still hanging wide open, perfectly vulnerable for an army of mosquitoes had it been a warmer time of year.

“What the fuck is she doing?” Michelle openly outraged.

“Don’t you think Alice is acting a little weird...?” Roxy shuffled uncomfortably. “Like, yeah, she likes candy, but not *that* much...”

“I don’t know...” Michelle muttered, thinking of something she very much did not want to do. “Christ, I don’t know? It’s our last Halloween together? Maybe now that it’s over reality’s catching up with her, or whatever.”

They stood there awkwardly, hoping the situation could just resolve itself.

“You know we have to go in and get her?”

“Yeah...” Michelle groaned painfully, “yeah I do...”

Roxy was the first to move and Michelle’s only inspiration to follow suit. Each step creaked with their ascent and they came up to the doorway, peering down a long, empty hall.

“God...Alice...!” Michelle cried with her actual hairs sticking straight up. “How are your parents gonna send you to college if you can’t even practice stranger danger...!”

And with a fraidy-cat held on the visiting nurse’s arm, they crossed the threshold.

Leave it to the feline’s nose to be bothered first.

“Ew...” Michelle gave the connecting rooms along the main walkway cursory glances, shrouded in darkness, save for a dim bulb over a kitchen sink and bright CRT television on mute by a puffy-curtained window. “It smells like...old people.”

“Yeah, well I think you saw who was living here...” Roxy walked with a spine far straighter and an aura with much more confidence, but even she was looking twice or thrice more around them.

A dull, yellowed wallpaper coated the halls and the carpet beneath their feet seemed worn and frayed along the edges that were never quite cut properly on the day they were installed. If only the original carpenter wasn’t likely retired by now to fix their handiwork.

The hallway was washed in a lukewarm yellow light, shining through a poor man's chandelier; a fixture hanging by a decorative chain and partially shrouded by a stained glass housing.

"Wait!" Michelle pulled back on Roxy's arm and the nurse nearly jumped out of her skin. Just as she realized it was her friend, simultaneous relief and frustration overcame her.

"Don't *do* that!" Roxy hissed and her friend giggled apologetically, if only for a second.

"Like...shouldn't we close the door, or something? What if an actual criminal or something comes in here? Granny's losing her candy, but I'd rather she didn't lose her jewelry or whatever too?"

"*No*. We do *not* close the door, Michelle! Don't you watch horror movies!? That's textbook!"

A quiet silence ensued with a sheepish look on her fraidy-cat's face.

"Oh. That's right," Roxy found a moment to be sly, "you don't."

"Yeah, because stupid stuff like this is plenty enough scary for me! Now will you move it?" Michelle shoved her behind. "Let's get Alice and go already!"

"Yeah, I know...! Got any ideas where she might be? Can't you sniff out her scent or anything?"

"Dogs do that! Not cats!"

"Then make like one and sneak around!"

Ugh. Roxy was definitely climbing on her friend's shitlist. The pair proceeded, ruling out all the darkened areas of the home primarily from superstition and wariness. But most importantly, desperately hoping that their candy-crazed friend wasn't actually that stupid.

"Roxy!" Michelle whispered loudly.

Her friend who was busy snooping through an open crack in a closet door turned her head.

"Yeah?"

"I...I think she's in the basement..."

"What?"



“Come look!”

Roxy joined Michelle at the end of the long hallway, walking behind the stairs leading to the floor above and finding an open doorway leading down a set of steps.

The deeper they went, the more surreal it felt. “Alice...!”

More aged wood descended to the home’s sub-level, and with every sensible force imaginable pushing against their objective and willing stupidity, Roxy and Michelle fought against the common sense their friend apparently lacked as they tip-toed down the basement stairs.

Not a word was spoken, but collective relief was shared in that the basement seemed well lit.

Michelle nearly stumbled forward ahead of her friend down the stairs once Roxy whispered.

“Do you think she’s down here...?”

“Probably...? The basement light was on? That woman said her candy was down here?”

“Yeah, but I dunno...old people forget to do stuff all the time, right? Like turning off the lights?”

“Wait...I see them!”

Michelle was half-expecting the secretive operation to continue, but rushed after Roxy the moment she stood and reached the bottom of the stairs. Roxy tripped partially over once Michelle magnetized to her, but both their eyes fell on the basement in its entirety.

A couple bulbs hung over a sea of shelves and boxes. Knick-knacks and trinkets laid all over the place. Dusty and polished, worn and new. Jars and vases, twine chairs, dated electronics, books, VHS and cassettes all over.

“It’s like a time capsule...” Probably because it was.

But all felt stable and sane once they laid their eyes on the youngest thing in the room.

They cried in unison. “Alice!” Both girls stormed over to her, catching wind of them with chipmunk cheeks full of chocolate.

“Heyh guysh!” Alice smiled and waved, a half-eaten candy bar in hand.

“Could you not wait?” Michelle sighed helplessly, spotting the half-open bag of store-bought candy on a nearby table. “What are you even thinking? Don’t you get what you just did?! I’m dressed as a cat for the night, Alice, not your mom!”

“Seriously, Alice,” Roxy jumped on in. “Dumb move.”

Maybe now that she wasn’t hungry anymore and was back to herself, a bashful realization was finally reaching her head.

“Ahye…” she paused to swallow, “I just wanted some candy, I guess… I don’t know what happened… I just wanted some really badly; like I couldn’t wait for it.”

“Well hopefully before next year you can practice some actual impulse control,” Roxy held up the bag of candy like it was radioactive. “Where is that woman anyways? We’re leaving, Alice. This was dumb, but at least you’re fine.”

A shy finger drifted over to a separate corridor of shelves in the room. “She said she was gonna get the rest of it over there… I know I shouldn’t have gone in, but… please? Can we please wait? I promise I’ll leave as soon as she gives us the rest! You were right, Roxy! She has a ton of candy! We can all share it, too!”

And Michelle was quietly observing the one with the most bravado, now drowning in the consequences of their own actions.

“Listen, Alice,” Roxy grabbed her shoulder, but an older voice emerged.

“Oh? When did your friends arrive?” the old bleached blonde head of hair returned from the shadows with two more unopened packages of candy in hand. “Did you girls want some candy too?” she asked as she shuffled over to the table, setting her current load down. But she was already off to the races again, muttering, “I think I still have a few more…!”

“Wait!” Michelle called, and thankfully the woman’s hearing was still functioning. “It’s fine—thank you for the candy, but we really need to get going!”

“Michelle…!” Alice’s whine sent unnerving chills up her friend's spine. Was this even Alice anymore? Local scholar known for crossing to the other side of the street just to avoid walking by a stranger? Her delicate fingers had residues of melty chocolate and specks of sparkled sugar were on her lips.

Thankfully their muscle was backing them up. “Alice! No, we’re *done!*” Roxy barked, putting a pout on the schoolgirl the moment the bag of candy was swiped off the table.

“Hey...!”

“You’ll get it once we get outside...!” Roxy sighed, holding the treasure nearly up to the wooden beams supporting the ground floor. Alice jumped and hoped, standing on her toes without a single sense of modesty left in her book-smarts brain. “And please! Stop jumping around like you’re actually a grade schooler!”

“Oh dear,” a sudden revelation struck the stranger’s voice, like her unknown case of dementia had hit a point of clarity. “I’ve been keeping you girls up all night, haven’t I? Oh...! I’m so sorry! I...I just got so excited seeing some kids this year; I didn’t get a single trick-or-treater this year...”

“We...we appreciate the apology,” at least two of them maybe did, “but we really need to go... It’s getting late,” Michelle explained, and feeling obligated, her hands swept one of the other unopened bags into her pillow case. Thank goodness she was just an old woman. A cloudy mind, sure, but only that. Otherwise their friend would’ve been chock full of blades by now, most likely. A very morbid thought, one that suddenly had Michelle scaring herself.

“Can we take a hike now?” Roxy gingerly pushed Alice on the back forward, certain to not let such an impressionable girl with such a large caboose bring up the rear.

“Yes,” Michelle tidied her candy bag, tying a knot on her case. Leave now and not a second later.

But just a second later, “Oh! Wait!”

The trio stopped but the woman moved like they were about to vanish.

“Wait! Wait! Oh, I’m so sorry!” she hurried her frail body over to another pile of knick-knacks, happening upon something that came like whiplash. How hadn’t they noticed this coming down? It was massive...!

A tall, bright pink two-story home sat on one of the woman’s large wooden circular tables. A fresh front lawn of the finest green imaginable. As green as long as the plastic grass remained so, at least.

Sloped roofs, a garage, windows for days, and more. Either make the house a little bigger or give the economy just a bit longer to deteriorate, and it would've been enough to make any money-scraping homebuyer jealous...!

“Uhm...it's a very nice dollhouse?” Michelle commented, sharing a ‘why does this concern me?’ look with her friend, and finally even Alice regained some focus to notice too.

“Oh, thank you, sweetheart. You see, my mother got me this when I was around your age!”

“That's...nice...” Were her glasses working? Maybe around their age minus another ten years or so?

“I wanted to surprise my granddaughter tomorrow with this! But...” she glumly glanced over at the stairs. “I'm not quite the young'un I used to be! It's a little hard for me to get up and down the stairs, so carrying things too is just...”

Yet the chase had been cut once Roxy strolled over. “--So you need one of us to bring it upstairs for you, right?”

*Nice one, Roxy! Get us out of here!*

The woman's eyes shined brighter than the dingy bulb above their heads.

“*Oh* you will? Thank you so much, sweetie!”

“Alice? Think you can stop licking your fingers and help me lift?”

Caught right before her third finger was about to slip between her lips, Alice's embarrassed hands were suddenly hiding behind her skirt. “I...I wasn't doing anything...!”

The pair set to work, guiding the massive toy upstairs while Michelle played supervisor, offering only the best words of encouragement to finish the job faster and get home. This was feeling like the weirdest and most adult-like Halloween yet. Dress in skimpy outfits, barely go out for the actual candy, chat up strangers and suddenly do them favors over at their house.

Not a whole lot of treats unless you were Alice, but thankfully no tricks either.

Michelle slowly followed them down the hall, swinging into the kitchen, though something obvious only came as a second thought once they passed it.

When did they close the front door?

“Right there on the table, please!” the woman pointed out her quaint dinner table, and with a huff from the heavy lifters the dollhouse was officially moved.

“Okay...done,” Roxy wiped her forehead. “We’re done now. For real, done-done. Alice, get your candy, it’s time to leave.” And while Michelle may have gone down in history as the scaredy-cat fool, right alongside that title would be Roxy’s least favorite time that she turned out to be right.

They watched for a moment as the grandmother fussed over the dollhouse, checking it all over.

“We didn’t bang anything on it when we brought it up?” Roxy spoke defensively, like her reputation as a toy-shipper was on the line.

“Oh, no, dearie, I’m sure you girls did just fine...I just can’t help but worry is all... Could...could you three help me check? Just to make sure? I’d hate for my sweetie pie tomorrow to get a broken toy!”

It was certainly a collective ‘no’ among all three friends, but no one actually had the gusto to refuse a frail old woman’s request.

Roxy traced her finger along the plastic-shingled roof, pretending like she was inspecting. Alice gently poked the windows of the house, finding no glass but just the fake wooden crossbars to make it seem like one, and Michelle flimsily flicked the front door with her fingernail.

“It looks fine.”

“I don’t see any marks...”

“I think it’s good?”

And with all their backs turned, what caught their peripherals was a faint purple hue that crept along the floor, walls, and ceiling of the room.

Simultaneously all their heads spun, and right where the source of the flash came was the old woman.

They all blinked in confusion, wondering what she just did. And what was she holding? A stick? A very straight one at that. A pointer? A...wand?

“Uhh...” Michelle blinked strangely, “E...Excuse me, but—”

And then the tingles started, making her stumble. It was instant, like her primal sixth sense was firing all cylinders the moment the foreign sensation struck her.

“I feel...weird...” Alice quietly muttered with a slow, sluggish hand approaching her forehead.

Roxy took a few unsteady steps back against the wallpaper. “Wh...what the fuck...?”

And all in their stumbly haze, Michelle could see the smile on the old woman, and it spoke of everything but kindness. The moment she saw her look, she knew something was wrong. Weird.

*Bad.*

Without a word, Michelle lunged herself not for the perpetrator but for the doorway back into the hall. She hurriedly ran and panted, moving her legs as fast as she could, yet finding herself making purchase with the ground like she was trying to run in a dream on a treadmill.

Somehow, finally, she rounded the corner, ready to burst forward for her desperate flight and escape to safety, but reality was as crushing as it was weird and strange. The front door they'd so tactfully left wide open was now shut and closed.

Michelle reached for the knob and fell face first, like her depth perception had been misjudged or the knob was just slightly in that same moment pulled out of reach. And it was half right.

*Michelle* was the one pulled out of reach, but not by another person and instead a mysterious force. The same force that was making her tingle with pins and needles all over. Pulling her farther away, but not back on her feet. *Down.*

Down.

Down.

Down.

Her mind was aching and the outer edges of the world she saw was being eaten away by a parasitic void of black. The world grew bigger as she shrunk smaller. Shrinking? Smaller? Bigger? A wave of vertigo finally hit and it tipsied her onto her back, looking up at the high ceiling, like she was in a stadium, laying down right in the middle of it. But there were no crowds or sports being played. Simply her drug-induced fever dream happening inside a stranger's home.

It was surreal. Unthinkable. Unimaginable.

It was a dream. A horrible, fucked up dream. It was a—!

And it all went black.

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The carpet was rough and far less forgiving than her feet had remembered. When Michelle finally started to wake back up, the thick curls as she remembered in the gray floor that she passed out on had no feeling whatsoever.

Her eyes reacted before her mind could remember just how scary of a situation she'd fallen into, just so she could convince herself to keep her eyes shut and simply choose to check out of life entirely. Just so she didn't have to deal with whatever was happening.

But her body always reacted first. So her eyes opened first.

It wasn't carpet anymore. Smooth, light cherry-stained hardwood floors. In a quiet panic, trying to find her bearings before anything else, Michelle dropped her hand on the surface, getting ready to prop herself up.

Her head felt fine, her hands too. Arms, legs, and feet. Body in-tact, and certifiably alive.

And as she felt the floor beneath her it was a hard slap, like with any wooden floor, but without any of the texture. Looking down at it, Michelle swiped her hand carefully, feeling none of the texture in the supposed grooves that she could see. Like they didn't exist. Like it was just some picture.

Michelle lifted her head, looking all around.

The lighting wasn't warm anymore, and it certainly didn't feel proper. The first thing she saw in the strange room were the many shadows casted by a tiny light fixture above her head, far too inadequate for the room it was installed in. From the windows she could see the darkness of the outside, yet not a cricket to be heard. Dead silence. Yet she squinted over at the window, like it was missing its glass?

Still in her daze, Michelle's eyes fell back down at the floor, knocking on the unusual material, unnerved in some inexplicable way by how it felt. In a single motion she swung her legs together

and pushed off the floor. She stood, but just for a moment. Her legs stopped short of her estimate, never coming close to reaching her knees as the power she pushed herself with did not compensate and she fell right back down on her butt. But it wasn't a hard landing.

A muffled, dry puff crinkled from somewhere the moment she sat, and Michelle blinked some more as she looked around the foreign room with confusion. And only after a second pass did she notice her legs weren't bare and no longer was she adorning her black cat costume. It was another quiet moment of shock as Michelle drank in what she was seeing. Thin and sexy spandex had been stripped off her entirely. She put her hands up to her head and felt her artificial cat ears, tugging, yet winced the moment she felt legitimate feedback. While her fake ears were gone, her hair had apparently taken its place. In feeling the nubs, she could feel some kind of cloth where they seemed to sprout from both sides of her head. Ribbon?

Her hair was the least confusing part, however. With her catsuit gone, in its place was now a thickly stitched set of suspenders; bright baby-blue corduroy. Fat red buttons sewed her shoulder straps to the material covering her chest, reaching all the way down to her crotch and between her legs, of which had been rolled up to her thighs, showing off its pink interior with white outlined hearts. But between her crotch... Around her crotch. Her...very bulgy crotch.

In a moment of sheer confusion, a cold sweat hit the girl the moment she thought that she was waking up to a terrifying case of body horror. Her shaky hand dropped between her legs and pushed on the rounded part, just about ready to cry the moment her sudden tumor reacted in agitation, but all she got was a dry crinkle with little sensation. A sudden, possible relief, but confusing no less.

She tried to pull at her suspender straps and they certainly did stretch, but not by much. Underneath that was an awfully tacky rainbow-striped shirt; something she knew for certain she did not own, suspenders included. And her feet were encased in thick velcro sneakers. Eggshell white.

With a better understanding of her obstacles, Michelle came to her feet, ignoring the plastic bag noise and the presence between her legs to look around. In a quiet, almost hesitant voice, she called, "G...guys?"

Her head spun on a swivel as soon as she heard another voice. Voices.

"Wait, did you hear that?"

"She's awake!"