

Stephen Moran's Museum of Illusions ~ www.SJMoran.com ~ Presents

Beacon and Numbskull

by Stephen Moran

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Nick was standing in line to check-out some Indian vegetarian food for his lunch. Living alone and working from his house, he made a point of getting out daily to buy provisions. It was the last day of October, and the local High Street was full of late harvest fare.

‘Numbskull!’ the cashier said, with a big smile.

‘Oh! You must have seen my picture online.’

‘It’s me, Beacon!’

‘Beacon! Well I’ll be damned... You’re so different than I imagined, Beacon.’

‘You mean you never knew I was black?’

Nick blushed.

‘No, I mean you’re absolutely beautiful!’

Rather glowing black with purple tones, than pink with hairy goosebumps, he thought. Other customers were waiting to be served.

‘Look, I can see that this will take more than a quick chat to sort out,’ she said, ‘Meet me in the Tapas bar next door at 7 o’clock tonight and we’ll have a good old chinwag.’

They had always exchanged glances whenever Nick bought something in the

health food shop, and he always hoped their hands would touch when he paid.

Tonight would be Nick's first date since his wife had gone off with Mr Chicken. She had been Mr Chicken's secretary at corporate headquarters in the arsehole of the East End.

Something Beacon said about the décor in the Tapas bar, while they speared olives and whitebait over a pitcher of sangria, made Nick wonder if two people could ever truly agree on anything. She described the yellow walls as restful.

'People usually think green is restful, but for me yellow is the most relaxing,' she said. 'Green is oppressive.'

'That's interesting,' he said, 'because I'm the same with blue and red. I find blue warm, and red cold.'

'No, no! Blue is dull and boring,' she said. 'Red is intellectual and vibrant.'

'Isn't lilac intellectual,' said Nick, 'and grey boring?'

'Oh no,' said Beacon, 'grey is electrifying!'

'Let me just double-check here,' Nick said, laughing, 'you are female?'

'No,' said Beacon.

'Don't do that to me, Beacon! What is your real name, anyway?'

When Beacon finished laughing her head off, she said, 'Jacintha. What's

yours?’

‘Nick. Very boring, I’m afraid. Not like your exotic name.’

‘P-lease? “Jacintha” is a very boring name. And you are colour-blind, my friend.’

‘No not at all, I agree on the names of all the colours. Just the names, though.’

Jacintha made the sign of a jet-plane flying over her head.

‘You’re Numbskull alright – I’m definite now. – Sorry, Nick.’

Their way home was the same as far as Jacintha’s place, so it was natural for him to walk her there. The night had turned cold and misty. He was hoping she might offer the cup of coffee that keeps you awake, then lets you escape back to your own world after a few orgasms and a fry-up. Instead when they got to Jacintha’s block, she gave him a peck on the cheek, said ‘Goodnight’ and disappeared like a breeze.

Out of the fog, a group of Halloween children appeared, dressed as witches and ghosts. ‘Trick or Treat!’ they cried, and rattled their collection tins as he climbed the hill to his house. Their leader was as tall as Nick and wore a Scream mask.

‘It’s past your bedtimes,’ he answered, beside his gate.

The house was dark ahead of him. The four lingered nearby in their ugly masks.

‘Clear off!’ he said.

When he turned his back on them, he thought he heard one say, ‘You had your choice!’ When he looked around they were gone.

He went inside and turned on his computer. It was the first thing Nick always did because it took so long to start up, and he wanted to check his messages as soon as possible. Then he went around the house drawing the curtains. Nick liked to close the curtains before turning on the lights, so as not to make a shop window for the nosey neighbours.

As he entered the dark living room, something outside approached the window, spangled by moonlight through the birch hedge. If it was a person, it was horribly misshapen, with its head on the wrong way. Pins and needles flushed Nick’s limbs, as he tried to make sense of the looming presence. Maybe it was some trick by the Halloween children. No, it was more sinister. The figure moved again, then Nick remembered – it was only a potted plant he had moved closer to the house to protect it from frost.

Okay, he could go over to the window. A night storm had blown up. In the sudden gale the brown paper leaves of the birch hedges were rattling, their shadows trembling on the living room wall. Pressed behind the glass, was the Scream mask. Nick emitted an incoherent shout. The image disappeared.

‘Bloody Screamer!’

Just when he recovered enough to continue pulling the curtains, an egg crashed on the window and slid down the outside of the glass.

Livid, Nick completed his round of darkened rooms in the house, closing all the curtains and turning on a few lights. From the study a voice said, ‘You have email.’

It was a message from Beacon. ‘Happy Halloween,’ it said, ‘and thanks for an interesting evening. Let’s do it again sometime!’

‘Jacintha,’ he typed, ‘yes, it was lovely. Halloween! I’ve just been Tricked by the Trick-or-Treaters. They scared the crap out of me. I’ll post full details online tomorrow. – Numbskull.’

As he clicked Send, there was a loud hammering at the front door, like a policeman’s knock. It was followed by scuffing and running sounds. They had played another trick on him. Raging, he grabbed his house-keys, rushed to the hall door and opened it. Most of the streetlights were out of order but he could see the Trick or Treaters lit by the moon in a vortex of cloud. They turned and ran. Nick launched himself from the doorstep and ran after them.

They were fitter than him. About halfway down the hill they scattered into the grounds of the building that Jacintha had gone into earlier. Nick followed the one

with the Scream mask into a stairwell and up some steps that reeked of urine. ‘They always go up, that’s how they get caught,’ he thought. He reached the top of the four-storey block. The Screamer, in a black robe was beside a door at the end of the landing holding a bunch of keys.

Before the Screamer could find the right key Nick was there, grabbed the robe and swung him. The Screamer fell and cracked the back of his head on the concrete balcony. Lights came on in a flat at the other end of the landing. The neighbours, an old couple, peeped round their door and quickly went back in. The Screamer was not moving.

‘You stupid bastard! Are you okay?’

There was no answer. All blood drained from Nick’s skin. To help the Screamer, he would have to remove the mask. The reaction to the chase hit Nick as he bent down. He started gasping for air. The same flush of pins and needles raced through his limbs again. ‘Best tear it off quickly like a Band-Aid,’ he thought.

He forced himself to grasp the mask. It rose in his hand. Underneath, a blood-red Shinto demon turned and sneered at him. With a jolt like an electric shock, pain began to crush Nick’s ribcage. The Shinto demon turned into a summer-blue Bambi cartoon, and then into the face of Jacintha, flicking her pink tongue around her lips. Unable to breathe, Nick buckled and fell on his knees, catching the edge of the robe.

The air was still acrid from bonfires and damp with mist when Jacintha opened her door in the morning. On the balcony outside her flat she found Numbskull lying dead on the robe, with a Scream mask in his hand.



Stephen Moran was born in Dublin. He made his way to London in his mid-twenties and stayed. There he combined a career in database software with writing poetry, fiction and editing. His latest book is *Day of the Flying Leaves (Selected Poems, 2021)*. He previously published a short story collection 'The London Silence and Other Stories'. He has also edited or co-edited eleven anthologies of fiction and two of poetry. His blog *Stephen Moran's Museum of Illusions*, begun in 2003, continues to the present date. (www.SJMoran.com)