

The Best Holiday of the Year

By Monique Polak

“That’s child abuse,” Ray says.

We are sitting, facing each other on the carpet in my bedroom. Ray always comes over after school on Tuesdays because his dad works till six.

“No it’s not.” I’m allowed to complain about my parents. But my best friend isn’t. “Child abuse is smacking your kid or calling them a loser. Not allowing me to wear a princess costume at Halloween does not qualify as child abuse.”

Ray rolls his eyes. “Haven’t they ever heard of freedom of expression?”

I fold my arms over my chest. “They think dressing up like a princess reinforces negative stereotypes. Such as that girls are helpless and their lives only begin when they get kissed by some handsome prince.”

Ray snorts. “Are you telling me you never *ever* got to dress up like a princess? Not even when you were like three?”

“Not even when I was like three. I’m pretty sure that when I was three I was an astronaut for Halloween.” I close my eyes to help me remember. “Either that or a neurosurgeon.”

Ray looks down at the carpet, then slowly back up at me. “What if I wanted to be a princess for Halloween?”

“You?”

“Yeah... me.”

I nearly say, “You’re a boy.” But then I stop myself. It’s Halloween. Ray can be anything he wants to be. Including a princess. Even if I can’t. So instead I say, “I could help with your costume.”

Mom has a flowy pink dress at the back of her closet. “I wore it to Jeannette’s wedding,” she says when she takes it out to show us. “I was a bridesmaid. Otherwise I’d never have been caught dead wearing pink.”

Ray holds the dress up in front of him. “What do you think?”

“I think you look amazing in pink,” I tell him.

“I had shoes to go with it,” Mom says. “But I got rid of them.”

Mom goes back downstairs. I hear Dad rattling around in the kitchen. They try a new recipe every Tuesday. Tonight it’s pasta with a pumpkin tomato sauce. In honour of Halloween.

Ray goes to the bathroom to try on Mom’s pink dress. When he’s done, he knocks on the door to my bedroom. “Don’t laugh,” he warns.

I’m lying on my bed. The dress is a little loose on top. Ray stands on his tiptoes and does a pirouette.

“All that’s missing is socks,” I tell him.

“Socks?”

I get a pair of gym socks from my top drawer. I fold one sock into two and stuff it inside the bodice of the dress. Ray does the same with the other sock. He checks out his reflection in the mirror on the back of my bedroom door. I can tell from the way his eyes are shining that he likes what he sees.

“You need accessories,” I tell him.

“Like a purse?” Ray asks.

“Definitely. A pink purse.”

“Where am I going to get one?” Ray knows that girls who aren’t allowed to wear princess costumes don’t own pink purses. And it’s not like he can ask his mom because she lives in Vancouver and he only sees her when he goes there for two weeks every summer.

“There’s always Value *Village*.” I pronounce *Village* the French way to make it sound more glamorous.

Ray high fives me. “What would I do without you, Adele?” Then he pauses. “Hey, what are you going to be for Halloween?”

“I have no idea,” I admit. “Maybe I’ll find some *inspo* at Value *Village*.”

Ray's Dad stays for supper. He brings store-bought pumpkin pie for dessert. Ray doesn't mention the pink dress and when he and his dad leave, Ray doesn't bring the pink dress with him.

Ray and I aren't the only Grade Sixes at Value Village. We spot some others from the class across the hall from ours. Plus a few older kids we've seen outside the local high school.

The store smells like mothballs and floor cleaner. "Eau de Value *Village*," Ray says.

One of the high school kids passes behind us. He's dressed all in black and has skin so pale it's nearly white. If he wants to be a vampire for Halloween all he needs is a black cape. "You into perfume?" he asks Ray.

Ray ignores him. Vampire Kid nudges Ray. Ray doesn't react. Neither of us says a word till Vampire Kid is out of sight.

A bright red jumpsuit on one of the racks catches my eye. It's the inspo I needed. "You know what I'd like to be for Halloween? A superhero." I don't tell Ray what else I'm thinking. That a superhero would have known how to handle Vampire Kid.

In Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, where we live, people really get into Halloween. On our way back from Value Village, we pass a house covered with giant gauze spider webs. Many houses have plastic tombstones in their gardens or giant inflatable pumpkins on their lawns.

"Halloween's the best holiday of the year," Ray says.

"For the candy?"

"And the dressing up. Remember how we used to play dress up at my house? We'd raid my mom's tickle trunk."

Ray doesn't usually talk about the times when his mom was still around.

"Did she take it with her – when she left?"

When Ray looks down at the sidewalk I worry I've upset him. But when he looks back up at me, Ray's half-smiling. "The tickle trunk's still there. There's mostly dresses in it." Ray pauses. "I like trying them on."

I'm imagining Ray at his dad's house, trying on a dress from the tickle trunk.

"Do you think you do that because you miss her?"

“It isn’t that,” Ray says. “I just like wearing dresses. They make me feel—” he searches for the right word “-- pretty.”

I can feel that what Ray just told me is important. That it matters to him a lot. And that my reaction will be important too. Which is why I stop in the middle of the sidewalk and look at Ray. He is wearing a grey hoodie and khakis. “You *are* pretty,” I tell him.

This time Ray’s smiles is whole.

On Halloween night, Ray and I decide to wait until it’s dark to go trick-or-treating. That way, we can each be home to hand out candy to the little kids who go out early.

Was your dad okay with your costume? I text Ray.

Ray texts back: *He whistled when he saw me.*

I hope you told him that’s sexist.

We have trick-or-treated in our neighbourhood so often that we know which streets have the best candy. It’s not what you’d expect. The streets with the biggest houses and the fanciest decorations have crap candy. The candy’s way better on the streets closer to Cavendish Boulevard.

We only go to houses where the lights are on. We watch our step. There are leaves everywhere – on sidewalks, streets, stairways. At least it’s not raining – or snowing But it rained yesterday and the ground is slick.

“Smarties!” Ray shouts when he spots a woman handing out mini-Smarties boxes. “My dad makes me give him all my Smarties,” Ray tells the woman when we get to her porch.

“In that case,” she tells Ray, “take two. By the way,” she adds, “you look awesome.”

Ray does a pirouette when we’re back on the sidewalk. “This is the best Halloween ever!”

There’s something different about Ray. Something lighter. “Remember Bora-de-Bora-Bora?” I ask him.

Two years ago, Bora-de-Bora-Bora came to read at our library. He wore a blonde wig and a dress with giant flowers on it. Some parents tried to get the library to cancel the visit, but the library refused. I thought Bora-de-Bora-Bora was awesome.

“Of course I remember Bora-de-Bora-Bora.”

“Do you think you could be like him?” I ask Ray.

“Maybe.”

Some older kids are behind us. I hear them hooting and saying swear words. “Let’s cross to the other side of the street,” I say to Ray.

It’s already too late. We hear a rush of sounds. Some kid running, other kids running, then panting... then a ripping sound. Ray’s dress. Someone has stepped down hard on the back of Ray’s dress. Ray is trapped.

“I told you it was him,” says the boy who’s pinned Ray to the sidewalk. I recognize the voice. Vampire Kid. Only he’s dressed like Harry Potter, wire-rimmed glasses and all. I can’t help laughing. He’d have made a way better vampire.

My laugh confuses Vampire Kid. He shifts from one foot to the other, loosening his hold on Ray.

“What’s so funny, loser?” he asks me.

I don’t answer. Instead I turn to Ray. “Run!” I grunt.

We make a dash for the other side of the street. The pink dress slows Ray down.

I can hear the sound of someone behind me slipping on wet leaves and the vroom of a car engine.

“Crap!” a voice says. Ray must’ve tripped on his dress.

The vroom gets louder. Yellow headlights flood the street. When I turn my head, I see it’s Vampire Kid sprawled on the pavement. His Harry Potter glasses glisten under the glare from the headlights.

My first thought is *Justice*. But my second thought is stronger, so strong it knocks the first thought out -- like pins tumbling over at the bowling alley.

Get him!

I run into the street – waving my arms so the car stops in time. Ray is there too, hoisting Vampire Kid to his feet.

The screech of brakes. People everywhere.

“You have something you still want to say?” I ask Vampire Kid.

He looks from me to Ray. “Thanks. And sorry.”

After that, it’s hard to go back to trick-or-treating. Ray grabs my elbow and makes me skip with him along the sidewalk. At first, I’m embarrassed, but then I think *Who cares? A superhero and a princess can do anything.*