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When I Needed A Friend

By Sasha Aspinall

The older kids had stolen all my sweets, do you remember? My orange plastic pumpkin was heavier empty than full, the shame of being the only kid without candy pressed heavily against the back of my eight-year-old head. I sat in muffled outrage watching the others laugh and trade sweets, a sad little ghost on the swings of the park. Halloween was ruined. The world had ended. I couldn't understand how everyone else was still happy.

A crunching of leaves behind me alerted me to someone's presence. I twisted around to scowl at them. Another kid dressed as a ghost stood behind me – it was you, Laila – with a white sheet over your head that covered your hands but didn't quite reach your knees, offensively bright stripy tights underneath and a black cauldron bucket full of, I noticed jealously, colourful candy. You lifted a sheet-covered hand in an awkward wave.

"Hi," you said, "can I sit next to you?"

My scowl deepened. "No."

You deflated a little but didn't move away. "Are you sure? I could share my sweets."

Now that changed things. "...fine."

You sat down with a swish of fabric and plonked the bucket of confectionary on the ground between the pair of us. "Help yourself but leave the fudge ones. I like the fudge ones." You still do, often filling your cheeks with as many as you can manage to fit in your mouth. You look like a hamster when you do that.

I dug in, tugging the white cloth that had transformed me into a terrifying spirit of the otherworld off my head to get at the sugary treats, despite what Mummy and Daddy always said about accepting sweets from strangers.

A small cloth covered hand lifted one of the fudge fingers out of the cauldron and I watched as you fumbled to unwrap it through the fabric. I giggled, the sugar already making me feel ridiculously happy.

You huffed and pulled off the white sheet. I froze with a jelly snake halfway to my mouth. I bet I looked so stupid. You carefully peeled the wrapper off your treat with translucent fingers, costume still wrapped around your shoulders, partially obscuring your paint-splattered t-shirt and doodle-covered shorts. Thank goodness ghosts don't get cold.

You turned to look at me and I could see both your face and the swings behind it like an overlay on a photo.

I still don't know why I laughed. Maybe it was the shock, maybe it was the sugar, maybe it was the strangeness of the entire situation – a ghost dressed as a ghost going trick-or-treating and sharing her sweets with me; a human dressed as a ghost also going trick-or-treating. Funny, right?

Before we knew it, we were both laughing ourselves to pieces – I nearly fell off the swings.

Dearest ghost-of-Laila-Collins, you remember that night, don't you? Here I am, eighty years later. My family and friends are sad that I am leaving, and I am sad to leave them – but happy, too. My fingers go numb. You grin that imp-grin of yours that I know so well and help my ghost to sit up.

Where to, Laila? What mischief will we get up to first?