

Thirty-eight cents

by Deborah Cota & Sam Reeves

Okay, I admit it...I was bored of my normal schedule: screaming, maiming, burning, torturing, and dismembering. It just lost its luster. I needed a break. I needed something new. Something to let me get away from it all and experience something...well, different. That's how I ended up here. In this town. On this bench. Waiting for a bus.

Me.

The Devil.

Satan.

Beelzebub.

And I don't think I even have the right change.

The bus shifts gears four blocks away and moans toward me. Sounds seem closer at night. I suck in a slow breath that tastes like wet, October leaves. In my mind, I can see the boy sitting about halfway back in the bus. He wears a glow-in-the-dark skeleton costume with little, red LED lights in the eye sockets. I need to ask him a question. If I am to take a holiday, even a single day, I will first have to speak with him.

"He's not going to know."

It was a woman's voice; she does not realize she is speaking.

She is being pulled by her daughter, dressed as a hot dog. Mom wears what appears to be a genuine firefighter's helmet that covers the top half of her ears and pushes her bangs down so that her eyelashes keep brushing them. The rest of the costume is a pair of footy pajamas with Dalmatian spots that smells like laundry marker ink. Apparently, dogs are the theme.

"Trick or treat," I say and smile.

The mother must have heard me because she is glancing down. *Don't*, I think. She bites her bottom lip and squints.

"It's all right," I say.

With some dreamy urgency, the mother says, "The little boy is not going to know."

Still no recognition that she has spoken. Her head lifts toward the thin, amber line of dusk.

"I'll say what I can, and he either will or won't," I say. "You probably should finish your trick-or-treating now. It's not good for humans to be this close to me for too long."

The little girl never smiles. Her eyes become liquid and drunken. She pushes her hand into the top of Mom's purse and draws out coins cupped in her little fingers. She drops them into my hand. Neither of them is aware this happens.

Thirty-eight cents. Exactly what I need for the bus.

This is the nature of omnipotence. It is not a matter of control. It is a matter of need.

As I step on the platform, and place my coins in the hungry machine, the bus driver says, "Happy Halloween!"

I look at him and want to slap him, but remember I am on vacation and off the clock. As I walk back to the middle of the bus, I find the boy; recognized right off by the costume. I take a seat one row behind, across the aisle from him, and then try not to stare. But I do stare. I don't know why.

The boy turns suddenly and stares me down, "What?"

"What, *what*?"

"You're staring at me. What are you, some kind of perv? A lost, teenage geek with no friends looking for the nearest Radio Shack? What? Gotta tell ya, if you're here to steal my candy, you're too late. I've already been mugged twice tonight."

The boy's face shows signs of a fight. His lip is cut, and both eyes have taken their fair share of punching. These details were not in the vision I'd had earlier. "I... um...I...uh..."

The boy mocks me, "I...um...I...uh ...'what's the matter with you?"

"*You can see me?*"

"Yes. I can *see* you."

"And *hear* me?"

"Like, I've been talking to you, haven't I? Jee-zus H! I'm outta here."

"Wait!"

"Walkin', Man. This is my stop."

I spring from the bench and trot after the boy, still stunned he is unaffected by me. A puff of air hits my back as the doors snap shut and the bus pulls away from the curb, trailing blue-gray fumes. This neighborhood is unlike where I first picked up the bus: graffiti stains the walls and a pair of Fila high-tops hangs from a telephone line above. Exhaust fumes, greasy food, chemicals, and several different smokes blend in the air. But the boy...long gone.

So, here I am, lost and alone in some unknown, urban area with no money, and no one around to ask for help.

"Shit!"

"Chill out, Man. I'm over here," the boy says, sitting on a swing in a rundown playground. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Between us, waist-high weeds push up between broken plates of asphalt. Foxtails brush the backs of my hands and beggar's lice cling to my pant legs as I walk toward the boy's swing, which is the only remaining one of four attached to a set of monkey bars. The whole structure reminds me of an animal's skeleton.

"One way or another, I've been here more often than you might think," I say and wrap my hand around the rusted, gritty pipes. "After so many millennia, there are few places I haven't been."

His honey-colored eyes turn up toward me and glow unnaturally, seated inside the smeared black make-up around them. A purple mouse sags under the left eye and blood stains the sclera.

How old is he? Maybe five? He talks more like a teenager. I suspect he is small for his age. What is this boy? How can he let me . . . *stop* for a while?

"Are you from India?" he says.

"No."

"You look like one of those old brown men. Like a monk."

Laughter blares from my throat, scaring a pair of pigeons from between the concrete pillars of the bridge behind us. "I am not a monk." I look at the mahogany flesh covering the backs of my hands. "I just work in a place where it stays hot year round."

From where the pigeons flushed, I recognize movement in the darkness under the bridge.

The boy sees it too. "What is that?"

Hell's Secret Service had been dispatched to retrieve their AWOL ruler. I sneer, but what else can I do? The nature of omnipotence does not give you what you want, it gives you what you need. Even if you try to stop it.

"It is something like me," I say. "And not interested in you."

The boy pushes the rubber skull mask farther back onto the top of his head as if it were a ball cap.

I say, "What is your name?"

"I don't tell things like you my name." His head shakes like a hound flopping water from its ears. "Jesus H, I'm like bait for you guys."

I am only killing time. Part of me has grown curious what that thing intended to do to me. I say, "I understand. Knowing someone's name gives you power over them."

He shrugs. "It's just better when they don't know who they are looking for. They don't come back as soon."

So, things like me have visited him often. It means that he can see them too and that he knows what they are. What did they want?

When I ask him, he says, "They all say the same thing: 'How do I stop?'"

I swallow hard and remember the woman telling me the boy would not know the answer to my question. That did not mean he would not already know the question. No wonder he had never asked.

Was that what I really needed, just to stop? I wanted more than a mere day's vacation. I did not want to do this anymore, any of it, ever. I was tired of maintaining the losing side. After so many millennia, only a fool failed to see that God was right.

"I don't know why they ask me," the boy says. "One of them says that I'm like an 'orkel'."

I smile. "Yeah, you're like an oracle." The boy has stopped paying attention to me and is gently squinting with his puffy eye. The skin of my face begins to ache in empathy. "I think you just attract bad things. Maybe they like the sound of your voice."

His expression tells me he already knows that.

The boy stops squinting and peers into the weeds I had just walked through. I twist my head and see a couple of the foxtails twitch.

"And so you tell the things like me that you don't know how they can stop?"

"Uh-huh. Because it don't make sense."

He is five. It should not make sense.

"Because I thought about it, and I thought, 'What if God didn't want to be God no more?' Could he quit? I don't think he can. I mean, when I was four I couldn't stop being four. I couldn't be three again. I just had to wait until I was five."

The muscles in the bottom of my stomach tighten. I know why I had come to the boy. Everything happens exactly when it is supposed to, and the nature of omnipotence doesn't give us what we want. It gives us what we need. I suppose this was the nature of all life, which also meant that I had the answer to my question. Or, at least close enough.

This is what I am.

I can't simply unravel and fall into a different configuration.

There is no un-being and re-being.

No matter how I agonize over my station, the universe has a need for me just as I am. God needs me to be as I am for Him to exist, and I needed Him. Yin and Yang. *Up* is meaningless without *down* to define it. Time has come to go home.

"Which direction is your house?"

"I don't live here." The boy's hands drop from the swing chain and his eyes went flat.

At first, I think I have been too close to him for too long. Maybe what my presence does to humans has finally affected him. But that isn't it. His face pinches up and he pulls down the rubber skull mask. When he speaks again, his voice is weak and muffled. "I don't wanna live here."

The weeds roll as a breeze pushes the stink of urine and burnt chemicals around the playground.

"Mom says that she don't want to be with Dad no more." He tries to wipe his nose on his sleeve and instead wipes the front of the mask. "She says that as soon as he passed out, she was taking me to my aunt."

"You ran away?"

"No. He never passed out. She says for me to go trick-or-treating so he wouldn't be suspicious, and she would pick me up. But she didn't. Then the big kids came, and I got on the bus to get away from them."

"Your aunt lives here? Close?"

"I think so--ah!"

He is looking toward the weeds again, tears instantly gone. I turn and see a Siamese cat. It has caught one of the pigeons. A wing tries to beat at whatever was closest but the movement is slow and weak as if the wing has gone to sleep. The cat's fangs sink into the bird's neck until the offending wing stretches out and quivers.

Seeing this makes me uncomfortable, and I know immediately that I am beginning to feel human weakness. I am the Shepherd of the Damned and should be able to look onto this with amusement. Maybe I have been too close to the humans for too long, and they have begun to change me. I have begun to believe that I could unravel and reform, and it is indeed happening.

As the cat pulls a wet, red strip from the bird's ribs, I hear the boy start to laugh.

I do not look back at him immediately, because I don't want to see his face now or those honey-colored, inhuman eyes. I am afraid.

My senses have dulled so I did not notice the thing from the shadows is standing next to me until it says, "Jesus H, Boy. You attract these things like bait."

I spin around and back away at the same time. The thing from the shadows is covered in the furry scent of beer, and he glares at me with the same honey-colored eyes as the boy. The fact that this thing is the boy's father is not the worst bit of news. The worst, the very worst, is that this thing is something from before my time.

I feel like the pigeon.

I cannot focus on the thing's face. My head keeps moving, instinctively, to shift him to the edge of my vision. It makes his voice feel as if it were part of a dream, something not completely outside of me.

He says in a soothing tone, "It's time to go home."

He is talking to me.

"You are not God. I've met Him," I say. "Are you a bounty hunter?"

"When you left, Heaven and Hell both cried out to me in the same voice."

This is an Ancient. A Fundamental of the Fabric. A drunk whose wife was getting ready to leave him.

Exhaling beer, he says, "Because the nature of omnipotence does not give you what you want; it gives you what you need. And today you are not what you once were."

My head snaps toward him. We lock eyes and I cannot look away.

"You have created a vacuum. It is time to go home."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the boy lean toward me, just a little. The air becomes light and I clench my fangs.

"Here," the boy says, reaching his clenched hand out to me.

Cautiously I extend mine to him and he drops a few coins on my palm.

Thirty-eight cents, exactly.

"Your ride is here," the man says with a happy smile, nodding to something behind me. I turn to see the same bus the boy and I rode here. Looking down at the money in my hand, I can feel the eyes of the boy on me. I dare a look. His golden glowing eyes, made eerie by the battery-operated drop of blood, were smiling.

"Where am I going?" I ask.

"Home, of course," the man replies. "Where else?"

Without lifting either of my feet, I am moving toward the bus. Floating across the weeds and brush to the curb as the ugly hunk of metal rolls to a stop with its obscene flatulent brakes. Without thinking, I climb the steps, and deposit my fare.

"Happy Halloween," the driver says with a smile.

"Go to Hell," I snarl.

"Trust me, Sir...we are." The driver closes the doors and nods to the man and the boy at the swings. I fall into the front seat just behind the driver. The man waves to me as we speed away.

"Didn't get your answer, did you?"

It is the woman's voice again; she still does not realize she is speaking.

She is seated next to the little girl, still in their canine themed costumes.

"Pardon me?"

"Your question...did you get your answer?"

The woman seems in a daze. I move to the seat across the aisle in front of her and the little girl and waive my hand in front of her face. She does not react.

"She can't see you," the little girl says. "And she can't talk. You cut her tongue out the last time you went AWOL and she ratted you out."

"The last time...?"

"You do this every Halloween," the little girl says. "I have to commend you. This is the first time you didn't mame or kill the child. You must be growing up." The little girl tosses her head back and laughs like one much older than she appears. "You don't remember?"

"No, because it never happened."

"Yes, I'm afraid it did. Has. Every year."

"You're lying."

"No. No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. I've never done this before. Ever. This is the first vacation I have ever taken. I had a question. I needed answers. I wanted...I...you know, everything happens exactly when it is supposed to, because the nature of omnipotence..."

"Doesn't give us what we want. It gives us what we need, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," the little girl whines, rolling her eyes at me. "You have some serious power issues don't you? Always repeating to yourself how omnipotent you are. Are you sure you know what that word means?"

"Of course I know what it means," I bark. "Impudent little brat."

The little girl giggles, "I *know* the answer."

"What?"

"Do you have a hearing problem?"

Turning to face the little imp head on, "No, I do not have a hearing problem, you little shit. Why didn't you just tell me the first time? There on the bench."

"Because you didn't ask. Besides...wooooo, your vision *told you* the little boy was the one with the answer," she says, standing up and getting in my face. "Mister Omnipotent...oh, I'm so unhappy. Oh, poor me! Oh, I'm so misunderstood."

The little girl sits back down, crossing her arms across her bun and stares me down, "Once upon a time, you made a choice...and now you regret it."

"Well..."

"Hush! I am not finished. You made a choice, and now you regret it. Yes?"

"I wouldn't say regret, really...just, well, ya know, I need a little change. A little magic in the day. A little mystery to liven things up....a little..."

"Holy crap! Take a Calgon bath, a couple of Midol and call me when your balls grow back!"

"Excuse me?"

"Again with the hearing? I SAID TAKE A...."

"I heard you, I was being facetious."

"*That was facetious?*"

"Yes."

"Wow!"

"What?"

"You are really losing it, aren't you?"

Exasperated and I believe a little disappointed, the little girl gets up, goes to the driver, and asks him to stop. The bus makes an obscene belch and we all lurch forward with the motion. The little girl tells the driver thank you, and then reaches across his body and rips out his beating heart.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" I yell, watching the blood drip on her costume like ketchup.

"What am I doing? I'm doing what you used to love. Your life's work. YOUR CALLING! Don't you *feel* anything?"

I have to admit, I am quite titillated.

And I have never used the word titillated before in my life.

"Seriously? Nothing?" the little girl asks putting the heart back into the chest of the driver. She pats his chest and he nods to her to say that he is all right.

"Well?"

"Well, I felt..."

"Yes?"

"Titillated."

The little girl looks at me as if I am from Mars.

"Excited. Yes, yes. I was excited. Indeed. I believe, I was excited."

The little girl, still looking at me as if I have boogers on my face, was a little more appeased. "Well, okay then. It's a place to start at least."

The little girl pats the driver's arm and the bus starts to move forward again. She walks back to the seat next to the woman dressed like a Dalmatian and sits down, crossing her arms over her bun again. Content for the time with me, and my answer, but still a little unsure about the night.

"We'll have you whipped back into shape again in no time. You'll see," she says, nodding to an imaginary team of support. "Everyone has job issues these days. Who doesn't? Job security. Lack of blunt and sharp tools. Salary. Bloody workstations. Training. Repetitive decapitations. Nosey co-workers. Lack of imaginative disembowelments. No paid vacation..."

I look the little girl in the eyes for the first time. They were bright red, like molten lava. She smiles. I smile back, and stifle a yawn. "It's getting late."

The little girl nods, and leans on the Dalmatian's shoulder, closing her eyes.

Leaning my head back against the window, I drowsily enjoy the last minutes of my vacation. Thinking back, the girl was right. I had done this before.

But that's me. I've always wanted it all. Right now. No questions asked. And look what it's got me.

Stuck on a bus.

On Halloween.

With a dalmatian.

And a hot dog.

With still no answer to my question.

And without even thirty-eight cents to my name.