

# "The Scariest Thing I Know"

a short story by Dean Koontz

When I was twelve years old, in seventh grade, I was a disaster waiting to happen. I wasn't the equivalent of a simple flood or a mere train wreck. I was an earthquake in ragged sneakers, a tornado in patched jeans, ready to bring tremendous ruin down on myself and on everyone around me.

I didn't realize I was a loser. I thought I was smart and tough.

I was so smart, I *knew* school was a concentration camp where they brainwashed kids to be good citizens and spiked the lousy cafeteria food with be-nice pills. To me, being an upstanding citizen meant working your whole life for nickels and dimes and having no fun. I preferred to be bad.

And tough? Other kids called me *Stony*, because I was hard. You didn't want to mess with me. I had my secret smokes — Lucky Strikes, the smokes of tough men — and recently, I'd started carrying a knife. Five-inch blade, gravity release. I hadn't used it in a fight — not yet — because so far I'd never been in danger of losing with my fists alone. Looking back, I can remember the anger that was in me, the storm of violence waiting to break, but I can't *feel* it anymore, not the way I felt it then. The twelve-year-old me is more unknowable than a stranger. He's an alien from another world. I'm grateful I didn't grow up to be him.

My name is Nicholas Loffman. My friends call me Nick or Nicky. No one has called me Stony since I was twelve, thirty-eight years ago.

Halloween 1963 was the night my life changed forever. I didn't believe in spooks and such. The world held no mystery for me in those days. I saw everything simply, clearly: There were people who always got what they wanted — and people who never did. I was determined to be one of the always-gots, not one of the nevers-dids. I intended to take what I wanted, no matter what the risks.

That Halloween, most other twelve-year-olds were still doing the witch-vampire-skeleton thing, toting huge shopping bags door-to-door, hoping to fill them with enough candy to rot their teeth before Thanksgiving.

I was looking for bigger loot. My English teacher, Mrs. Carson, was going to be away from home for the evening. She and her husband, who taught twelfth-grade English, were chaperoning a corny "Goblin Hop" at the high school. I figured I could jimmy a window at their place, without much chance of getting caught, and see if I could find some loose money or anything else I wanted.

I didn't have anything against Mrs. Carson. She never sent me to detention. She tried her best to teach me. And I didn't know her husband, though I did know he was a coin collector, and I figured maybe there would be some significant change lying around. The word burglary never entered my head. As I saw it, if I had the nerve to take something I wanted, then it was rightfully mine. In school, we'd learned about evolution, the survival of the fittest, predators, and prey. I was fit, strong for my age, bold — so, hey, I was just fulfilling nature's plan.

Late in the afternoon that Halloween, nature's plan had to be put on hold when my mother informed me that I had to accompany my little brother, Dink, when he went trick-or-treating.

By twelve, I was a thief and a bully, but I couldn't say no to my mother when she asked for my help. I was perpetually angry with her. I'm ashamed to say that she embarrassed me, that I had no respect for her, that I shrank from her touch and was often rude to her. But when she asked me to do a chore, I did it. Never with a smile, always with a display of contempt, but I did the chore. This curious obedient streak frustrated and puzzled me. I didn't understand why she had this power over me — because back then, I didn't realize that I loved her.

This is very hard to tell you, very hard, but if you're to believe what follows, I need to be painfully honest and admit that she embarrassed me because she was constantly tired, endlessly worried about one thing or another, every day counting pennies and cutting corners and planning for crises that might never come. We were poor, and I blamed her for our poverty, because it seemed to me that she had just accepted it.

In reality, she was tired all the time because she worked six and sometimes seven days a week as a waitress at the Good Plate Diner out on the state highway. She sewed her own clothes and some of ours, and she could stretch a grocery dollar until it would kill you if it snapped. She was only thirty then, but worn thin and pale with care.

My father walked out on us the year that Dink was born, when I was three, and we never saw him again. I blamed her for that, too, because my father wasn't there to take the brunt of my anger. And even Stony Loffman, young thug in the making, wasn't heartless enough to blame his brother Dink.

The world over, little brothers — he was nine that October — are an irritant to boys on the cusp of adolescence. Often, however, I was prickly with Dink because he so strongly resembled our mother while I was the image of my father, whom I knew from photographs. I hated my father and loathed my resemblance to him. Mother tried to counsel me out of my hatred. She said my old man wasn't evil, not even bad, really, just weak. She forgave him, but I would not.

The creep abandoned us for many reasons, but the deciding event had been Dink. My brother's left side was unfinished when he was born. His left arm measured two inches shorter than his right, and had three fingers. His left leg required a brace to support him. One thing I can be proud of: I never made fun of Dink's disabilities or expected less of him because of them. Anyone who dared to tease him carried my signature bruises for a week.

Yet I remained prickly with Dink, impatient, uncommunicative.

An hour after sundown, we set out. Using Mother's black cardigan as a tunic and a pillow as a hump, wearing a dime-store mask, Dink had dressed for trick-or-treating as the Hunchback of Notre Dame. He was never self-conscious about his arm and leg; now it tickled him to emphasize his deformities. I wore no costume, none of that kid stuff. I was strictly Dink's chaperone bent on hustling him along, getting his treat bag filled, so I would be free to search Mrs. Carson's house while the Halloween hop was still hopping.

In those days, in our quiet town, kids could safely go roaming on Halloween without clenched-jawed adults accompanying them. The candy collected didn't have to be fluoroscoped [X-rayed] for hidden razor blades or chemically analyzed for poisons. But, of course that was in another century.

Trick-or-treaters banded together in groups, to goof with one another and to play at being spooky. We walked four blocks from the trailer park where we lived before we encountered others in costume, but by the time we'd traveled two blocks farther, there were twelve of us, some kids as young as six, a couple as old as me.

Witches, vampires, skeletons: They were the usual suspects, less convincingly monstrous than they thought they were.

A little girl, about Dink's age, missed the point altogether; she ventured into the haunted night as an angel, dressed in white, with white feathered wings. When the others ragged her mercilessly, she said, "I like being an angel, and so would you if you were good enough to be one." This earned her even more jeers and taunts, in response to which she merely smiled and curtsied — eliciting additional mockery.

One kid, masquerading as Death, had a genuinely creepy costume. He was shorter than me, maybe ten years old. He wore a black robe that dragged on the ground, a deep hood over his head. He'd painted his face black, so it vanished in the hood.

The long sleeves of his robe hid his hands. But from time to time, he raised an arm and pointed at one of the other kids, and from the sleeve came the bony fingers of a skeleton, no doubt a plastic, novelty-shop gag that he was holding in his real hand. Three things about his performance were genius. First, he never spoke. No amount of taunting or wheedling could pry a sound from him. Second he stank like death. Perhaps with a chemistry-hobby set, this weirdo had concocted a putrescent stench and sprinkled it on his robe.

We recognized some of the kids. Some we didn't. Kid Death, as I came to think of him, surely seemed to be a stranger, because neither Dink nor I knew anyone who had this cool imagination.

From house to house, we proceeded, and the trick-or-treaters grew increasingly terrified of Kid Death. They were convinced the stinky one was real, not one of them, but the Grim Reaper in miniature.

I could have grabbed the little geek, wrestled him to the ground, and yanked his hood back, but he was smaller than me. And as bad as I was, I never fought anyone unless he was my size or bigger. Picking on someone smaller was a sign of weakness, and I was not my father.

Besides, I just wanted to move this show along and get to Mrs. Carson's place. The third bit of genius in Kid Death's performance: He wasn't carrying a shopping bag, and he showed no interest in candy. He held back, at the periphery of the group, watching, pointing. If he didn't want candy, then the logical conclusion, among the small fry in our group, was that HE WAS REALLY DEATH, AND HE WANTED THEIR SOULS!

Before long, Dink was staying particularly close to me. In fact, all the kids were huddling around me.

"He's no kid," said Dink. "He's real."

"Get real," I told him. "He's no bogeyman."

Just then, when Kid Death turned to us, moonlight flared in the whites of his eyes. The moon was full, pocked and yellow, with rags of clouds trailing from it, like the face of a mummy revealed between unraveling bandages. His eyes, therefore, were yellow and unearthly.

Pent-up terror exploded through the group. When yellow-eyed Kid Death pointed at them with his bony hand, the munchkins screamed and ran, having worked themselves into a state of high anxiety.

I lost Dink. Then I saw his small form with the fake hump and the real limp, stumbling into the street. I saw, too, the onrushing truck.

Strong as I was, tough as I was, I couldn't reach him fast enough to sweep him out of danger. I ran toward him, knowing it was hopeless.

That's when time stopped. Not for me. But it stopped for Kid Death and all the trick-or-treaters. They were frozen in midstep, in midbreath, like statues. The clouds ceased unraveling across the face of the moon. The breeze died in an instant and not one leaf stirred on the trees. The world was suddenly without sound: not a tick, not a click, not a whisper. I thought I'd gone deaf.

Time stopped for Dink, too, and for the speeding truck. At first I alone was moving in a petrified world — but I saw the little girl dressed as an angel. She moved faster than I could, straight for Dink: She was flying, she swept Dink off the street, carried him past the truck, and time started moving again. The truck roared by in a blast of wind, and all the munchkins were screaming, and Dink was safe with the white-winged girl on the other side of the street.

By the time I reached my brother, the girl was gone. I never saw her vanish. I hugged Dink so hard.

When the other trick-or-treaters gathered around, I plucked off Kid Death's hood. He was a boy we knew, a geeky sixth-grader.

Dink didn't remember the angel girl. He thought I was the one who pulled him out of the path of the truck. That's what he still believes, all these years after that night. Indeed, no one remembered her but me. She had been sent to save Dink, but even back then, hardcase Stony Loffman realized she had been sent to save him, too. Which is why time didn't stop for me, why I was allowed to see her fly.

I never went to Mrs. Carson's house that night. I never stole again. I threw away the knife.

Dink grew up to be a doctor of biology and a medical researcher whose discoveries have saved uncountable lives.

Me? I've become a popular writer of suspense novels, scary stuff. Married, with two kids of my own. I was successful enough, early on, to give my mom ten years of easy living before she died.

Because of what I write, people often ask me what is the scariest thing that's ever happened to me. I tell them, instead, the scariest thing I know: that there is a purpose to life, and meaning, and that everything we do counts in the end. This is the scariest thing I know — but also the most wonderful.