



HALLOWEEN by J.R. HELTON  
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# **THE SAVAGE KICK #5**

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## **Halloween**

The business was called Danny's Grass and Wood. It was in the northern part of town on the 360 Loop at 183. The proprietor's name was, Danny. He was about forty-two, forty-three, and, he told me, an official born-again Christian.

"You get a lot more business being born-again," Danny said. "I've been looking through the Christian Yellow pages and there's this whole network of Christian businesses you can hook up with."

We sat in his office, a little trailer off the freeway. Danny told me about his life while we smoked a joint. He'd been a welder for most of it in South Texas. Ten years ago, he smuggled dope in trucks into New Mexico. "I got into a fight one day in Santa Rosa with a bunch of Indians. One of them took a brick and knocked my whole jaw off. See, I've had reconstructive surgery. They had to rebuild my entire jaw. These aren't my real teeth either." He turned his head and showed me where they'd stitched him together. I could see the pink scars. His face had a plastic, rubbery shine to it and moved in the wrong directions whenever he talked. "They took a bunch of skin off of the back of my legs and used it on my face," he said.

He took me behind his office and showed me an even smaller

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trailer. “You can stay in here.” We went inside. It was a little place, but there was a cot, a hot plate, a card table, and a fold-out chair. The whole place smelled like beer vomit. “I’ll pay you five-fifty an hour.”

It was October. Danny said he usually sold St. Augustine grass and firewood, but he was going to try pumpkins for Halloween. A truck and trailer pulled in one day and backed up to the yard. Danny had just hired another worker named Vicente. He was young, from Guatemala, and spoke no English.

“He lives somewhere around the corner I think,” Danny said to me. “It’s great cuz he can walk to work. The cash I give him is a lot of money in his country.”

We worked all day on unloading the pumpkins. There were many rotten ones that broke and reeked. Once we were through, Vicente had to go around and pick up all the rotten pumpkins, throw the orange and black goop into a wheelbarrow, and dump it in the back yard. Danny said he had a special job for me.

We went into the trailer and he showed me his scale to weigh pumpkins on.

“This scale cost twenty-five dollars so be careful with it. Keep an eye on it. Don’t let anybody steal it.”

“Okay.”

“Be careful with it when you weigh those big pumpkins. If you break it, you have to buy me a new one.”

“Okay.”

He gave me another tour of the grounds and we smoked a joint. He had some ugly patio furniture for sale and asked me to memorize all of the prices. There were also several large, heavy,

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barbecue pit smokers. All were very expensive. Danny wanted me to memorize a little speech he'd made up to tell customers about the smokers but he couldn't remember it. He gave me a little booklet on their construction instead. We walked back through the yard, went over the grass prices one more time. All of the St. Augustine was stacked on palettes and it was turning brown. He saw me looking at it.

"It just does that," he said. "It turns green again when you plant it."

Vicente was out there working, stacking a small supply of oak logs and throwing away rotten pumpkins.

Danny drove away. Whenever he left, I was supposed to sit at the phone and wait for pumpkin, grass, firewood, patio furniture, or barbecue pit customers. I spent my time smoking dope and making a scarecrow out of old clothes and hay Danny had left me. It was supposed to attract customers, he said. Few came and nobody called.

Danny was gone a lot. One day, he happened to return just as a woman was driving up in a station wagon. She and several kids jumped out. The kids ran around the pumpkins Vicente and I had stacked up around some scraggly trees next to the highway. They looked at my scarecrow. The woman asked me if we had any pumpkins for sale.

"Yes ma'me."

"How much are they a pound?"

Danny stepped between us. "Well," he said, "the big ones are eighteen cents and the little ones are twenty-five cents a pound. They're more expensive."

"They're only thirteen cents a pound at H.E.B. for all sizes,"

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the woman said.

Danny looked at me and frowned.

“Uh yeah,” he said, “but uh, these are organically grown.”

“They are?”

“Yeah, up in Deaf Smith County. They got lotsa organic stuff up there.”

“Oh well,” the woman said. “I was hoping I could maybe buy a few big ones and you’d give me a bag of those little ones for the kids.”

“I don’t know about that,” Danny said.

The woman was very nice and polite. “I’m sorry, it’s just that they’re from the orphanage.” She smiled. “I work at the orphanage off Mopac and we don’t have a budget to speak of. I have enough money for a few of the big ones but I can’t pay for all of the little ones. See, we were hoping every child could have his own little pumpkin. We’re having a Halloween party.”

“Well, I’m sorry about this,” Danny said. “But I can’t just give them away.”

“I can probably bring some more business down here,” she said. “I know some other teachers who need pumpkins for their classes.”

Danny looked at me and the woman warily, as if we were in it together. “Listen, I’m sorry, but how do I know that’s true? Those teachers could come down here and ask me to give ‘em away too.”

“I guess they could,” the woman said. “Come on, kids.”

The children were confused. “No pumpkins? We can’t get any pumpkins?”

“No, the prices are too high here. We’ll go down to H.E.B.”

“I can’t give ‘em away,” Danny said.

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The woman said nothing, loaded up the kids, and drove off.

“Shit,” Danny said, “that was our first customer.”

Not many people were buying Danny’s pumpkins. As Halloween approached, they rotted in increasing numbers. Vicente hauled them off, worked hard all day. I sat in the trailer. Every once in a while, I’d sell a pumpkin, or Danny would send me off in a rickety truck, pulling a rickety trailer, overloaded with brown St. Augustine palettes to deliver to someone’s yard. Vicente rode in the truck with me and we’d try to talk. The first thing that he got me to understand was that he wanted some clothes. I told Danny about it.

“He wants to go to the store.”

“He wants everything. He smells like shit. I told him to take a bath.”

“It’s his clothes. They have rotten pumpkins all over them.”

“Tell him to change his fucking pants.”

“Those are the only ones he’s got.”

“Well, shit. All right, I’ll take him to K-Mart. Answer the phones.”

He drove away with Vicente and left me in front of the silent phones.

Halloween came and went. In spite of my scarecrow and lowering prices to seventeen cents a pound, Danny sold few pumpkins. Most all of them had rotted anyway and Vicente hauled them off.

Danny came in one day wearing a new, expensive, western-style suit and new cowboy boots and a white hat. “I’m thinking of running for sheriff,” he explained.

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Another day, he bought an unusually expensive phone for the office trailer. He couldn't figure out the buttons and nobody called anyway. Then, he ran off and dropped a bunch of money on two mobile phones for his trucks that barely ran. He was very excited.

"You can reach me from all over the city. I can call in wood orders to you while you're still out delivering."

"Great."

The mobile phones didn't work at all. It seemed they had a range of about five miles or so and hung up on the caller constantly. They worked correctly one time when I had to call Danny and tell him the police had just pulled me over and given me four tickets personally because of his piece of shit truck and that they were questioning Vicente about being an illegal alien.

"Did you tell them my name?" he asked me.

"It's on the side of your truck."

"Oh yeah. But not my last name. Just get out of there."

I hung up, gave them Danny's last name, his address, everything, and they let me go. But they kept Vicente, yanked him out of the truck, stuck him in their car, and sent him back to Guatemala.

Nobody bought any of the crap he had lying around. People stopped by occasionally, out of curiosity, saw the high-priced patio furniture, the expensive barbecue smokers that weighed several tons apiece, rotten pumpkins everywhere, and they drove away. The grass business was down because it was fall and the economy was down and when the economy's down, I guess the last thing people need to do is run out and sod their yard. I sat in the trailer with Danny, smoking dope, and it drove him crazy that he was paying me

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and there wasn't much to do.

His driver came in one day, delivering a full load of brown St. Augustine palettes to the yard. The driver's name was Pete and he talked to me while Danny looked over the truck. Pete told me he was pissed because Danny rarely paid him and when he did the checks bounced half the time. The big semi he drove constantly broke down and it was Danny's truck, not Pete's, and he felt Danny should have to fix it rather than blaming him for everything that broke. Pete then told Danny this and Danny threatened to fire Pete on the spot.

"You don't know how to drive a truck, goddammit. I oughta can your ass right now. What did you break this time?"

Pete was nervous and stammering. "Don't fire me, Danny. I need this check to pay my electric and water. I gotta a lotta bills, an' child support an'---"

"I oughta take this shit outa your check. What did you say was broken?"

"Uh, it's that spring under there. I told you we loaded too heavy this time."

"Well, Pete, we gotta overload because if I don't overload I don't make any money and every other driver I've ever had who's overloaded don't get pulled over or break down near as much as you."

"I'm sorry, Danny. I'm just doing what you tell me. I know I told you 'bout that spring before. I thought it was gonna break."

"Yeah, yeah..." He looked at me. "Go get that big wrench up in the cab."

I ran up to the cab, climbed in.

"It's under the seat!"



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I found the wrench and ran back. “Come here,” Danny said and crawled under the flatbed.

I crawled under there in the mud and we looked at the leaf springs. They were five inch wide strips of half inch steel stacked together. The top strip was clearly broken into two pieces. A large nut and bolt held all of the strips down.

“See where it’s cracked?” Danny asked.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s take that bolt out and look at that top one.”

I put the wrench on the nut and started to turn. It never occurred to me that the truck was still overloaded and that more than twenty thousand pounds of pressure was on those leaf springs and that the nut was the only thing holding them down. I put my body and head directly above it and started to turn harder. It wouldn’t budge.

“Turn it,” Danny said.

I leaned away from the springs and pulled on the wrench with all my weight. There was a loud clang and pop and several large pieces of steel exploded upwards. I was dizzy for a few seconds and didn’t know what had happened. I heard Danny’s voice faintly: “Oh my God. Oh shit. Oh my God.”

I looked down at my right hand. My index finger and my middle finger were broken and twisted out at odd angles. All the skin was scraped off the top of my hand and half my thumb was missing. A red stream of blood spurted forcefully out of the hole. I held the hand with my left hand and crawled out from under the flatbed. Pete helped me over to another truck.

“Shit, this hurts,” I said.

Danny ran around panicking. “Well shit! Just take it easy,

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everybody just take it easy all right? You're all right. You still got your fingers. Goddammit! Where's the emergency room? Where's the hospital?"

"There's a minor emergency center up the road," Pete said.

"Okay, shit, let's go," Danny said and jumped into the truck. Pete handed me a dirty rag. I put it on my right hand and got into the truck. Danny talked to me as we sped down the freeway.

"You're going to be all right. Are you okay? You're turning pale. Are you okay?"

I could barely hear him. Everything started turning white, from the outside in. I heard a loud steady buzzing sound in my ears.

"I think I'm passing out."

"Don't worry, man. I'll get you to a hospital."

We drove to a little strip mall and Danny got out and ran inside what looked like a medical office. I stepped out of the truck and my blood ran down my arm and dripped on the sidewalk. Danny ran out of the office.

"Get back in the truck. Hurry up. You're bleeding all over the place."

"What about the doctor?"

"This is a dentist's office."

I climbed back in the truck and we eventually found the emergency center. Danny took me in, talked to a nurse, and said to me, "Are you gonna be all right? I have to go back to the trailer. Nobody's at the phones."

"I'll be fine."

"Don't worry, I told 'em I'd pay for it."

"Okay."

He left. The nurse x-rayed me and cleaned the oil and dirt

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out of my torn skin. She scrubbed hard and fast. “I know this hurts,” she said. “But I have to do it.”

I told her it was okay and the doctor came in.

“Your wrist is broken,” he said. “These two fingers are broken, too.”

He straightened out my fingers, taped them up, bandaged my hand, and put a cast over my wrist and I called Danny. The doctor prescribed some codeine pain killers and when Danny arrived I asked him to take me to the pharmacy. He seemed pissed.

“What for?”

“I need these pills.”

“I suppose you want me to pay for them...”

He paid for them and we went back to Danny’s Grass and Wood. I went to my little trailer and Danny followed me in. I found a warm beer under the card table, took the lid off the pill bottle with my teeth, and downed several of the pills.

“Do you really need those?” Danny asked.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Give me a couple.”

I poured two out on the card table and Danny swallowed them dry.

**--- END OF SAMPLE ---**

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