



ANOTHER TALE OF TWO CITIES

The old man yawned as he pulled back the kitchen curtains. '*I'll have to clear up all those leaves before the winter sets in'* he thought, looking out of the kitchen window. A steady stream of children was coming down from Rhiwbina and joining up with children coming from the opposite direction along Pantbach Road. They were all heading for the local primary school, chattering excitedly as they met up with friends. It was clear from the outfits worn by the children that the school was having a party. '*Of course, it's Halloween tonight*', thought the old man. It did annoy him when he lost track of the date.

One little girl in particular, dressed in a witch's outfit with a very full tulle skirt, kept twirling around to show off her dress to the admiration of her friends and the irritation of her mother, who was in constant danger of being tripped up. Most of the little girls wore elaborately trimmed full-length gowns in either black, purple or blood red. Their colour was the only indication that they were supposed to be witches, but the boys' outfits were more authentic, with hobgoblins being the dominant theme. There was even a jolly little pumpkin who was in danger of being temporarily blinded by the orange hood which kept slipping down over his eyes

Seeing the excited children reminded the old man of his own childhood, in a city far away where there seemed to be some kind of celebration almost every week. The biggest festivals were the Muslim Eid and Kurdish Nowrooz. The Muslim children always had new clothes, not witches' costumes but pretty dresses for the girls and designer trainers for the boys. The mosques would be busy cooking food for the poor and he and his cousins were not above standing in line to get a plateful themselves. During Nowrooz, housewives made

up little trays of delicacies and took them as a gift to neighbours' children. You didn't have to be Kurdish to receive a tray of baklawa and sweets from a friendly neighbour.

Naturally, Christmas and Easter were especially important to his family, though he did find the church services boring. After a while he would start to fidget and make faces at his friend in another pew, causing his mother to frown and put on her angry face, but he loved the processions through the streets afterwards, then the meals at his grandparents' house. All his cousins would be there and they would run wild through the garden and up the stairs to the roof where they would call to neighbouring children to come out and play in the street.

The little girl with the swirly skirt was named Lily, although the old man didn't know that of course. That morning Lily's mother had been wearing a witch's hat and huge plastic nose as she gave her breakfast, toast smothered in green jam on a plastic plate with a picture of a nasty black cat around the rim. Even her milk was coloured green. Lily loved Halloween. That evening she was going trick or treating with her brother, William. Her father would wait outside while they rang their neighbours' doorbells and collected their loot, usually sweets or chocolate. Later that night her parents were having their own party and she and William were going to stay up late to see the guests arriving in their Halloween costumes.

Uncle Harry's was usually the best and he would probably come upstairs and read them a scary story before going down to the party to get a drink. Although she was sometimes afraid of a really grotesque Halloween mask, Lily understood it was all pretend, although last year when Daddy draped himself in a sheet and hid behind the rose bushes Mummy had got quite cross. He jumped out making wooing noises just as she arrived home from work and Daddy had to apologise and give her a hug before she saw the funny side of it.

A little girl named Layla, also unknown to the old man, lived in his old home now. Unlike Lily, she had been afraid for most of her life, ever since the men with the long beards and black banners came. Three of them had come and taken away her uncle Faris in their Toyota truck. They kicked in the front door and dragged him off. He twisted and turned, trying to escape, but he couldn't get away from them. Her mum had tried to stop them, but they punched her and threw her into a corner where she lay with her hands over her eyes. Lily could tell that she was crying because her shoulders were shaking but she didn't make a sound.

After that everything changed. Mum wasn't allowed to work at the hospital anymore and Layla wasn't allowed to go to school. Mum tried to teach her at home, but she didn't seem to be able to concentrate. She would start to explain something then a far-away look would come to her eyes until she'd ask, 'Where did we get to?' so the lessons never really went anywhere. Mum never took her shopping any more either and when she left the house, she wore funny clothes, dresses which came right down to the floor and a scarf over her face. Layla had also overheard mum whispering to her neighbour 'Thank goodness she's too young, even for them' and she was terrified although she didn't really understand why.

Dad still went to his office, but he wore funny clothes too, baggy white trousers and a long cotton shirt instead of his normal suits. He also had a long beard, just like theirs, and when he swung her up into his arms for a kiss it tickled and scratched so she wriggled away from

him and asked to be put down. She was like a little mouse hiding in her room, unable to go out and suffocating under the blanket of fear which enveloped her.

But the old man had no regrets. He had come to Wales as a seventeen-year-old student, the first time he had been away from his parents. He prepared for his A levels at a local college then went on to graduate as a civil engineer from Swansea University. While he was there he met a pretty Welsh girl whose parents, feeling sorry for the young man from far away, welcomed him into their home. Their friendship blossomed into love and after graduation they married and moved to Cardiff, which at the time seemed to him to be very grubby and run down. Over the years he watched the city transformed into a modern, cosmopolitan capital with its vibrant bay area, Opera house, ultra-modern sports stadiums and a wealth of hospitality venues. When he heard that his parents had died in a rocket attack, he was devastated but he loved the girl he had married and so he never went back.

Still, he kept to the old religion and regularly attended Church. Over the years he had held on to his belief in a compassionate and all-powerful God, but lately when he heard the news coming out of the ill-fated city where he was born he couldn't stop himself from wondering.

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