

Halloween is the most wonderful part of the year for many of us. For dedicated fans, the season begins when the leaves start turning autumn colors and doesn't finish until Hallowtide ends in November. With it comes a whole lot of fun: scary movies and stories, haunted houses, seasonal sweets, spooky decorations, costume parties, and of course trick or treat. But Halloween is also a deeply spiritual time for some; it's an opportunity to remember and honor loved ones who have passed on.

Master storyteller Lucy A. Snyder has filled her cauldron with everything that Halloween means to her and distilled it into a spell-binding volume of stories. Within these pages you'll find thrills and chills, hilarity and horrors, the sweet and the naughty.

One of the best things about Halloween is you don't have to be yourself. So go ahead and try on a new mask or two...you may discover hidden talents as a witch, a pirate, a space voyager, a zombie fighter, or even an elf. This is the perfect collection to celebrate the season of the dead or to summon those heady autumn vibes whenever you like. You may even find a couple of tales that evoke a certain winter holiday that keeps trying to crowd in on the fun.

*In the worlds within this book,  
every day is Halloween!*

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HALLOWEEN SEASON

LUCY A. SNYDER



Not your kids' Halloween.

# HALLOWEEN SEASON

stories by

LUCY A. SNYDER



# HALLOWEEN SEASON

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# HALLOWEEN SEASON

Lucy A. Snyder

**RAW DOG  
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# Beggars' Night

Stinky kid sneakers peek beneath  
ghostly sheets and shredded zombie jeans.  
Chatty moms herd sugarbuzzed superheroes  
and tween princesses off strangers' lawns  
onto frosty concrete to await safe treats.

But half past nine, flashlight batteries die,  
buzzing streetlamps flicker to silent black  
as scudding clouds blot the gibbous moon;  
manly hearts jump as small sweaty fingers  
impatiently twist free from daddies' hands.

And in the sudden dark, for just a moment,  
cheap cotton gauze spins to Egyptian linen,  
latex and greasepaint become twitching scars,  
hairy feral muscle splits wispy nylon rags,  
and every smile stinks of clotted blood.

But in a heartbeat, the dire clouds retreat,  
the moon shines brave and the lamps relight.  
Trembling parents retrieve little tricksters,  
ruffle hair, press hands to narrow chests,  
unable to feel the monsters burning inside.



## Hazelnuts and Yummy Mummies

I was at the edge of the SownCon Author Alley in the main vendor hall when the drugs began to take hold. A guy in a black Batman tee shirt was frowning down at my books, clearly not liking what he saw. I'd nailed a smile to my face as I chatted about the plot of my first novel, but I knew I wasn't connecting because his scowl deepened and deepened but he wasn't walking away so I started babbling about the plot of the rest of the series while thinking, *Oh god, why did I agree to do this?*

*You agreed to this because they offered you a free hotel room and you have to stay busy this weekend,* my Inner Responsible Adult replied. *On Halloween, you have to stay busy. You have to, or you will think too many thoughts and end up in the bin again.*

Keeping busy was good. But I wasn't any kind of plausible saleswoman. Nobody was going to hire me to pitch jewelry or juicers. I became a writer in the first pea-picking place because I could only seem to gather my thoughts on paper; I constantly found myself tongue-tied whenever I had to meet new people. So why in the name of sweet candy corn was I working a table trying to talk up books I'd written precisely because I could never reliably form complete sentences except with a keyboard? Couldn't I have chosen to stay busy doing something less painful, like competing in ghost pepper eating contests? Nude sandpaper surfing? Milking angry sharks?

In my mind, I heard my dead mother's voice: "Life is a grand comedy, dear; just do your best."

I suddenly felt too hot despite the chilly diesel-stinky October draft from the loading dock in back and my head felt floaty and puffy like a party balloon. And I wasn't even sure what words were coming out of my mouth. *Something something action something adventure something award-winning something.* Batfan's face scrunched up more and more, getting impossibly wrinkled, and his nose squinched and flattened and inverted, his eyes shrunk tiny, black and beady

and suddenly I was looking up at the head of an actual bat. A brown bat like the ones that roosted under the overpass near my mom's house back in Missouri. Except fifty times as huge, because brown bats are itty-bitty and the Batfan had a noggin the size of a cantaloupe.

I trailed off, gaping at him. *What. The. Actual. Fuck.*

And then wondered: *Did I say that out loud?*

The bat gave me a weird, suspicious look and walked away without a screech.

Elaine, the SownCon author liaison, came hurrying up, her tall pointy witch hat askew, her glittery blue satin dress swirling and glowing like galaxies. Her whole outfit seemed to have turned into a portal to another dimension. I felt as though I might fall right into it.

"Miss Bowen?" she said. By her expression, it wasn't the first time she'd tried to get my attention. A halo of stardust seemed to float around her face.

"Yes?" I replied. My tongue felt too big in my mouth. It seemed huge as a tuna, and it might wriggle free and go swimming across the sea-green carpet. I'd have to chase it down in the gaming room, tackle it near the Munchkin tournament. The idea of that made me laugh out loud.

"Did you eat one of the black raspberry cookies?" Elaine was frowning, looking worried. Her face was getting wrinkled up. I wondered if she was going to turn into a bat, too.

She'd been by a half-hour before with a big basket of homemade Halloween cookies for all the guest authors and artists. A whole spread of tiny frosted tombstones, snickerdoodle ghosts, gingerbread cats. And black cookies, each decorated with a single blue candy eye. I have blue eyes, and after three hours of sitting at my table, the thought of devouring my own flesh had started to appeal to me. So I took two, and gave one to my friend Heather, who'd come with me to the convention to help schlep books and maintain my sanity.

"Did you eat one of the black cookies?" Elaine repeated.

I nodded slowly. "It was tasty. But the frosting was a little bitter."

"Oh no." She leaned in over by books. "Listen. I meant to give you a treat, but you got a trick by mistake. You've just consumed a fairly large dose of a hallucinogen. Those black cookies were for our ritual tonight, but our initiate got the batches mixed up."



Elaine's eyes were swirling, glittering, dark as a black pearl ring my mom used to own. It was always her favorite. She lost it in the ocean the same day she got her first diagnosis.

"My mom died five years ago today," I blurted out. "She had two kinds of cancer and ehrlichiosis and cryptosporidium and it all killed her. It was like watching Boromir get shot with those black arrows. She never did *anything* halfway, not even dying."

"I'm...I'm really sorry to hear that. But the hallucinogen—"

"On Halloween we're supposed to remember the dead," I said. "But how can I not remember my mom dying? How could I ever *not* think about that? So she could have died any other day and I'd still remember. Dying on Halloween was just...overkill. But hey, that's Mom! Never do things halfway."

"I'm truly sorry about your mother, but *listen!*" Elaine was speaking very slowly and clearly, as if she were addressing a learning-disabled child. "The hallucinogen is going to give you visions. It might last five or six hours."

I had a moment of rational clarity: "I take antidepressants. There's a bunch of stuff I'm not supposed to take with them. Is the cookie going to make me sick?"

"I don't think so." She sounded profoundly uncertain, and her voice echoed as if she were in a large cavern. "Many of us in the coven are also on antidepressants and nobody's had a problem. But you do need to drink a lot of water. I'm going to call someone to take you back to your hotel room and keep an eye on you. I'll get someone else to watch your table for the rest of the day. Everything will be fine."

"I have a panel on zombie poetry in an hour," I said, watching tiny stardust pixies dance around her hat.

"Don't worry about the panel—"

"But I have to warn them." I gazed up at her, suddenly realizing it was not merely another convention panel but a very important personal mission. "I have to warn them all that when you write poetry, you are letting the brain eaters into your mind. You are letting them into your mind!"

"Listen, don't worry about the brain eaters. Just come around the table take my hand and we'll get you back to your room and get you some blankets and water, and—"

“VICTORIAAAAA!”

Heather was zooming down the carpeted aisle full-speed on her electric, candy apple red mobility scooter. Startled con-goers were dodging right and left to get out of her way. She’d had surgery on both feet four weeks earlier and while she’d been okayed to walk short distances, the vastness of the convention center was just too much.

Her eyes were hugely dilated, and she had a sweaty look of determination I seldom saw outside end game rounds of Iron Dragon. In her free arm, she clutched a brand-new skateboard decorated with the colorful unicorn logo of one of the role-playing game companies that was sponsoring the convention. As far as I knew, she didn’t skateboard and certainly wasn’t in any condition to do it now. Had she bought it? Won it? *Stolen* it? Was this Grand Theft Skateboard?

She plunked it down on the floor beside my table as though she were throwing a gauntlet. “Victoria! The Ghost of Trick-or-Treat needs us!”

“It does?”

“Yes! Come with me if you want to save The Great Pumpkin!” Her words rang with irresistible authority. I was needed. Summoned. *Destined*.

Nervous purple fairies orbited Elaine’s head. “I don’t think—”

“OK!” I jumped up and stared down at the skateboard, which was undulating slightly, like a cat that was about to hork up a hairball. “What now?”

“Get upon this flatfish steed and grab the back of my Harley!”

I was sure that the skateboard might vomit all over my shoes, but a good soldier in the Halloween army honors the call of duty. I stepped on the wobbly board and grasped the back of the scooter’s seat. The black vinyl bubbled up between my fingers and hissed at me, but I held fast.

“Oh, Miss Bowen, no—”

“To infinity!” Heather punched the scooter into high gear.

We zoomed past the laughing liquid racks of vendors’ books and games, faster and faster, the colors streaking and boiling with sparks as we approached light speed. And then with a blast of outer space cold, we were in the Haunter’s Hall where cartoon ghosts whooshed above the bloated foam animatronic zombies and shrieking funhouse mansion-fronts. Heather’s speeding wheels kicked up a storm of autumn leaves that made me sneeze from the smell of wood smoke and

pumpkin spice. The leaves swirled up around us in a rattling vortex of reds and oranges and browns, their brittle serrated edges lashing my face and arms, and I let go of the scooter to shield my eyes—

—the skateboard squirted out from beneath my feet and my arms windmilled as I fell forward through empty darkness—

—and I face-planted onto someone's frosty lawn, the air whoofing out of my lungs.

"Clumsy," a man above me said. "A princess shouldn't be clumsy."

I pushed myself up onto my knees. My arms were tiny, and I was wearing a pink princess outfit made from cheap satin and stiff crinoline with stars made from glue and silver and pink glitter. The dress was loose. I'd outgrown this costume when I was five or six, and my mom gave it to Goodwill.

I looked up at the man, whose face was obscured by mist. The only thing I could see clearly was the Budweiser longneck in a blue koozie in his right hand.

"Papa?" I asked uncertainly. Mom had burned all his photos after he left us when I was five, and all I could really remember about him was the beer he always seemed to have. But before he decided fatherhood and marriage weren't for him, he had taken me trick-or-treating when Mom was attending night classes after her waitressing shifts to become a computer operator. It was possibly the least he could do. But he did it.

"Well, get up, Whoopsy-Daisy, and let's get you some candy." My father held out his free hand, helped me to my feet, and picked dead leaves off my dress.

Decades later, during an online search, I learned that he died in a drunk driving accident in Mexico about two years after he left us. If Mom knew about that, she never let on. She'd been so furious and hurt that not only did she destroy all evidence of his existence in the house, she changed both our last names back to her maiden name. Alex Ronson had given me nothing that lasted except some DNA and a couple of hazy memories.

If he'd sobered up, he might have called or written me. He might have come back and tried to be a father. A lot of things could have happened, but of course they didn't. The brief article I'd found just listed his expiration date and the cause; it didn't say if he'd died instantly in his smashed fast car or if he'd lingered in pain in the hospital as my mother had.

“Did it hurt?” I asked him.

“Did what hurt?” he grunted as he led me up the sidewalk of our old neighborhood toward Mrs. Robinson’s house. She always had the best candies for trick-or-treaters: full-sized Kit-Kats and peanut butter cups and Almond Joys.

“When you died,” I said. “Did it hurt?”

“No, it didn’t hurt at all.”

His voice had changed. I looked up, and saw the man was now my mom’s boyfriend Joe Moreno. He looked the same as he had when he was thirty or so: angular face softened by his gentle brown eyes, his thick black hair parted down the middle and feathered back like it was still 1988. He worked as an ER nurse. He met my mom when I was seven, and they stayed together until he suffered a massive heart attack in the hospital parking lot and died.

He took a long drag from his Lucky Strike and puffed smoke rings into the chilly autumn air. “Well, that’s a little lie. It was the worst crushing cramp in my chest you can imagine, but my knees buckled and I fell and cracked my head on a concrete parking block. Knocked me clean out, and I didn’t feel anything after that. They found me quick and brought me back into the ER; it took me maybe a half hour to die while they were working hard on me. They busted nearly every rib and I didn’t feel it. As deaths go, mine was totally ironic, but I got off easy pain-wise.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, gripping his warm hand more tightly. “You were only forty-five, and it wasn’t fair.”

“Don’t be sorry. I got to help a lot of people at the hospital. Save little kids. I got to be *worthy*. And I had a good life with Donna, and after a while I thought of you as my own daughter. Even if I always told you to call me Joe. I did my best to be a good dad, but I never figured I had the right to claim to be your father unless Donna and me got married, and we didn’t.”

I blinked, surprised at the regret in his voice. “I thought you never wanted to?”

Another, longer drag, and more smoke rings. The smell of his tobacco in the air made my heart ache at how much I’d missed his calm, steady strength in my life the past thirteen years. He was the perfect balance to my mom’s passionate volatility and he’d mediated plenty of arguments between her and me. Without him around, not much could stop Hurricane Donna. I loved my mom and I

knew she loved me, but when I had the chance to move across the country for a job, I took it. And, later, I lay awake at night wondering if my absence meant she hadn't gone to the doctor when she needed to.

"I thought about marriage plenty," Joe said, "but things were good the way they were, you know? Marriage changes things; it's like a mutation. Sometimes your relationship gets superpowers, but sometimes it goes malignant. I didn't want to risk the good thing we had. And neither did your mom, not after the ways your dad changed."

If Joe had lived, he might have spotted signs of Mom's cancer earlier when it was still treatable. He would have been able to go with her to appointments and advocate for better care.

If he'd lived, maybe they'd both still be alive.

"You were always good to us," I told him. "I'll never forget that."

Joe smiled around his cigarette. "That's the best thing an old ghost like me can hope for."

I felt myself grow bigger as he led me to Mrs. Robinson's house. By the time we reached the front door, I was adult-sized again and my princess dress was gone, replaced by my usual outfit of jeans and a black tee shirt. Joe pulled open the screen door so I could knock.

After two raps, the door swung inward, but it wasn't Mrs. Robinson's living room. It was the cluttered den in my mom's sister Catherine's split-level in Maine. The smells of warm apple cider and popcorn wafted from the kitchen. My aunt's six-year-old twins Noah and Natalie had dressed up as pirates and were shrieking with glee and chasing each other around the room with foam cutlasses.

I hadn't seen Catherine since my mom's funeral; the twins were still in diapers, and she'd left them at home with her husband. She only stayed for the funeral and reception. Seven hours at the most, and then she was back in the air. I'd only seen her kids in photos and videos on Facebook, but they looked like a real handful for a couple of fortysomethings. Somewhere I read that older mother's kids inherited weakened mitochondria, but Noah and Natalie seemed to have enough energy to power an entire city.

"I'm not taking you trick-or-treating if you don't calm down and put on your coats!" Catherine yelled.



## *Halloween Season*

I tried to take a step forward into the house, but found myself blocked by an invisible wall.

"Just as well," I muttered. "They don't know me anyhow."

"They *could* know you," Joe said. "You could be there right now."

I shook my head. "She didn't have much time for me before Mom died, and later...well, she acted all weird after I tried to kill myself. Acted like...like the crazy would rub off on her or something. Facebook's as close as she wants me, I guess."

"She did say to visit any time."

"Yeah, but...come on, she didn't mean that. She was just trying to be polite."

"She can't know that you even want to visit if you don't try. And your cousins won't remember you if they never get to see you."

"It's too hard." I stared down at my black Chuck Taylors, still dusted with purple and silver glitter from the princess dress. "I can't put myself out there and have her reject me again. I just can't."

The light dimmed. I looked up, and realized that Joe and I were standing in a cramped efficiency apartment between a drab brown couch and a flatscreen TV tuned to a cheesy 50s horror movie. The room stank of spilled beer, garbage, and unwashed laundry. A sallow-eyed woman in a blue bathrobe was sitting on the couch, blankly staring past us at the screen; she didn't seem to know we were there. Her face was bloated, and so it took me a second to realize that the woman was *me*. A broken-down me 15 or 20 years in the future, fifty pounds heavier with an alcoholic's reddened skin. This was surely what giving up looked like.

"Well, shit," I whispered.

The coffee table in front of her was cluttered with empty bottles of Budweiser and cheap whiskey along with crumpled Taco Bell and Halloween candy wrappers. She pushed through the mess until she found a mostly-full bottle of Wild Turkey and a bottle of Tylenol. The sad woman started tossing back the painkillers by the handful, washing them down with the whiskey.

"Fuck, no, stop!" I stepped toward her, but the invisible wall blocked me again.

"She'll be dead in days," Joe said. "I saw my share of people who decided to commit suicide like this. It's effective, cheap, and an awful way to die. The alcohol and acetaminophen turns your liver to dog food. There's no help for it

except an emergency transplant, and almost nobody can get that. Not without money, and...well. Doesn't look like there's much of that around here."

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. "Shit."

When I dropped my hands, Joe and I were standing in a darkened hospital corridor. It seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. Hospitals all look pretty much the same. The walls were decorated with cardboard Halloween witches, pumpkins, and black cats. Most of the rooms were dark and their doors closed, but the light was on in one open room toward the end of the hall.

"I'm sorry you didn't get any trick-or-treat goodies." Joe reached into the pocket of his windbreaker and pulled out a colorful package of candy. "Here you go."

I took the proffered pack. The cartoon ancient Egyptian on the wrapper gripped a blue Tropical Fruit Punch mummy that looked more like a board he was going to use to surf some dunes. "Yummy Mummies? Really?"

Joe shrugged and grinned. "Hey, I'm stuck in 1988, what did you expect?"

His grin faded and he nodded toward the lighted room. "You should go see her now."

My stomach churned. "Is...is Mom in there?"

"She is."

"I...I can't." I shook my head. I couldn't go back to that night. It was my worst failure. I *couldn't*.

"Vicky, I can't make you. But you know what happens if you don't try. The guilt will keep eating you from the inside out."

"Okay." I took a deep breath. "Okay."

I tucked the pack of Yummy Mummies into my back pocket and slowly walked down the hall to my mom's room. My dread increased with every step. I'd had nightmares about this nearly every week for the past five years, and now I had to face her.

She lay mute and too sick to move in the bed, just as I remembered her. And the smell—the hospital antiseptic overlaying the stink of diarrhea and vomit made me want to gag. The veins in her arms had collapsed and she'd gone into kidney failure, so they had stuck a quiver of painful-looking needles into the pulsing vessels in her neck to hook her up to various IV tubes. One was for saline, another for an antiparasitic drug, and the rest for dialysis. The surgical tape over

the needles hadn't held properly and blood had slowly seeped out in a sticky, uncomfortable-looking pool spreading across the hollows of her collarbones and down her cleavage. Futile silver bags hung on the IV tree above her.

And I—the five-years-younger version of me—sat in the chair beside her. Staring at her with a dazed expression. Just staring and watching her die.

“C'mon,” I begged myself. “Get up and call a nurse to come sponge her off. *Get up.*”

But I couldn't hear myself and just kept sitting and staring. I know what I was thinking. The nurses during the day had buzzed around my mother with impatient efficiency and I'd just tried to stay out of their way. At night, I hadn't been able to shift to realizing that now nobody else was checking on her and I needed to do something. But I felt like a bystander, an observer. I felt helpless in the face of all those needles and tubes and malignant cells I couldn't stop. It never occurred to me that the extra bit of discomfort my mother was suffering was something *I could* stop.

The whole point of my flying a thousand miles to stay with my mother in the hospital was to try to provide some comfort during what turned out to be her final days. I'd gotten a portable player with her favorite Dead Can Dance and The Incredible String Band CDs. I'd read to her from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her favorite book. But the one thing I could have really done to make things better was the one thing I was too stupid to do.

A few hours later, the morning nurse would come in and declare, “Well, if it were my mother, *I'd* have called someone in to clean her up!”

And then, shamefaced and embarrassed, I'd go home to try to sleep.

And then my mother would die while I was gone. While nobody was looking. While nobody was there to hold her hand.

The nurse's words would take root in my memory and grow, tainting every other memory they touched. They were loud in my head when I swallowed the bottle of tranquilizers. And they never went away even after the few post-hospital therapy sessions my insurance grudgingly covered. They would never, ever go away, condemnation and proof that I had failed my mom.

“Vicky.” My mother sat up in bed and was giving me a stern look.

My heart jumped when I realized that she saw me. I felt pierced by her amber eyes. “Yes?”

"The blood was a little uncomfortable, yes. But my intestines were being torn apart by microbes and cancer. My kidneys were rotting inside my body. A little itch on my neck just didn't matter, you know? Stop beating yourself up over it. That's an order, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She beckoned me closer and held out her bone-thin arms for a hug. The invisible wall didn't block me this time. I sat down on the bed beside her and held her close. As I breathed in the familiar scents of her perfume and hair spray, I was overwhelmed at the enormity of what I'd lost when she died, and I began to weep.

"I'm so sorry you died alone," I sobbed. "I'm so, so sorry. I wanted to be there for you."

"But you were!" My mother gently pushed me back and wiped the tears off my face with her thumbs like she had when I was little. "I heard the music, I heard you read. I knew you were there. I wasn't even conscious when I died. It was like slipping from sleep into...more sleep. It wasn't scary. You didn't fail me."

She turned to the hospital tray beside her bed and picked up three small brown nuts beside her insulated plastic water jug.

"Hold out your hand," she said.

I did as she asked, and she dropped the nuts onto my palm.

"What are these?"

"Hazelnuts," she replied. "For wisdom, healing, and maybe a little inspiration for those books of yours."

"Thank you." I tucked them into the left front pocket of my jeans.

"Have a happy Halloween." My mother gave me a gentle push, and I tumbled backward off the bed into darkness.



I came to in the bed in my hotel room. The room was dark except for a head-splitting band of light under the blackout curtain. My head ached, and my mouth felt fuzzy. I still wore my convention clothes. Heather was snoring away in the other bed.

"Ugh." I moaned like a zombie.

## *Halloween Season*

“Oh, thank goodness you’re awake!” Elaine said. I heard her get up from the desk chair and walk to the bed. “You need to drink water; here’s an Aquafina.”

I took a tentative sip from the bottle she stuck close to my face. The water was cool and delicious, so I took a longer draw.

“We looked all over for you,” Elaine said. “Nicole found you in the convention center basement—how you got down there, we’ll never know! She says you were hugging a steam pipe. You’re lucky you didn’t get burned!”

“Lucky. Yeah. I gotta go pee.”

“Let me help you—”

“Nah, I got this.”

I rolled out of the bed and staggered toward the toilet.

Heather’s sleep-frowsy head rose from the sheets.

“Hey, I saved the Great Pumpkin,” she slurred at me.

“Good job!” I locked the bathroom door behind me in case Elaine decided I needed assistance. To be fair, she was probably panicking that I was going to sue her and the convention for feeding me illicit drugs. I went to the toilet and unzipped my glitter-smeared jeans and heard something fall out of my back pocket onto the floor.

It was a package of Lik-a-Stik Yummy Mummies.

I pulled my jeans back up and reached into my left front pocket. My finger encountered something round and hard: the three hazelnuts. I took them out and stared at them for several minutes, rolling them around on my palm with the tip of my finger. One for healing, one for wisdom, and one for inspiration. One for me, one for Mom, and one for Joe. One for my past, one for my present, and one for my future.

Elaine rapped gently on the door. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” I replied.

And realized that, for a change, I actually was.



## Cosmic Cola

Millie leaned her forehead against the back window of her stepfather's new Toyota van, morosely watching the weather-beaten, navy-on-white "Welcome to Marsh Landing!" sign approach and recede. Welcome to what? There was little but some bone-white dunes and shuttered, peeling bait shacks so far. Nothing she'd learned about the isolated coastal town in her school's library made her feel any better about moving here. Population: 20,000. Primary export: fish and Cosmic Cola. Total Dullsville. It was probably one of those stuffy communities that forbade trick-or-treat at Halloween. Marsh Middle School was barely half the size of her old school and didn't have any Girl Scouts troops she could join. It didn't even have an orchestra. She'd only just started playing violin and already she was going to have to quit, probably.

Quitters never got anywhere in life. That's what her grandfather Ernest always used to tell her anyhow, before he had a stroke and quit living. In the months before he died, he'd argue about physics when he was alone in his room, as if the empty walls were his audience. She could play her violin in her room and pretend she had an audience, she supposed, but her bedroom walls wouldn't tell her if she dropped a note, or if her bowing was scratchy, or if her phrasing was awkward. So even if she kept going on her own, she wasn't sure she'd get anywhere anyway.

If she was honest with herself, giving up violin didn't bother her nearly as much as the notion of giving up Halloween. It was her favorite holiday, even better than Christmas, though she could never say that out loud. Her mom would say it wasn't *ladylike* to prefer Halloween over Jesus' birthday. And her love for it wasn't just because of trick-or-treating. It was the one night when all the things she dreamed of seemed like they could actually become real. The one night when she didn't have to always be nice and demure and could be something besides a girl from a little town in a flyover state. She could be a ghost. A witch. A werewolf. Something mythical, something to be feared and respected. Running

down the street in her costume, she could close her eyes in the frosty fall air and just for a moment imagine that plastic teeth and waxy paints were enamel and skin, and she could go anywhere at all that she wanted on her own. What was Christmas compared to the chilly frisson of *becoming*?

“Gimme!” On the middle seat, her little half-brother Travis reached for his twin sister’s Cabbage Patch doll.

“Nooo!” Tiffany hugged the doll to her chest and turned away from her brother’s grabby hands. “Mooom!”

“Leave your sister’s toys alone.” Their mother’s tone was one of utter exhaustion. Was exhaustion an emotion, or the lack of it? Millie wasn’t sure. “Play with your Star Wars figures.”

“Fifty,” Millie announced.

“What?” Her mother turned in her seat and squinted at her tiredly.

“That’s the fiftieth time you’ve said those exact words on this trip.”

Her mother’s lips twitched into a half-smile. “You counted?”

“I did.” Millie couldn’t keep the satisfaction out of her voice. She was *very* good at counting. Last year she’d won a \$50 gift certificate in a contest at Harmon’s Grocery to guess how many jellybeans were in a big jar, and was a little sad afterward when she found out that since she won once she couldn’t compete again. She’d missed the count by 248, and was sure she could have done even better the next time.

Her stepfather cleared his throat, obviously annoyed. “Doesn’t Madame Curie have a book to read?”

Her mother shot him a dirty look but didn’t say anything. Millie felt her face grow hot. Her stepfather had started calling her “Madame Curie” after she won the school science fair with her homemade electrolysis set. And at first it had seemed like a nice thing, as if after five years of being her stepfather he was starting to like her a little bit and to be proud of her accomplishments, like he was proud of Tiffany and Travis. After all, Marie Curie was the only person in history to win Nobel Prizes in two different sciences! So calling her Madame Curie couldn’t really be a bad thing, could it? But the way he started saying it after the first couple of times...it tasted like a razor blade inside a Tootsie Roll. But if she said anything, he’d just accuse her of not being able to take a compliment. Of not having a sense of humor. Of being a brat.

"I *had* a book to read," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, "and I read it."

"Then you should have brought more." His tone was hard as the pavement beneath his van's black tires.

"I brought *four*. And I read them all." Her heart was beating so fast her vision was starting to twitch.

The twins had gone silent in the seat in front of her, like nest-bound fledglings beneath the shadow of a hawk.

"You did *not* read four books in the past six hours." He stared at her in the rearview mirror, his gaze as steady as any raptor's.

"Did, too." She grabbed her library book sale copies of *Bunnicula*, *Superfudge*, *Blubber*, and *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* and held them up so he could see them. "I read them cover to cover. Ask me about them. Ask me *anything*."

She wasn't lying, and she knew that he hadn't enough of a clue about any of the books to even begin to question her about them. He'd made it clear he considered them to be kids' books, *girl* books, and he was a man. A man with a brand-new van and a fancy important job. Nothing in the books could interest him, so why bother? The idea of seeking a subject to discuss with his stepdaughter was so far from his orbit it could take him millennia to discover it.

"If you were so busy reading back there, how could you possibly know what your mother said to the twins?" There was a talon of warning in his tone: she had better stop challenging him, or else.

*Or else what?* she wondered bitterly. *Or else you'll take me away from everything I care about and drop me in some dumpy awful town that probably stinks of fish? Just because you got a job at some stupid soft drink company?*

Why couldn't he have gone away to work and left them where they were? Other dads did that to keep from uprooting their families. But her half-siblings weren't in school yet, so she was the only one being uprooted. Her real father had brought her mother to Greensburg so they could be closer to his father, and Mom hadn't liked it there since Grandpa Ernest died. She said that seeing his old room every day made her feel sad. And Millie wanted her mom to be happy. She *did*. But...ugh.

"I can count and read at the same time," she replied defiantly.

"Hey, look, it's our street," her mother exclaimed in the loud, overly cheery tone she used when she was trying to distract her stepfather.

## About the Author

Lucy A. Snyder is the five-time Bram Stoker Award-winning and Shirley Jackson Award-nominated author of over 100 published short stories and 14 books. Chaosium will release her novel *The Girl With the Star-Stained Soul* sometime in 2021. She also wrote the novels *Spellbent*, *Shotgun Sorceress*, and *Switchblade Goddess*, the nonfiction book *Shooting Yourself in the Head for Fun and Profit: A Writer's Survival Guide*, and the collections *Garden of Eldritch Delights*, *While the Black Stars Burn*, *Soft Apocalypses*, *Orchid Carousals*, *Sparks and Shadows*, *Chimeric Machines*, and *Installing Linux on a Dead Badger*. Her writing has been translated into French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Czech, and Japanese editions and has appeared in publications such as *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Apex Magazine*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *Pseudopod*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Best Horror of the Year*.

With Michael Bailey, Lucy also co-edited the critically-acclaimed collaborative dark fiction anthology *Chiral Mad 4*. When she's not writing, she's faculty in Seton Hill University's MFA program in Writing Popular Fiction and also works as a freelance developmental editor in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. You can learn more about her at [www.lucysnyder.com](http://www.lucysnyder.com) and you can follow her on Twitter at @LucyASnyder.