

Widow's Walk 1

Halloween in Santa Cruz coupled unbridled creativity with people freed from their normal inhibitions. The night was festive and exhilarating, but with so many people anonymous behind masks, there was always the potential for trouble. Police officers worked in pairs; it was safer that way. They let the crowd party — Halloween was everyone's favorite holiday — but they were vigilant, ready.

Spontaneous parades started as merrymakers followed the giant steps of stilt-walkers striding up Pacific Avenue. Spicy aromas of food from many nations emanated from sidewalk stands opened for the hungry. Face-painting and party-hat-making stalls sprang up to help revelers with personal adornment. Other booths offered decorations to carry: magical wands, glitter-covered stars and moons on sticks, and feathery batons to wave and bounce up and down. Music came from volunteer bands performing on every street corner.

As the night progressed, ever more people crowded on to Pacific Avenue. The street became a crush of resplendently costumed hordes.

A number of women braved the October night's chill dressed as harem girls with bare midriffs and gauzy leg coverings. Most strutted with attitude, certain their role was to provide titillating entertainment for the throng, although not all were young or svelte.

Imaginative ideas were expressed in costume. Pizza boxes were stacked high and akimbo to surround a woman and turn her into a leaning tower of pizza; a thick covering of purple balloons transformed another reveler into a bunch of grapes. Many costumes were inspired by fanciful imaginings of sea creatures that might be lurking, undiscovered, in the deep submarine canyon of nearby Monterey Bay.

One group of friends formed a multi-headed dragon, which was capable of playfully snapping at several passersby simultaneously. An oversized big bad wolf, his jaws open menacingly and his teeth already bloody, snapped, too, until a still intact and very much in charge sweet Little Red Riding Hood produced a whip and warned him to stop or he would be punished.

The night brought out many shadowy black figures with rubbery masks portraying Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Without exception they bounced and scurried and waved to friends. It seemed incongruous that they were so engaged and having such fun when their masks portrayed only despair and misery.

Halloween brought out other black-clad figures, too, some carrying bloodied scythes. Most tried to walk silently and slowly enough that the hoods covering their heads fell forward to obscure their skeleton-masked faces.

If asked who they were, their ghoulish presentations were often ruined by a returned question: "Dude, can't you tell? I'm Death."

Some did manage to stay in character long enough to murmur menacingly that they were Death. Usually though, they couldn't resist following their whisper with a laugh, as if they were driven to keep some separation between their portrayal and their person by making light of it.

On this Santa Cruz Halloween night, one such solemn phantom set a higher standard. It seemed to have no human face to hide. Black scrim, the kind used in stage productions, obscured a barely visible death-head set deeply under the hood, leaving the details of what was behind to the imagination of Death's beholders. It was over six feet tall, towering, and thin enough to suggest there might *be* only bones under its dark robes.

It moved soundlessly and evenly, its shroud obscuring its feet so completely that it seemed to float. If spoken to, it remained as silent as the grave and responded not at all, as if it were truly otherworldly and oblivious to the commotion around it.

Occasionally it raised an elegant black gloved hand and tapped a costumed reveler on the shoulder. When its chosen target turned to face it, Death handed him a small piece of paper. Death's note held a future date lettered in a bold typeface that resembled hand-written script. Recipients quickly figured out their messages ... they were the dates Death would return to claim them.

Reactions to receiving a death date were curious to watch. Those made aware of their mortality knew

it wasn't real, but most, even the young, reflexively drew in their elbows to protect their midsections and twittered nervously. Then they laughed too exuberantly, dismissing their future death by making it a joke and an event too distant to warrant any more of their attention, especially not on a festive Halloween night.

One elf-costumed man had a very different reaction to his death-date.

"What kind of crap is this?" he confronted Death. "Is this supposed to be funny, because I don't think this is a bit funny!"

He shouted loudly enough that those near him stopped and took notice.

"What is it, Walter?" a smallish woman in a matching elf costume asked.

He shoved the card at her, narrowed his eyes to angry slits, and tilted his head back to glower up at the lofty Death.

"This jerk says I'm going to die tonight."

Death, its delivery made and the elf-man's displeasure clear, bowed slightly, backed away from the couple, and then turned and began silently retreating into the surrounding crowd.

The elf-man shook his fist in the direction of the withdrawing grim reaper. "Are you smiling under your mask, you creep? You think this is a joke? Come back here!"

The elf-wife took the note from her husband's hand and read it. She sighed and shook her head, "What a sick sense of humor, and on a night that's supposed to be fun."

She wadded up the note and dropped it into her pocket. She looped her hand through her husband's arm and pulled him close. "That disturbed individual is not worth getting worked up over," she smiled up at him. "Umm, can you smell cinnamon? Let's tempt fate and get something to eat that's greasy and loaded with sugar," she said as she tugged her husband toward a nearby churro stand.

With a final huff, the elf-man turned his head for another look over his shoulder. He wanted to give

Death a final annoyed stare, but Death was gone, banished it seemed by the high spirits of the milling swarm.

Neither the elf-man nor his mate gave the note another thought as they enjoyed their treat. Certainly no one in the crowd who witnessed the elf-man's outburst took any further notice of him, nor did any of the patrons at the popular churro stand — that is until he lay crumpled on the ground with his bright green and gold costume darkening from the blood that pooled around him on the sidewalk.

The elf-man's mouth worked helplessly. He tried to speak but the death closing around him had already taken his voice.

His elf-wife dropped to the sidewalk next to him.

"Walter!" she screamed.

She was aghast but not hysterical. She turned him on to his side and touched the wound where his blood oozed near the small of his back. She covered one of her hands with the other and pressed hard in a practiced way, but she couldn't staunch the bleeding.

"Help me, please," she commanded the surrounding crowd with surprising authority, "someone call 9-1-1."

Cell phones appeared from the most incongruous places: from the paw of an oversized Dalmatian dog, from under the fronds of a light-covered strolling Christmas tree, from the unseen pocket in the folds of the Statue of Liberty's gown. The phones chirped out in harmony as all dialed the same three digits.

A man dressed in green hospital scrubs came forward and announced he was a doctor. The irony of his profession matching his costume was lost on most in the crowd.

He dropped to one knee and felt the elf-man's neck at the carotid artery. He looked closely at the elf-man's open and unblinking eyes. The doctor spoke barely above a whisper but the surrounding crowd

had fallen silent ... they heard his words.

“He’s gone.”

The elf-wife wailed, “Death stabbed my husband!”

One by one the surrounding bystanders began to squeal as the growing pool of blood around the elf-man reached their toes. What they were witnessing was real, not a Halloween show, not performance art done well.

The mass of people, who had been slowly pressing closer for a better look, moved back a step in unison, seemingly of one body and mind. A black-draped grim reaper backed away, too.

The elf-woman’s eyes searched the crowd until she saw the threat. She pointed an accusing finger at the dark-clad figure. “Death killed my husband!”

Death no longer seemed towering and reed-thin. He seemed diminished in stature, but fuller, as if in the act of claiming his quarry, he had sunk into the earth with the weight of his victim’s mortality.

Death did not like being the center of attention; he did not like the accusing finger of the elf-wife pointing at him. He turned and pushed through the growing throng.

The troubled witnesses stepped aside willingly, glad to see him go. Some might have thought they should stop him — but no one dared lay hands on him or interrupt his leaving, not after what they had just seen.

Within a heartbeat, no one was looking after Death any longer or wondering if his black gloves camouflaged fresh red blood. They were silent in the presence of the newly dead, and looking only at Death’s newest acquisition.