



PHOTO: JONATHAN EVANS

A Ghostly Trick or Treat Ride

By Margaret Evans

On a hill overlooking Brokeville, an old lady moved quietly through her home.

All was in place.

It was as it should be.

It was time.



PHOTO: ROBIN DUNCAN PHOTOGRAPHY

“I’ve got a GREAT idea!” Anita grinned as she dumped her school backpack on the bus floor. “Let’s do a mounted trick or treat at Hallowe’en!”

Jill stared at her, dumbfounded. “Are you KIDDING?”

“Our ponies will freak out,” said her cousin Meridy as she imagined her pony Daisy bolting.

“Not to mention our parents.” Sandie rolled her eyes knowingly.

“No, no,” said Anita quickly. “We’ll dress up our ponies and ride before dark, before the real stuff gets going. We’ll go out when the little kids go out — before any fireworks start.”

“Mom never lets me go when the pre-schoolers are out,” said Jill. “It’s their turn.”

“Most of them go into town,” Anita reminded her. “We’ll ride around the local farms, away from anyone else.”

As the school bus rumbled from stop to stop, the girls began to warm up to Anita’s Great Idea.

Their Socials teacher had given them an essay assignment to write about the origins of Hallowe’en. Anita did her research on the internet and she was surprised to learn how ancient the festival of Samhain really was. It went back over 2000 years when the Celts celebrated the New Year on November 1. But on October 31 they celebrated Samhain when the line between this world and the next one was thin and the ghosts of the dead could return to earth and cause mischief. The Celts dressed up in costumes of animal heads and skins and they lit huge sacred bonfires. It didn’t take much for Anita to make the connection that, in those days, people went everywhere by horseback. Well, she thought, why couldn’t they?

She was still buzzing with ideas when she casually mentioned the Hallowe’en plan at

supper time. The immediate silence was deafening.

“No, you’re not,” Dad said in his discussion-over voice.

“Are you crazy?” Matt, Anita’s brother, guffawed, but was secretly thinking that it was a great idea and he and Sean could go with them on bikes.

“That’s not a good idea, Anita.” Mom sounded like Dad.

Anita had already anticipated a little resistance. So she launched into her planned speech about riding before it was dark when the little kids went out, keeping away from town, and only going to the local farms.

“Are you crazy?” Matt had a way of repeating himself.

“There are always the tween kids who get out early too,” Mom reminded Anita. “I know Penny and Sugar are pretty reliable but Daisy can be nervous.”

“All our ponies and Fanny have never been a problem when there’s been a costume class at a show,” argued Anita. “And fireworks won’t start until after dark. We’ll be back even before supper!”

Mom and Dad studied her. “What do the other moms say?”

“I don’t know yet.” Anita’s voice was quiet. She knew they’d ask that. Now there would be a Great Parent Conference. “I’ll find out.”

“I’ll find out,” Dad said emphatically.

Everyone found out that all the parents had said a flat “No.” But then, when the girls pleaded their case and negotiated rules, they came up with the Great Unbreakable Guidelines. They would ride out at 4pm, be back by 5:30, keep within a three-kilometre circuit from home base, and their cell phones had to be on at all times.

"This is going to be so much fun!" grinned Jill when the girls got together at Anita's house the following Saturday to make costumes. They were also going to take a donation box for the local humane society.

"I think we should do some early evening rides this week to get the ponies used to riding out at dusk," suggested Meridy. "Daisy needs it."

"Perfect idea," laughed Anita. "Let's start tomorrow."

"We'll call them the Twilight Zone rides," grinned Sandie, who always watched reruns of the TV series.

"What're you guys going to dress up in?" Matt asked as he and Sean, Sandie's brother, joined them.

"I've still got all my medieval knight stuff from the costume class at Blue Meadows," said Anita.

"Fanny's got her clown costume," said Sandie. "Dad's going to fill a balloon with helium. I'll tie it onto her headband."

"Daisy's going to be a pumpkin," grinned Meridy. "I'll use a great big orange cooler and put green covers on her ears for the stalk. I'll tie white balls in her tail for seeds. What are you doing for Sugar, Jill?"

"She could be a soft drink vendor," laughed Jill. "I can decorate her with pop cans and she can drink from one if we need to do tricks."

"Me an' Sean are going with you as snipers," shouted Matt. "We're dressing our bikes in camouflage and taking fake rifles. Do we really have to do tricks?"

"Not with fake rifles, you're not." Anita tried to sound like Dad.

"We'll have to work on pony tricks," grinned Sandie.

"I can get Daisy to make faces," said Meridy. "You know, when you tweak her muzzle she does that flehmen thing and curls up her lip."

The next afternoon, the girls excitedly mounted up for their first twilight ride. Everywhere, the trees were ablaze in the golds and russets of fall. The air, which had been soft

and balmy during the day, had a sharp coolness as the sun slid down toward sunset. They followed the road that led to the dairy farm then turned north toward the SwineLine Pig Farm. From there it led to the connector road that went to Triple Creek Ranch. But instead, the girls picked up the loop road that took them to Bart Poole's acreage on the way to Parcher Farm.

They couldn't resist stopping at Bart's place. Bart was the brother of Pete Poole, Anita's neighbour. He lived in a pretty cottage next to the river. They trotted in to say hi to Bart and see if he needed anything.

"What're you kids doing riding late in the afternoon?" he asked, pleasantly pleased to see them, and then laughed when they told him. "You watch it now. Ponies and firecrackers don't mix."

"We're only going to ride around the local farms before dark," Meridy grinned as she patted Daisy.

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"Be careful now, girls," he warned. Then he chuckled, "Take plenty of goodie bags. Folks might want to give a treat to your ponies as well as you. Make sure they can do a trick though!"

"We're working on it!" Anita laughed as they turned to ride home.

"Hey, girls," called Bart, remembering something. "Don't forget to visit the ol' hilltop farmhouse. Those folks always do great stuff on Hallowe'en."

Waving warmly at him, they picked up the pace and continued on their route at a working trot before returning home, arriving back at the Anita's barn right on schedule. They were really careful not to be back late on their practices.

The following week flew by and the girls worked on their costumes, practiced their tricks with the ponies, and did the twilight rides. Penny, Sugar, Fanny, and Daisy began to anticipate the after school rides and settled comfortably into the route the girls had chosen. It was a simple loop along familiar country roads.

The day of Hallowe'en dawned clear and cold with a promise of a full moon that night. School seemed to take forever but Anita was happy because she got a B+ for her Hallowe'en essay. A lot of the kids came to school in their costumes but the girls had kept theirs carefully laid out at home ready for their trick or treat ride. The school bell couldn't ring soon enough.

At home, Anita raced to the barn and gave Penny a flake of hay. While she ate, Anita gave her a good grooming before tacking her up and putting her knight's costume on. Penny looked so cool in her big oversized metallic silver cooler under her saddle. She had red tassels on her bridle and reins, and a metallic silver cloth across her nose. Then Anita changed into her own costume of a blue and silver tunic and leggings. Her riding helmet was covered in tin foil and she had made a shield with cardboard covered in foil and crossed in red tape.

By the time she was ready, Sandie rode up on Fanny the clown, Meridy arrived on Daisy the pumpkin, and Jill clattered in on Sugar the pop can vendor. With the boys in tow in full camouflage gear, they were ready for their trick or treat adventure.

Despite their reservations, Anita's parents laughed at the crazy, colourful kids. Mom grabbed the camera for the group shot while Squirt, their black lab, raced around them excitedly.

"Keep your cell phones on, be back on time, and have fun!" Dad called to them as they clattered out of the yard.

Laughing at each other and full of excitement at finally being on the Trick-or-Treat Twilight Ride, they trotted down the road, waving to cars and trucks that went by and smiling at those who beeped a horn in support.

"Trick or treat!" they yelled as they rode into the yard of Brissom Dairy Farm. Instantly a black-covered door opened. Inside a dull orange light illuminated cobwebs and a great big spider as Brenda Brissom hobbled witch-like over the stoop with a basket of apples and candies.

"Look at you guys!" she croaked, full of praise. "What fabulous costumes. But you've got to do a trick first!"

Anita jumped off and caught Penny's bridle. "Meet Mrs. Brissom Penny. Shake a leg!"

Penny held back and sniffed the costume suspiciously. Then she found the basket of apples. So she raised her right foreleg obligingly and offered it to Mrs. Brissom who caught her fetlock and shook it politely. She laughed as she offered all the ponies and Fanny apple pieces and put candy into the girls' knapsacks and the boys' goodie bags.

"Cool! That was easy," grinned Anita. "Meridy, you do the next trick, okay?"

"You bet!"

"We'll do one after Meridy," shouted Matt.

Just then, Anita's cell phone rang. She grabbed it, knowing it would be Mom.

"Is Squirt with you, Anita?"

Anita slowed Penny and stared around.

"No. Isn't he there?"

"He disappeared after you left."

"I bet he's chasing Pete Poole's cat. They've always got a war going about territory. He never follows us."

"I know." Mom sounded worried. "I hope nothing spooked him."

"We'll watch for him in case he's gone off on his loop run," said Anita. Squirt often explored the trails close to home following mystery scents. "I'll call you back if we see him."

"Squirt's missing," she told the others as she replaced her cell phone in her pocket. "Keep a watch just in case he's wandering too far."

Matt stared at Anita. "Squirt doesn't like bangs."

"No one's letting off fireworks right now."

"You know Squirt. He can hear stuff in another province."

The girls grinned at him.

"I bet he's in your barn," said Jill. "You know how he goes hunting for mice and doesn't hear anyone calling for him. He's such a goofy lab."

Anita giggled as she picked up Penny's reins. "C'mon. Let's keep on schedule. Our moms and dads will have another freak out if we're late."

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At the next stop Daisy made a flehmen face when Meridy tweaked her muzzle, and at the SwineLine Pig Farm the boys did bike tricks to earn treats for the group. At Bart Poole's cottage Fanny brayed on cue to earn a carrot, then brayed again and again for more causing everyone to laugh at her. Their bags of treats were filling up as they journeyed from door to door. Soon they ended up at the Parcher farm where Sugar demonstrated how flexible her lips were when she drank from a pop can.

"You children look wonderful!" Mrs. Parcher beamed as she bounced out of her house dressed as a chorus girl. The girls laughed at her in such a costume. Mrs. Parcher was well in her 70s. "I'm so happy to see Penny again."

The Parcher breeding farm was very special. It was where Penny had been born.

"Penny always loves coming here," grinned Anita.

"You come back when you have more time," Mrs. Parcher said. "Be on your way now. Get home before dark."

"That was hysterical fun," laughed Sandie. "I wish Hallowe'en was more than once a year."

As they trotted around the bend a black dog streaked across the road.

"That's Squirt!" yelled Matt and sped down the road in pursuit.

The girls stared after him, then urged their ponies on. Squirt was racing up a narrow lane. He was clearly on a scent and Anita knew with a sinking feeling that he was going to be hard to catch. But with the sun setting and the after dark fun of Hallowe'en starting in an hour, they had to get him home. Like lots of dogs, Squirt was afraid of fireworks.

They raced up the lane behind the boys and reined in at a bend as Matt jumped off his bike and dived into the bush.

"Got him!" He yelled. "I need a leash."

"Hang on!" Anita shouted as she leapt off Penny and whipped open her saddle bag. "I've got some cord."

"I'll hold Penny," said Sandie, taking the

pony's reins as Anita ran into the bush to help Matt. Squirt was panting furiously but his face broke into his funny doggy smile as Anita ran up to him to give him a hug and secure the cord on him.

"Can you lead him and ride your bike okay?" she asked Matt.

"Of course!" he scorned. "He'll be my tracker dog. Goes with the outfit."

"Were we ever lucky to spot him," she said as she took the reins from Sandie.

"Call Auntie Betty and let her know," said Meridy.

Anita pulled out her cell phone and speed-dialled home to give Mom the good news.

"We've got Squirt... He's fine... We're on the lane that goes to the hilltop farm... He was in the bush... Matt saw him... Home soon."

Just as she mounted Penny, Anita saw a glow coming from the top of the hill. Dusk was just starting to set in and Hallowe'en lights were going on.

"Cool!" Sean and Matt exclaimed. "Let's do one last stop."

"Might as well," grinned Jill. "Bart told us we should go up there."

The hilltop farm was older than the town of Brokeville. It was the area's first homestead and had been settled by the Tasker family in the mid 1800s. Someone still lived there but the land wasn't farmed anymore and the place had a gentle unkept look to it. No one really knew much about it and there were all kinds of local legends and stories about the first settlers. It was a pretty lonely place. Except at Hallowe'en.

The ponies were quiet. Squirt stopped pulling and walked closely beside Matt. There seemed to be a silence that was deeper than just the stillness of the air. Anita felt anxiety mounting as she wondered whether they were doing the right thing.

They rounded the last bend and gasped at the sight before them. The old log and timber-framed farmhouse glowed in yellow

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light. A lantern, warm and inviting, swung from the well-worn porch. Lights twinkled from the overhung roof. Corn brooms, cauldrons, and corn stalks decorated the entrance where an expansive cobweb hung in the doorway. Even the bushes in front of the house were draped in glistening spider webs and there were pumpkins strewn on the lawn. From somewhere deep within, the strains of a flute could be heard.

They glanced at each other. This was exciting but Anita had a twingy feeling about it as they walked their ponies to the porch. Penny stiffened slightly as a figure shuffled into view. Her black dress swept the floor and the sleeves were long enough to cover her hands. On her head was a wide-brimmed, coned hat that fit low over her brow, casting her face into shadows.

The children were mesmerized by her. They had never seen such an authentic costume and a homeowner who acted the part so perfectly. She moved forward and from the folds of her skirt she offered each pony a slivered treat. Much later, Anita would wonder what it was she had given them but as she sat immobilized on Penny she could think of nothing but who this incredible person was and the effort she had put into decorating the farmhouse.

"Thanks so much for the pony treats..." she started to say. Somehow, though, her

words didn't sound right. The lady, so perfect, was eerily different, strange...

She turned away, brushing by the boys as she moved back to the house. Sandie caught Anita's eye and motioned for them to go. They turned their ponies, calling quietly to the boys to follow. Matt was pale.

"She touched me," his voice quavered. "But I didn't feel anything."

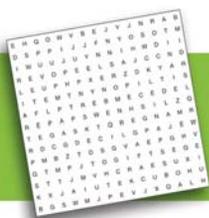
Squirt whined. Anita swivelled in her saddle to whisper to him. She glanced back one more time at the house. The lady was at the porch steps. She seemed to glide rather than climb them. Anita blinked, straining her eyes to see more clearly. The lady turned and for just a second, Anita saw her face, translucent and achingly sad and pale. It was almost otherworldly.

Penny fidgeted, anxious to leave. As they rode down the lane they kept close together, saying nothing. The ponies bunched instinctively.

The lady paused. Lights dimmed. Images dissolved.

At the bend the children paused, unable to resist one last glance back. They gasped, holding their breath. All they saw was the ramshackled, dark, lonely farmhouse outlined in the pale light of a full rising moon.

An ancient spirit called. Beyond, the lady heard. Then she was gone. Lost in space and time...



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