

HOLIDAY MADNESS

13 Dark Tales for
Halloween, Christmas, and all Occasions

Fred Wiehe

Holiday Madness:
13 Dark Tales for Halloween, Christmas, and all Occasions

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All stories were first read on KKUP radio in the San Francisco Bay Area from 2004 through 2009.

Trick or Treat; It's the Puppet People was later published in *Sinister Tales Magazine*, Halloween 2007.

Trick or Troll was later published at *ShadeWorks*, Halloween 2008.

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and plots are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, companies, or events is purely coincidental.

To my brothers and sisters:
Steve, Sandy, Sharon, Debbie, Craig, and Kevin
Seven of us...now orphans all

In memory of my parents Fred (Fritz) and Elizabeth (Betty)...now drinking
beer and dancing the jitterbug in heaven.

As always, thank you to my wife and children for their never-ending support
and love. I love you Suzy, Jesse, and Ian.

I'd also like to thank my mother-in-law June and my brother-in-law Steve
for their support throughout the years.

Of course, I have to thank Jim McMillen of KKUP radio. Please read the
Forward for further understanding of how these 13 tales wouldn't exist
without him or the radio station.

Lastly, I hope all of my writing students—both children and adults—at
Communication Academy, Sunnyvale-Cupertino Adult Education, and
Milpitas Adult Education enjoy and learn from these 13 tales.

Holiday Madness, Wiehe—5

“Halloween lurks
Within shadows in my head
Christmastime gremlins hide
Underneath my bed
Trolls crouch at my threshold
Wolf Men come to call
Ghosts haunt my thoughts
And walk my dusty halls
Uglies prowl the night
Hunting for helpless prey
Puppet People don’t exist
At least that’s what I hope
At least that’s what I pray
Vampires step into sunlight
They burst into fire
It’s at night that they hunt
It’s my blood they desire
But none of these monsters compare
To the stresses and the sadness
Those crazy feelings I get
And strange voices that I hear
That I call holiday madness”

—The Collected Nightmares

Table of Contents

1. Forward
2. Holiday Madness
3. Trick or Treat: It's The Puppet People
4. A Gremlin for Christmas
5. The Uglies
6. Raven Mocker
7. Santa's War
8. Ghosts, Inc.
9. Run, Run Rudy: A Zombie's Not Too Far Behind
10. The Halloween Box
11. Bad Moon
12. The Three Wolf Men
13. Trick or Troll
14. Christmas-*Time* Gremlins: A sequel

Forward

The tales you're about to read are a compilation of stories that I had written specially for radio station KKUP, 91.5 FM in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some years ago, my good friend and radio personality Jim McMillen somehow convinced me (or was it conned me) into writing a short story to read on his program *One from the Heart* at Christmas time. This to me seemed like a strange request since I'm basically a horror writer; Christmas and horror just didn't seem like a natural mix. Still, I agreed. But I knew (and warned Jim) that a Christmas story from a horror writer was going to be anything but traditional, fuzzy, or warm.

His response was, "Great!"

That first year *A Gremlin for Christmas* was born and so was what has become a new holiday tradition. Apparently, people loved the idea of dark, nontraditional Christmas stories.

We have now completed our fifth annual Christmas/Horror show at KKUP. The stories after that first year in succession are *Holiday Madness*; *The Three Wolf Men*; *Run, Run Rudy: A Zombie's Not Too Far Behind*; and *Santa's War*. For Christmas 2009, I'll be reading *Christmas-Time Gremlins* (a sequel to *A Gremlin for Christmas*), which is also included in this anthology.

Putting me to work once a year and having a successful, annual

Christmas show, however, wasn't enough for Jim. Soon he came to me with the more logical idea of having an annual Halloween show. This of course seemed like a more natural fit for a horror writer. But of course, now he had me writing two stories a year for his show. Let me tell you folks there's nothing like working for free.

But I couldn't say no, so three successful Halloween programs later we have *Trick or Treat: It's the Puppet People*; *Trick or Troll*; and *The Uglies*. By the way, those first two stories were later published in Halloween editions of *Sinister Tales Magazine* and *ShadeWorks* respectively, as well as in this anthology. For Halloween 2009, I've given him two for the price of one: the short story, *Ghosts, Inc.*, and the poem, *The Halloween Box*. Of course, these two are also included in this anthology.

In between the annual holiday shows, Jim also had me appear on two Talk Marathons for KKUP and had me on his show a couple of times during the summer, usually when another guest bailed at the last second. Two more stories were born because of those guest spots but without holiday themes: *Raven Mocker* and *Bad Moon*. These two stories round out this collection.

I have to say that it's been my privilege to be a part of KKUP, 91.5FM in Cupertino, California and Jim's show—*One from the Heart*. The radio station is a public, nonprofit station, and all of its on-air personalities and staff are volunteers. It survives solely on donations by its listeners. It's also been an honor to entertain those listeners and to help raise money for this worthy station.

I'd also like to thank Jim McMillen for forcing me to write these stories; without him this anthology wouldn't exist. I've had a great time

reading them on air and talking with listeners from around the San Francisco Bay Area. I hope to continue this tradition for many years to come too.

But now it's come time to share these nontraditional Christmas stories and Halloween stories, as well as the two other stories for all occasions with a much wider audience; that's the purpose of compiling these 13 (my favorite number) tales into book form.

It's my hope that readers—Tweens, Teens, Young Adults, and Adults alike—from all over and from all walks of life enjoy these supernatural tales as much as the listeners of KKUP radio in the Bay Area enjoyed hearing them.

Happy Halloween!

Merry Christmas!

Be scared!

Fred Wiehe

October 2009

Holiday Madness

The alien voices start right after Thanksgiving. At first, they are just whisperings in my head, like a hundred hissing snakes slithering in and out of my mind—incomprehensible, garbled, and perplexing. They make no sense to me. I can't decipher one from another. I suppose it could even be one voice that endlessly echoes through my mind, as if not for this constant chatter my head would be an empty and cavernous void. But I suspect they are many voices, bombarding me like a demonic blitzkrieg.

Why I think the voices are the work of the devil and not God, I can't tell you. I can't understand what they're saying. I can't translate their message. I have no idea for certain if the voices communicate good or evil. But a cold, greasy sensation deep in my soul, like an oil spill on the ocean, warns me of the possibility for wickedness. A volcanic rumbling in my once dormant gut cautions me against listening.

Still, I find it next to impossible to turn a deaf ear. The voices are relentless, feeding on my brain as a pack of ravenous wolves feed on dead prey, ripping and rending my will to shreds. I try to pay no heed to them and go about my daily chores as if all's right with the world. Christmas, after all, is fast approaching; this is a time for joy and hope, a time for giving and family. So, I work at my job, kiss my wife, play with the kids, tend the stock, and make my Christmas lists as usual. But I do so without much enthusiasm, and always with the whispers as constant and unwelcome

companions.

Only a week before Christmas and the voices grow louder, clearer, more distinct. Rather than a jumble of whisperings that sound like so much white noise, I can now tell one voice from the other and even somewhat decipher what they're trying to tell me. I can't understand every word but a few come through loud and clear: IMPOSTERS...DANGER...DEAD.

Now, rather than trying to ignore the voices, I listen to them carefully for better understanding. Clearly, they're attempting to warn me, to save me from some sort of impending threat. I no longer believe they're demonic in nature but instead voices of salvation, wishing nothing more than to deliver me from harm's way. The harder I concentrate the more I'm rewarded with clarity of mind, until finally the voices meld into one clear message:

"You are in danger. Don't trust the imposters. They want you dead."

The now intelligible message raises more questions than it answers, disturbing questions with no ready answers:

Imposters? What imposters? Who are these people that want me dead? Why do they want me dead?

Paranoia now clings to me like a funeral shroud. Fear and suspicion feed on my wits until only bare bones remain. I jump at every sound and from the corner of my eye I see inexplicable movement in every dark corner and every shadow. I bite my fingernails to nubs as worry plagues my soul. I eye everyone with wariness and mistrust. Those closest to me are of most concern—my wife, my children. I no longer look upon them with loving eyes but rather with misgivings and doubts. Soon, however, this simple apprehension gives way to anxiety, which in turn gives way to panic, and

then eventually becomes pure terror.

All the while, the message rings through my head like an SOS:

“You are in danger. Don’t trust the imposters. They want you dead.”

I can no longer stand the sight of my family. They are indeed the imposters the voice warns me about; they must be, for there’s no one else here. They seem like strangers to me, almost alien in nature, as if no longer human. How could they have fooled me for so long? Why hadn’t I seen what they’d become? Are they witches, using some kind of glamour? Was I under a spell that is now broken? No matter. I now see them for what they truly are—monsters who want me dead.

For protection, I distance myself from everyone and everything, a self-imposed hermit, if not physically at least emotionally. I no longer eat the food my wife prepares for fear of poisoning. Unfortunately, however, I grow more emaciated and weak by the day. But it can’t be helped. I no longer play with the children for fear they will somehow harm me with their scissors or jump ropes or sling shots. I even ignore all conversation, their voices sounding to me like demonic talons scraping across the prison walls in perdition. Even the children’s laughter and songs bear the screeching tones of tortured souls. I dare not even make eye contact for fear that one look from them might strike me down as surely as Medusa’s stare could turn me to stone. Even the animals have begun to exhibit cold, predatory looks about them, as if eating me is the sole purpose of their meager existence.

Danger surrounds me. Terror holds me hostage.

It’s Christmas Eve. I lie in my bed, exhausted—having not slept for more than a week—but still awake. I dare not close my eyes, even for a

second. I listen to the sleeping snores of the thing that used to be my wife lying next to me and wonder if she's faking sleep in the hope that I'll let down my guard and fall asleep myself. Yes, that's it, I'm sure. Once I'm asleep she'll plunge a knife deep into my chest or hold a pillow over my face. She wants me dead. They all do.

Rather than take a chance on falling asleep, I sneak out of bed and dress in work clothes and boots. Fatigue, starvation, and fright have rattled me senseless. I prowl the dark house like a brainless zombie. I must do something to save myself before inaction does the job for them. Soon I'll either die of hunger or collapse in a weakened state. Then I'll be at their mercy. Maybe even the stress and lack of sleep could cause a heart attack or stroke. I must do something. I need a plan.

But what?

My mind is like a cluttered attic full of cobwebs. I can't think. Nothing will come to me. Only the voice echoes its warning through me:

"You are in danger. Don't trust the imposters. They want you dead."

I'm going to go crazy. I'm sure of it. I must do something.

I tiptoe back into the bedroom. The thing pretending to be my wife still fakes sleep.

I must do something.

That's when I see it. An axe leans against the fireplace, next to the small stockpile of wood. At the sight of it, the message in my head changes:

"Kill them first! Before they kill you!"

I grin at the sudden insight. Cobwebs in my brain are abruptly knocked away, as if someone with a broom had just whisked through my

head. Thoughts are clearer than they've been for weeks. Why hadn't I thought of it before? It's such a simple yet effective plan:

“Kill them first! Before they kill you!”

I creep to the fireplace. Floorboards squeak underfoot but the thing pretending to be my wife doesn't stir. I grab the axe handle and heft the heavy tool into the air. I bring it up and rest it on my shoulder as I approach the bed.

“Kill them first! Before they kill you!”

I nod as if in agreement. With both hands on the handle now, I raise the axe overhead. Like a rattlesnake, I'm poised for a deadly strike. But she—it—awakens just before the first blow, as if I had somehow actually rattled a warning. She rolls over, peers up at me through the darkness, and terror sweeps across her face. In that moment, I'm no longer sure of my convictions. I no longer see an alien or a monster. For the first time in weeks, I again see my wife. Her eyes plead with me to stop. She screams.

But I can't stop.

“Kill them first! Before they kill you!”

The axe plummets down as if possessed by an evil spirit. Heavy metal clunks loudly against skull. Blood splatters me, raining up onto my face and chest as if gravity didn't exist. I raise the axe again. Globes of blood and matted hair cling to the blade. The axe plummets. A torrential up-pour of red rain splatters me again. Bone fragments follow, pelting me like macabre shrapnel. But I don't stop. Again and again the axe falls, until only a mangled and bloody mass of flesh and bone fragments remain where her head had once been.

I'm sickened but not finished. The voice in my head still commands me:

“Kill them first! Before they kill you!”

I turn away when I'm sure she can no longer harm me. I pad to the large room where the aliens pretending to be my children sleep. As I push it open, the door creaks like a graveyard's rusted gate. No one wakes. They had slept through the screams and the sickening sound of the chopping axe, so why would a creaking door rouse them. I approach the first bed and hoist the axe overhead. The axe drops like the blade of a guillotine, but the thing on the bed rolls at the last second and it misses its mark. I quickly chop at the imposter again, but this time the blade crashes into the headboard and splinters it in two.

As if this was a call to arms, the imposters all startle awake, screams on their lips. They scatter like scared rabbits at the sight of me and my axe. Little had they realized; I was on to their charade and their murderous plans. But now they know, and they run in panic for their lives.

I quickly give chase, brandishing my weapon as if on a holy war. I swing wildly at the scrambling imposters. I'm manic in my pursuit. My axe smashes bric-a-brac and tears into furniture and walls. Destruction is left in my wake by my blind rage. But all of the little aliens somehow manage to get out of the house unscathed, as if protected from my axe by black magic.

I stare from inside the open door. None of them are in sight, but I see their small footprints in the snow. Some head toward the forest. I needn't worry about them. They will surely freeze to death by morning. Most of the footprints lead to the barn. They think they're the smart ones. It's warm in

there and there are places to hide—dark corners, mounds of hay. But I'll find them.

Undaunted, I give pursuit out into the frigid winter air. A stiff north wind greets me, and an icy downpour stings my face, like the thousand needles of an acupuncturist gone mad. Plumes of panted, frozen breath escape from my mouth, looking like wisps of tiny ghosts taking flight into the night. Hard surface snow crunches underfoot as I march across the yard. But I'm not the least bit cold. A maddening fire burns deep within the pit of my stomach, stoked by a combination of rage and the need to survive. Blood boils in my veins. I must find them all.

“Kill them first! Before they kill you!”

I must kill them all.

I kick in the barn door with the heel of my heavy boot. It smashes inward and bounces off the inside wall. I hear scuffling and muffled cries as I enter, but I see no movement, no sign of life except for the stock. The animals sense danger. They snort and stomp agitated hooves. A few kick their stable walls, splintering wood in their attempt to escape. But there will be no escape.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” I call to the imposters that have taken over the lives of my children.

They don't come out. They're smarter than that, devious in their thinking. I'm sure they are busy concocting a murderous plan. I must act quickly, before they're able to put their plan into action.

Frustration and fury motivate me to hatch my own plan first. I'll get them to come out, one way or another. With the frenzy of a madman, I start

hacking away at the stabled wildlife. The barn echoes with ululate cries and protracted bleats of frightened animals that instinctually realize they're all about to be put to slaughter. The butcher's axe has already sliced up three, and the sickening stench of the carnage has whipped the others into a frenzied panic.

I'm chopping the head off a fourth, showering in its blood, when the things that used to be my children rush me. They come out of nowhere, from every direction, pouncing on me en masse. The axe flies from my grasp as I go down hard on my back. Hands scratch at my face, poke at my eyes, and pull at the corners of my mouth. I try to fend them off, but there are too many of them. I'm defenseless. They know it and laugh wickedly at my plight. The hideous, evil laughter renews my courage and strength. With a deep, guttural growl and a last-ditch effort, I push up and fling them away. They shoot into the air like exploding fireworks and tumble onto the floor.

I sit up in bed, panting as if I'd just run a marathon.

In bed? How did I get in bed?

I look around, disoriented and confused. Laughter fills my head.

"Papa, get up," my wife says, framed in the bedroom doorway.

Her face is no longer a mangled piece of flesh and bone. There's no blood. She looks normal.

"You've got a big night ahead of you," she says, "but you must eat first."

I'm dazed, still half asleep, not comprehending what she's telling me. I still can't get over that she's alive.

“Kris,” she says, “are you all right?”

The elves are disentangling themselves on the floor, giggling all the while. Obviously, they thought my throwing them was all in fun because they had tried to wake me so forcefully.

“Yeah, come on, Santa,” one elf says as he stands and brushes himself off, “the reindeer are hitched to the sleigh and ready to go.”

I can hear the snorting and hoof stomping of the reindeer outside my window.

“All of you out,” Mrs. Claus scolds the elves. “Let Santa wake up.”

The elves scamper out the door, giggling and playfully wrestling as they go.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and place my feet on the cold floor. My hand swipes across my face to wipe the sleep away.

“Kris?” Mrs. Claus prompts.

“Yes, Mamma, I’m fine,” I assure her. “I’ll be right there.”

She smiles weakly and leaves me alone.

I sit on the edge of the bed and struggle to get my bearings. The nightmare still haunts me, but I attribute it to the stress of the season. Each year is more hectic than the last, a big push to finish on time. It’s taken its toll on my system. I haven’t slept well for weeks, and I’ve lost weight. I know I don’t look like the jolly old elf of story and song. But after tonight, I’ll be able to rest, take some time off before starting on next year. The nightmares will end. I’m sure of it.

I stand on the legs of a landlubber at sea. Somehow I catch my balance before it’s too late. From the corner of my eye, as I dress in my red

suit and black boots, I catch a glimpse of the axe. It leans against the fireplace by the small stockpile of wood, its usual place.

It was just a nightmare, I tell myself, nothing more than a terrible nightmare.

But my gaze lingers on the axe, as if the mere sight of it holds my mind hostage.

And like a hundred hissing snakes, cold, whispering voices slither in and out of my head, bombarding me like a demonic blitzkrieg.

Read more stories in *Holiday Madness: 13 Dark Tales for Halloween, Christmas, and ALL Occasions*

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