

## Midnight at the Crossroads

by Scott Cimarusti

The young man raised his eyes to the evening sky. Twilight had just descended, and the full moon glared down at him like a grimacing skull. When he had set out from home, the late October sun had still been a fiery orange arc melting into the horizon, and already the indigo sky threatened nightfall.

With the sun now vanquished for the night, the moon ushered with it a chill wind that rustled through the trees like the chattering of imps plotting evil mischief. The young man drew his gray woolen cloak closer to him to ward off the wind's probing fingers.

He continued along the hint of a trodden path that wandered through the ancient wood, the carpet of fallen leaves crumbling beneath his worn leather shoes like ancient parchment. From all sides, the dark silhouettes of massive ageless trees loomed, barren now of their garlands of summer leaves and ripe fruit, their leafless arms stretched upward to the dark sky, as if to pay homage to the gleaming white god above. Their gnarled branches reached for the young traveler like the withered hands of a crone, beckoning him into the gaping darkness beyond.

He dared not light his lantern yet; for lamp oil was a rare and expensive commodity, and one could not be frivolous with it, especially with the long, dark winter ahead.

Had this been any other night, the young man would never have ventured this far into the woods alone.

But this was no ordinary night.

It was All Hallow's Eve, and he had a promise to keep.

As if on cue, the wind suddenly picked up, rattling through the remaining stubborn leaves and whispering its ancient curses. It tousled the hair off the young man's forehead, revealing piercing green eyes that gleamed with purpose and betrayed the innocence of the youthful face from which they peered.

Finally, the young traveler broke free of the wood, and glimpsed a ribbon of chimney smoke wafting up to the heavens from a spired roof below. Relieved to finally be beyond the reach of the skeletal trees for the time being, he continued along the path and downward into a clearing towards the Festival Hall.

Nestled among the wooded foothills, the sprawling wooden building was an oasis from the impenetrable forest encircling it, promising safety and light to the wayward traveler. Built back before any of the old-timers could recall, the Festival Hall was one of the largest structures in the village out of necessity; for it was where the local populace congregated four times a year. In the spring, it was host to a festival commemorating sowing and a blessing of the crops. In summer and winter, it held celebrations for both solstices. And then there was tonight's event: the Harvest Festival on the Eve of All Saints.

As the young man advanced from the shadows and into the clearing, the sounds of music and laughter from inside the Hall drifted toward him, consoling his troubled spirit. When he reached the great oaken door, it suddenly burst open to reveal a trio of drunken revelers stumbling in the direction of the path he had just left. He followed their progress with his gaze as the darkness swallowed them, his head shaking almost imperceptibly. The ancient wood was not a place to wander without one's wits—especially tonight. He sighed and crossed the threshold, letting the warm glow of celebration embrace him.

An immense stone and mortar fireplace dominated the Hall's main room, where a raging fire spewed sparks against the iron grating and up into the high chimney. Flickering shadows loomed and danced all the way up to the timbered ceiling high above, where a wrought-iron chandelier swayed, its stout candles trailing veils of melted wax, some of it dripping onto the floor below.

At the opposite end of the large room was an arrangement of large oaken tables covered with simple white linens and laden with a bounty of food and drink. There were large wicker baskets brimming with fresh apples, pewter platters displaying rows of roasted corn, great ceramic jars of cider, and stout kegs of ale. Pumpkins and other assorted squashes in a variety of colors and shapes tumbled across the seamless white cloth.

The village elders were huddled near the fire, warming their weary bones and stroking their long gray beards. Some puffed on ornately carved pipes while they exchanged superstitions about the coming winter. Not far away from them, their wives gossiped among themselves, casting a stern eye to any rowdy youngsters that encroached upon their tightly-knit circle.

As for the young couples, they twirled about the center of the floor, keeping tempo with the rhythm provided by the trio of musicians tucked in a far corner. One player stroked a fiddle, another blew a long flute-like instrument, and the third plucked away at a mandolin.

The young man noticed all the young unmarried women of the village stationed along the walls around the room, dressed in their most prized, yet sensible, autumn gowns.

The Harvest Festival was the traditional occasion for a girl of eighteen summers to present herself before the young men of the village in the hopes of beginning a courtship that would continue through the winter and culminate into marriage in the spring. All of the doe-eyed girls primped and fidgeted nervously, straightening their skirts and fluffing their hair as they waited patiently for a potential suitor to approach them.

Their eyes teased. Their smiles tempted. The firelight shimmered in their blonde, chestnut, and ginger hair. And though it was difficult to ignore their gazes of desperation that radiated a palpable heat almost eclipsing that of the fireplace, there was no visible reaction from the young man.

He remembered the nervous anticipation he had felt at last year's Festival, the peculiar sensation of all those expectant eyes crawling over him. He could also recall how his pulse had suddenly quickened and his knees had buckled when at last his eager gaze had fallen upon the one who would capture his heart that night.

This year, though, he would be choosing no one.

Avoiding the young women's eyes entirely, the young man settled into a solitary chair away from the fire and the feast. The elders cast curious glances in his direction, but he ignored their judging eyes, too, focusing instead on the ornate grandfather's clock across the room, which ticked somberly, its weighty pendulum swaying in wide, deliberate arcs.

Sometimes his gaze wandered from the clock's hands over to the other young men of the village as they strutted about the room, their arrogance like a fetid stench. He watched with bitter contempt while his peers played their prey for fools, stringing maidens along until a better opportunity presented itself, then abandoning the rejected to resume the humiliating ritual.

What a primitive and antiquated rite this all seemed to him now. The poor girls must have felt like whores, displaying themselves like merchandise to be bought or livestock to be traded. But this was the way their mothers did it, and their mothers' mothers, and the countless generations before them.

As was the custom for time out of mind, the Harvest Festival was the last village gathering before the bitter cold and snows of winter attacked like a pack of ravaging wolves. The celebration would last until midnight; at which time, the Great Elder would then lead the villagers in a solemn prayer expressing gratitude for a bountiful harvest, hope for a mild winter, and reverence for ancestors long-passed.

Legend had it that at midnight on All Hallow's Eve, the barrier between the world of the living and the afterlife was at its thinnest. So, to ward off wayward evil spirits, peppermint oil would be burned, and all the windows and doors of the Hall opened to prevent demonic possessions; for the old wood surrounding the Hall was rumored to be haunted.

Though the ale and cider flowed freely all night, and the food seemed never-ending, the young man partook of none of it while he waited, for fear it might dull his senses; and he would need all his wits about him this night.

He tapped his foot anxiously, desperately wishing it were midnight already. Watching the minutes tick by, he observed the young maidens gradually pairing off with prospective suitors, either by choice or by desperation, as the band continued to play and the couples danced.

As one newly acquainted couple waltzed past him, he caught a whiff of perfume—something with a hint of lilac; the familiar scent stirring up bittersweet memories for the young man keeping his lonely vigil.

He was instantly taken back to the first spring he spent with his beloved, in the weeks before they were to marry. After the long, harsh winter, the world around him had seemed even more vibrant and alive because he had been so in love. The bright green spears of grass emerging from the earth...the hopeful buds sprouting on all the trees...the blossoming flowers in a kaleidoscope of colors. Though to his eyes, none of Mother Earth's majestic beauty could compare to that of his beloved. The sunshine shimmering in her golden hair...the flawless blue skies mirrored in her keen and soulful eyes...the melody of her laughter eclipsing even the

sweetest birdsong... He remembered the silken caress of her lips against his as they stole an unchaperoned kiss beneath a ripe April moon.

He also remembered the almost humbling sense of pride at the thought of the day when his beloved would finally become his bride.

But, alas, Fate had other plans for them both.

The young man was abruptly shaken from his reverie as the grandfather clock loudly chimed the quarter hour before midnight.

Finally, his patience would be rewarded

The young man leaped from his chair, grabbed his lantern, and strode toward the rear door of the Hall. He was oblivious to the gazes of contempt (and some of pity) that burned into his back as he fled out into the night, forfeiting the warmth and safety of the Hall for the darkness and uncertainty of the haunted forest beyond.

He quickly lit his lantern and stumbled onto the path that led into the heart of the old wood. Once again, he found himself engulfed by almost total blackness; his small hopeful circle of light casting flickering shadows like dancing imps all around him.

Nearby branches seemed to move of their own volition, clawing at his clothes; roots appeared to rise up from the path in an effort to ensnare his feet.

He thought he heard more whispered voices carried by the wind; laments, curses, and cries coming from the darkness. He suppressed his fear, though, concentrating instead on his single-minded purpose: reaching the crossroads at midnight. For if he did not, he would be condemned to suffer another year before his next meeting.

He ran at full speed, his body slicked in a cold sweat, blindly sweeping branches out of his way as he made for his destination.

Finally, he arrived at a small clearing, where he found the crossroads bathed in an ethereal glow cast by the pale light of the full moon. The twisted trees that surrounded the intersection leaned away from it, as if they sensed its power and recoiled from it. The young man's pulse thudded in his ears and his knees trembled. He knew he would leave the crossroads one of two ways this night; either a faithful consort rewarded for his patience, or else a raving lunatic infested with demons.

He panted heavily, his breath whistling in and out of his heaving chest as the oppressive silence closed in on him. Holding his lamp high, he glanced furtively about in search of a sign. On some primitive level of awareness that he didn't fully comprehend, he could sense more than one unseen presence lurking around him.

He feared that he was too late; that his perseverance would be for nothing, and his only compensation for his devotion would be damnation and torment from the evil forces that prowled this night.

Then the suffocating silence was broken by the sound of the Festival Hall's bells chiming off the twelfth hour.

The Witching Hour.

The distant chanting of the villagers could also be heard as they began their midnight prayers.

Gooseflesh broke out instantly over the young man's body. He could feel the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck rising. And suddenly his breath was snatched away by an icy chill that moved through his soul.

She was here with him now. He could sense her every emotion as if they were his own.

Sorrow.

Loss.

And longing.

And from a bottomless chasm, his beloved uttered his name; an echoing whisper he sensed, rather than heard.

He embraced her with his soul and felt her spirit lighten.

Then, as suddenly as she had come, her spirit was gone; her departure leaving him hollow and vacant, like an empty tomb.

But that emptiness was soon filled by a bittersweet contentment.

She had kept her promise. The promise she had made before the Reaper had stolen her from him.

The distant chimes from the Hall had ceased, as did the villagers' prayers.

Today was All Saints' Day.

The barrier between the realms of the living and the dead was stable again.

The young man turned and headed back in the direction of the Festival Hall, the anticipation of next year's meeting and the silvery moon above his sole companions.