



Carolina Goes Out at Night

Sometime in the late hours, the living room clock ticked loudly as Carolina Mistral slipped from sleep. She batted her eyes into consciousness and sought out the faint outline of the door between the two windows of her bedroom. That door which never revealed itself except at night, and then only some nights.

Her three brothers in the next room never knew it existed. Only her sister Madeline who previously slept in the room and shared the portal's existence with only Carolina. "This is night like you've never seen it," she told Carolina when giving her the key just before leaving for college. "Be careful not to stay out too long or you may never come back." Madeline never told her anything more specific about the danger but only added, "It's the most beautiful place you've ever been."

And so it was that night that Carolina got up from the bed, slipped on shoes and took the key from the drawer. The light that outlined the doorway shone more brightly the closer she came to it, and when she used the key, turned the knob, and opened the door, the unusual light flooded the room with luminescence.

Carolina stepped out the door to a night like satin against her skin. The sky—black almost to blue. Stars like pin pricks expanded to many times their size, then contracted again. The moon dangled—yes, dangled—as a silver orb.

She came first to the trees, the same ones she always saw in her back yard but not exactly the same. Their brown trunks had a coppery glow, and the red and gold leaves that had just appeared that week clinked like colored glass against each other in the light breeze.

When Carolina stepped forward taking a few brisk steps, she felt herself levitate just above the ground. Occasionally she dipped low to skirt the surface of the earth or to rustle the plants growing across it.

Carolina loved the feeling of being just slightly lighter than air. Gradually she started to notice several things happening around her. The balloon ghosts hanging on the Hastings' porch narrowed to become billowy objects that approached her slowly, gazing at her through menacing black bead eyes. When she turned she saw the giant inflated pumpkin in the Herrera's yard burst from its tethers, bouncing as it made its way toward her.

With her sister's warnings words whispering into her ears, Carolina decided it was time to flee, to return to her bedroom. The harder she ran, thought, the slower she seemed to be moving. Finally, when she decided that she could not outrun the ghosts and pumpkin, she stopped and turned around. "What do you want?!" she shouted and the figures stayed put.

For a few minutes, the ghosts fluttered, their eyes still fixed on her, and the pumpkin bounced up and down, a nostril snarling and its teeth bared. Then she heard a voice, small but sinister: "Trick or treat."

What? Carolina couldn't believe what she heard. "Trick or treat?"

"Yes," the pumpkin said in a low, deep voice. "Trick or treat."

"I don't have anything to give you."

“Then we’ll have to come inside and search,” one ghost said.

“We’ll have to turn the people over to see what they’re hiding,” said another.

“And if they’re hiding anything...” The pumpkin gave her a long glare. “We will not be very happy.”

“Don’t...don’t...” Carolina tried to talk through her chattering teeth. “Let me go inside and I’ll find something.” She quickly opened the door and went in, but try as she might, she couldn’t close the door behind her.

What to do, what to do. Carolina searched her bedroom. She’d eaten all her own candy. In the living room, the orange Halloween bowl waited for something to fill it. She scrambled to the kitchen, all the while hearing the angry groan coming from her bedroom, closer and closer. Then, out of desperation, she opened the refrigerator door. “That’s it!” Carolina pulled out the big bowl of fall ambrosia, the one that her mother always made but only her father really liked. She struggled to carry it to the bedroom. It sloshed out large globs that slunk over the side of the bowl. When she reached the bedroom, she saw that the bouncing pumpkin and four sinister ghosts waited for her just inside.

“Here!” Carolina ran to the door and the creatures followed her. Once they were all outside, Carolina shoved the bowl into the spindly arms of the pumpkin, who slurped it as the ghosts circled it, insisting on their share.

“Happy Halloween!” Carolina shut the door quickly behind her, locked it with the key her sister had given her, and took a dozen deep breaths as she settled into relief.

Carolina never mentioned that night to anyone. She swore to herself that she’d never return to the night through the same door again. Her father wondered about the ambrosia, but she said nothing. The next afternoon, he decided he would make more for himself when her mother refused.

When Madeline came home from school for the holidays, she asked Carolina if she'd gone through the portal at night.

"Not yet," Carolina told her, a little embarrassed that she'd lied.

Madeline's face lit up. "Good. Then wait until the best time of year to go. When it snows in winter."

Carolina hesitated for a moment. "Okay." She didn't mention the vision that immediately came into her mind of a giant snowman that she was sure would be trouble. It would possibly insist on eating every candy cane hanging on the tree while screaming "Happy Holidays!"

Later, when Carolina considered how beautiful the night had been that one time she'd gone out and how nice it was to soar above the ground, she changed her mind. Maybe if she just took a few candy canes with her, just in case, Carolina could again go out at night.