

The Halloween Costume Party

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Back in the early 1950s the Beta Alpha Delta fraternity at Heliotrope University had a mixed reputation and was frequently in trouble with the college administration and the local law enforcement people. The fraternity was almost closed down when authorities discovered that the pledges had liberated a sign from a local farm and displayed it in their chapter room. It was a large metal sign of a rooster used by a farmer to advertise his business. Only the intervention by a local alum and the forgiving spirit of the farmer prevented the fraternity from suffering serious consequences. Later, the men of BAD were suspected of purloining a portrait of a famous alum. Then a prank that backfired in the Bide A Wee Memory Gardens seemed to be the last straw, and the members were preparing to close their chapter house and be dispersed among the general student population.

Fortunately, the president of the fraternity was an impressive lad named Rip Johnson, who was determined not to go down without a fight. He called an emergency meeting of the BAD members and informed them they were on the cusp of being disbanded by the college administration unless they could think of some way to convince the president, the dean, and the trustees that the men would mend their ways and become respectable.

Now Rip had two resources he was counting on. First, he had a reputation on campus for being an eloquent and forceful speaker, someone who could actually persuade other people to change their minds and agree with him. Second, he was a man of ideas; he could think quickly on his feet and engage effectively with others in a persuasive situation. He was also a profound thinker, thanks to the course in logic and critical thinking he had taken under Professor Herschel Musty.

On the day before the fraternity was to hear the verdict from the dean, Rip Johnson addressed his fraternity brothers in the following way, "Gentlemen. I don't have to remind you of the seriousness of the situation. The guillotine is about to fall and, in the words of the famous orator Cicero, 'We do not have a leg to stand on.' But all is not lost I think I have a plan that will save us. But we must all agree to it, and, more important, all of us must act to implement it. I must have one hundred percent cooperation from you or I will not go forward with my plan."

The brothers looked at each other in amazement because they were expecting Rip to give a farewell speech, actually a funeral oration dripping with sentimental treacle and other hail-fellow-well-met hoopla. They were astounded at his announcement of a plan to save the organization.

Biff Magadan, a sophomore from Chicago, rose to speak. "I need to know what your plan is before I can support it. I am of the opinion that we have bought the farm and only God or Russian intervention can save us."

Russell Perkowski, a transfer student from California, disagreed with Biff and said, "Let's agree to support Rip and find out what his plan is later. After all, what do we have to lose?"

Unfortunately, like faculty meetings at most colleges and universities throughout this great land of ours, the BAD meeting degenerated into arguments with everyone speaking at once, some supporting Russell and others agreeing with Biff.

Finally, Rip had endured enough of the noise, and he said, "All right! All right! I will explain my plan now and let you decide. I made the mistake of assuming that you trusted me, not realizing when I

assume, I make an ass out of you and me. Now listen carefully.”

Rip had a presence to command attention, and he knew the value of hanging crepe at the beginning of a speech. He bowed his head as if in prayer; then he looked heavenward as if to implore divine assistance and spoke, “Brothers. my plan is to persuade the **Powers That Be** that we will transform our fraternity into a service organization that is dedicated to seeking after lasting things. We will demonstrate this dedication by several activities designed for the welfare of humanity. To explain what I mean, I offer the following specifics.

“First, we of the BAD fraternity will establish connections with the Red Cross. We will participate one hundred percent in the blood drives. We will volunteer to assist in various crises that will occur. We will assist in rolling bandages and preparing special care packages, and we will collect cash donations for that organization.

“Second, we will come to the aid of people in the community who suffer misfortunes. We will assist the farmer who is unable to tend and harvest his crops. We will assist with little league athletic programs and church activities that provide programs for children. We will assist special education teachers in working with learning-impaired children. We will assist Boy Scout leaders and other groups for young people.

“And I saved the two best ideas for last. In the spring every year the BAD fraternity will host and sponsor what I will call a Specials Olympics Day for disabled and special needs children in Illinois. The event will be like the Olympics except the children participating will be those who are physically impaired. We will invite the other Greek social organizations on campus to help us with the event.

“Finally. the *piece de resistance*: Each year we will sponsor a Halloween Costume Party and invite people from the entire community to take part in a costume competition, with the winner receiving a cash prize. This event will bring town and gown together in a spirit of celebration of young and old alike. Now what do you say?”

The response was unanimous. The members rose to their feet as one and applauded Rip for his ideas. The following day, Rip was at his persuasive best. He actually glowed with good will. The president, dean, and chairman of the board of trustees of Heliotrope were putty in his hands. Not a single negative point was brought up, and Rip was given permission to go forward with his plans. He had saved the BAD fraternity, temporarily at least.

Very quickly, the BAD brothers earned an impressive reputation as a service organization. Record numbers of people turned out to donate blood to the Red Cross, and when a crisis occurred in the community, the members of BAD were at the scene before the Rescue Squad, the local police, the ministers of the gospel, and the ambulance people.

Individual members of the BAD fraternity, especially Rip Johnson, became well known in town as real heroes. Rip Johnson was named “Man of the Year” by the Illinois Bean Growers Association at their annual convention in the Windy City. Russell Perkowski was honored for his leadership for the Special Olympics. Biff Magadan led a group of pledges to save a local farmer’s pumpkin crop when the unfortunate rustic was hospitalized after his tractor overturned on him. Once at three in the morning, BAD members saved a high school girl from perishing from a stubborn case of swollen nymph glands by rushing her to St Francis Hospital in Peoria. Thanks to a quick application of a Pabst Smear, they saved the girl’s life! But it was touch and go for a while.

The BAD fraternity's community service had succeeded beyond the wildest expectations, and so members were looking to the Halloween Costume Party as a way of celebrating a very successful year. It was an event that would put frosting on the cake, ice cream on the pie, and cheese pudding on the table, so to speak. In other words, the costume party would put a top on the many accomplishments of the BAD fraternity.

The members did not realize, however, that Paige Turner, an English major at the university, had a grudge against the men of BAD and intended to use the Halloween Party to seek her revenge by sabotaging the event and stealing the show.

Now, present-day readers need to realize that back in the 1950s the word "party" was a noun, not a verb as it is today. A party was a very special event where people would be assured of their safety as well as almost guaranteed to have a good time. Nowadays, "party" has become a verb and has lost its special meaning. The best party today is characterized by the expression "party till you puke," thus illustrating the old adage that change is not always for the better.

Plans for the Halloween Costume Party were elaborate. The event was widely publicized in the community, and little children were invited to do their trick or treating in the safety of Richards Gymnasium. Then at midnight the winner of the best costume would be announced as determined by a select committee of the faculty and townspeople.

Finally, the big night arrived and a large crowd of people in a wide variety of costumes gathered on the Heliotrope campus.

The evening was characterized by a spirit of light-hearted fun and laughter. Rip Johnson came as W.C. Fields and served as the master of ceremonies. Russell Perkowski came as Rumpelstiltskin. There was Dr. James Canada, a faculty member who dressed as Long John Silver and even wore a large gold ear ring and had a parrot on his shoulder and a hook for an arm.

The men of Beta Alpha Delta had gone to extremes in decorating the Richards Gymnasium. Elaborate spider webs were hung all around the place, and Dick Bumpass, a science major, had built a fog machine. Rip Johnson had gotten ideas from Edgar Allan Poe's stories, the works of H. P. Lovecraft, and the Gothic novels of English literature to create a perfect eldritch ambiance for the evening.

The place was crowded, and the people responded with imagination and creativity. There were characters from the comics: Popeye, Olive Oyl, and Wimpy; Lil' Abner and Daisy Mae; Jiggs and Maggie; Major Hoople and Martha; Dick Tracy and Sparkle Plenty, Batman and Robin; Superman and Wonder Woman; Green Lantern but without his undersea folk; Red Ryder and Little Beaver, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

There were characters from fairy tales and nursery rhymes: Little Red Riding Hood and Sleeping Beauty; Little Bo Peep and the Dutch boy who stuck his finger in the dike; Puss in Boots and the Pied Piper of Hamelin; Hansel and Gretel; Cinderella and Rapunzel; Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf; and, last but not least, Humpty-Dumpty.

Of course, there were characters from the horror movies: It was their night to howl. Dracula,

Frankenstein, and the Wolfman; the Mummy and the Creature from the Black Lagoon; the Phantom of the Opera and the Hunchback of Notre Dame; and lots of vampires, werewolves, and witches.

Then there were characters from the worlds of literature and music: Abelard and Heloise, Frankie and Johnny, Porgy and Bess. Cleopatra and Mark Antony, the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, David and Bathsheba, Dante and Beatrice, Captain Ahab, Uncle Remus, Rip Van Winkle, Hester Prynne, Abraham Lincoln, the Mad Hatter, the Great Gatsby, and all of the main characters from *The Wizard of Oz*.

It was truly a fantastic gathering of Who's Who of the world of enchantment, and Rip Johnson went around quoting lines from W. C. Fields, the high point being when he approached the Mad Hatter, who was in reality the president of the university, and said in a perfect W.C. Fields voice, "A man has to believe in something, and I believe I'll have another drink. Ah, yessss!"

The winner of the costume competition was to be announced at midnight, and exactly at the stroke of twelve, Paige Turner made her grand appearance like the Red Death in Poe's story of that name. She was wearing an old-fashioned funeral shroud which she had decorated with many little paste-on signs that read "I Voted." She had applied makeup so effectively that she had the appearance of a corpse long dead. Her appearance and the bewildering costume commanded everyone's attention. All eyes were on her, and naturally the people asked who she was.

"Are you a vampire?" Larry Talbot asked.

"No, I am not a vampire," Paige replied.

"Are you the bride of Dracula?" Wonder Woman asked.

"No, I'm not Dracula's bride."

"Are you Poe's Ligeia?" the Mummy asked.

"You are a witch, aren't you?" Rip Van Winkle asked. "In fact, you bear such an uncanny resemblance to Dame Van Winkle that I feel the urge to return to the Magic Mountain for another twenty-year nap."

J.C. Dithers then said, "You remind me of my wife Cora."

"No, I'm not Dame Van Winkle, and I'm not Cora Dithers either."

Several other possibilities were offered, but Paige's answer was always "No." And finally Russell Perkowski asked, "Do the 'I Voted' stickers have anything to do with your identity?"

Paige smiled and said, "Yes, they have everything to do with my identity. In fact, they are the key to my identity."

Rip Johnson spoke for the entire gathering when he said, "The meaning is so cryptic it escapes me. I think you will have to tell us who you are."

Paige took full advantage of the moment. She pointed to the "I Voted" signs on her costume, then took Rip's hand, looked into Rip's eyes, and said, "You cad, I'm a dead person from Chicago."

There was instantaneous and thunderous applause because everyone in attendance was aware of the meaning of Paige's costume. Indeed, the judges did not have to sequester and confer to decide who had the best and most original costume because, thanks to columnist Mike Royko, voter fraud in Chicago had long been known as an example of the egregious corruption in Illinois politics.

Paige's triumph was complete beyond her wildest dreams. She won the prize for the best costume, but that was not all of the honors bestowed upon her. She was named "Woman of the Year" by the Illinois Chapter of the Joan of Arc International Crusade for Good Government and was awarded a full scholarship to enroll in a doctoral program at San Andreas Fault State University at Borrego Sink, California. When asked about her plans for the future, Paige, replied, "I plan to dedicate my life to fighting political corruption, not just here in Illinois but also in Washington, DC."