

## Welcome To Spooktown – Halloween Special

[Spooky music]

ED EASTON: Ah! A real ghost now in Ryanair right now!

[Music stops]

[Busy street sounds]

ED: Hey, Kath.

KATH HUGHES: Hey, Ed. Oh, great costume.

ED: Happy – thank you – Halloween.

KATH: Happy Halloween.

ED: Happy thank you Halloween. Uh, great costume. Right back at you, actually.

KATH: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, I've gone for a – a hench cat vibes this year.

ED: Oh.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah, it works really well.

KATH: Yeah, thank you. I – I've sort of – I've got the sort of the – the full cat like hardcore like Andrew Lloyd Weber 'Cats' inspired makeup and then one of those, uh, masks –

ED: Stage show or film?

KATH: Uh, film. Um –

ED: Oh no. That's why I can see your bum hole.

KATH: Yeah. Yeah yeah. That's – that's what I was going for. And then one of those, um, you know, the – like the aprons. Those muscle men, muscley aprons.

ED: Yeah I do, actually.

KATH: Sort of over the top with – with little pants on.

ED: I love that.

ED: Yeah, I absolutely love that.

KATH: Yeah, I think it works. I think it works.

ED: You're looking hench as well. What do you bench these days?

KATH: Thank you. Oh, um, 500 kilograms.

ED: Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

KATH: And that's with a hernia.

ED: Is that a rage thing? Is that like –

KATH: Uh, yeah, pretty much.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: It's a like pure – I don't remember it after it's happened. I just – everyone in the gym is like, 'holy shit.' Everyone – everyone's sort of backed into the walls.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Screaming when I sort of come to. And, uh, I'm like, 'what – what number was it?' And they've written it on the like – written it on the board. There's a giant board which is just for me.

ED: Okay, yeah. I love this.

KATH: Yeah. And then everyone – everyone's really nice to me there. It's crazy.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Everyone's so kind. And sort of what they – they always seem really, really frightened. But they're so kind to me.

ED: That's so nice. Well done, mate. Fuck, that's actually insane.

KATH: Thanks. What – who are you?

ED: Who am I? I'm a sexy Bane.

KATH: Oh, nice.

ED: From off of Batman. Yeah.

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah.

ED: I've gone for – it's all skin-tight, um –

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

ED: It's pretty much almost exactly the same as the one in the film, because I think he's pretty fucking sexy there.

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

ED: Uh, it's basically a twink Bane.

KATH: Nice, yeah. Nice.

ED: Yeah, so I'm very slim, um, I've got that – this on here. The thing, you know, that you grab. The lapels, almost.

KATH: The – yeah, yeah.

ED: Um, and then the mask on. But the mask is a ball gag.

KATH: Yeah, that's really nice.

ED: To make it extra sexy.

KATH: Yeah. It's impressive that you can talk as well as you can with a – with a ball gag in, to be honest.

ED: It's not in. It's not in.

KATH: Oh, you've just got to – is it just – is that why it's bobbing up and down? Is it just resting on your lips?

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: I see. Well you look great.

[Spooky music]

ED: Um, I wanted to meet you here to A, trick – trick and treat.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: And B, I've been to the library again.

KATH: Oh, Henry's library.

ED: Yeah. Well, he works there. I don't know whether it's his.

KATH: Great. It's probably his.

ED: I'll ask him next time. I'll ask him next time.

KATH: Yeah, I reckon it's his. He's the only person there, so –

ED: But to be – yeah, um, um, because I read about a poem that was scratched into the eaves of a house, um, that I thought was really interesting. And I wondered if he had any literature on it. And it turns out it did and it was all about All Hollow's Eve.

KATH: Oh, great. Oh, let's hear it, then.

[Spooky music]

ED: 'When the sun that leaves for winter and sweet smells appear, hide your loved ones above ground, for the Hollow Men are here.' And that was found scratched in the rafters of the oldest house in Spooktown, which was the captain's house. Um, which I think is now is a Nazzie T, actually.

KATH: Huh.

ED: Yeah. We should go.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Bit expensive though, isn't it?

KATH: Yeah, we should, actually. Yeah, yeah.

ED: So yeah, this is the – this is what I found.

[Mysterious hissing sounds]

ED: Sometime after the earth's crust cooled but before centralised governments, back when the earth span a little quicker and the world was one giant forest humanity tried to hide inside, Spooktown, a dead tooth rotting in this miserable island's mouth, groaned under the weight of being while it prepared itself for the icy death grip of winter. Shadowy figures were dragging rotten tree trunks indoors to burn like rats hauling crusts of bread into their holes. Rats were hauling crusts of bread into their holes like shadowy figures dragging rotten tree trunks indoors to burn. Whispers drifted from the forest, cursing the fledgling community.

A nervous energy permeated the world. Humans, rats, owls, goats, cats, cows, hens, and wolves all preparing themselves for an ungodly freezing cold. A barren six months of slow death before sunlight returns their breath. Judica. The town stank like a blocked nose, a comforting smell that the residents embraced.

But come dusk on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October by our calendar, in the year the sheep gave birth to wolf pups, the scent shifted. A sickly, overwhelming scent of sugar and sweets and chocolate. And hidden underneath, the stench of death. Following close behind the ole wind were the Hollow Men.

[Low organ music, mysterious hissing]

Old Jeremiah's house lay on the outskirts of town. It was Hilkiyah, not Jeremiah, who inhabited Old Jeremiah's house. The house was made up in part of the bones of Old Jeremiah, hence the name. It was around 500 heartbeats since the sun went down, and Hilkiyah was cutting off the fat of a dead lamb by candlelight when she heard a knock at the door. Not the rap of a knuckled fist, but the soft brush of a flaccid, open palmed hand. [soft knocking] Brush, brush, brush. It sounded like a freshly blinded man was finding his way through a labyrinth, or a one-night stand trying to find their way to the toilet. Someone or something was pathetically pawing at the door. [soft knocking]

Hilkiyah, never afraid of a scrap with a neighbour but wary of the things that screamed in the forest at night, marched over to the door and paused. The pawing had stopped.

[Music stops, mysterious hissing]

A stillness in the air was interrupted by a soft breeze pouring under the door, stinking of burnt sugar and guts. Hilkieah, hoping a neighbour was coming to apologise with hot, sweet treats, opened the door. [door creaking] In front of her stood three figures, their faces sagging and stretching at odd angles. There was a soft, wet rustling, like a busy ant colony or hundreds of people quietly whispering blasphemies. The shape of their heads undulated, waves of flesh rippling in the still air. Although they looked human at first glance, Hilkieah could see that their lips were dry and chapped, the skin was old. Not aged. Gossamer weak and moon pale. The skin hung off whatever was inside like an oversized coat. The eyelids were red, raw, and gaping. The mouths were stretched and split.

Hilkieah knew that the bodies were human, but whatever inhabited the bodies, they were of the forest. She knew they were here for her. Knew that the clicking mandibles and searching antennae that jutted out of their eye sockets, mouths, and nostrils belonged to the creatures wearing the human skin. The Hollow Men. And when the first of the three abominations whispered, 'treat,' she knew that her time on this earth had come to an end.

Down the muddy pig trail to the stomach of Spooktown loomed more houses that the three Hollow Men creaked and clicked past to the next house with a candle in the window. Yanto's place. Smaller than an outhouse with only room to sit, the three shapes rattled up to the door. Yanto was counting teeth when they laid their hands on the door. Pat, pat, pat went the empty fingers. Yanto, hard of hearing and harder of courage, would not have opened the door even if he had heard it. It was the smell that attracted him. [sounds intensify] Sweetened boiled hooves. Boiled sugar poured over skin.

Yanto retched and stood. He peered out of his tiny window to see two figures stood behind the widow Hilkiah. Her skin sagged slightly and her eyes were sunken. Pitch black and moving. Yanto froze, staring out at Hilkiah. And Hilkiah's black holes stared back. Yanto inhaled and exhaled a thousand times while Hilkiah impotently hit his door. [knocking] Eventually a furious whisper came from Hilkiah's head. 'Trick.' As thousands of tiny oval jaundiced eye-white eggs bulleted their way through Yanto's door and window, [knocking intensifies] piercing his body and pedal dashing his hovel with grume. Grume is a blood clot. That's minging that, isn't it?

[Hissing stops, street noises]

KATH: That's so gross.

ED: Yeah. Yeah.

KATH: Grume is – is it –

ED: Grume.

KATH: So it's another word for a blood clot?

ED: G-R-U-M-E.

KATH: That's turned me sick, that has.

ED: [retches]

KATH: Oh.

[Mysterious hissing]

ED: The final house the ghouls visited was the captain's house in the middle of Spooktown, near the gallows and the river that ran uphill you should never drink from, where the Londis is now. The captain's family were awake, taking stock for the winter and spoiling their only daughter, Drusilla, with pumpkin innards. Their last child to be born before the drought ten years ago. She was a beacon of hope for the little hole they called home.

Drusilla was the first to notice the smell. [sounds intensify] Like fresh candy floss and used dental floss. But the captain, quick witted and always alert, dropped the pig head she was holding and whispered to Drusilla to climb up into the rafters. Before Drusilla could move, there was a soft knock at the door. [soft knocking] And although the captain did not know what was on the other side, she knew that her whole family was in mortal danger. The captain's husband picked up a fire poker, and the captain picked up her harpoon. It was as natural as breathing in. As reassuring as dawn.

Drusilla watched her parents open the door. [door creaking] Watched Hilkie and two grey strangers enter her home and pounce on her father. She watched them crush his insides into a pink paste and squeeze him out. [gushing] Even as her mother pierced one of them with her harpoon. She saw the skin peel off the figure like the skin off a burnt tomato. And what she saw appear from under that old, rank skin blinded her. Burnt her memory.

She was found the next morning on Hollow Day, up in the eaves screaming. [screaming] Three discarded skins were burnt on a ceremonial fire, and the townsfolk promised that they would protect themselves from the Hollow Men if they returned next

year by wearing the hollowed out bodies of those that scared them the most. Sexy cats and hench Banes. And so All Hollow's Eve was born.

[Spooky music]

ED: Oh!

KATH: Oh!

ED: Oh! Um –

KATH: So, Ed –

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Is that story all – is that all just scratched out into the wood?

ED: No, it's just the – [laughs] it's just the poem that – that's scratched into the wood.

KATH: Oh. God, I thought –

ED: So, 'when the sun leaves for winter and sweet smells appear, hide your loved ones above ground, for the Hollow Men are here,' scratched into the rafter of the – yeah.

KATH: Got you. Okay, I thought the lot was scratched in. I thought, 'bloody hell, that's going to take up a few rooms probably.'

ED: It's a big house. It's a big – the captain's house is a big house.

KATH: Big house. It can take it.

ED: Uh, no. Good lord, no. That, I found that in the library. You know that librarian, Henry?

KATH: Yeah.

ED: I went and visited him because I was like –

KATH: Oh, great.

ED: 'I've heard about this poem in the rafters. The huge rafters of the captain's house. Um, have you got any literature on it? Pref non-fic, uh, push-fic.'

KATH: Uh huh.

ED: The – the dream, sci-fic. It's my fav.

KATH: Yeah, I love sci-fic as well.

ED: Yeah. Science fic.

KATH: Is, um, is the fact that the way they, uh, like knocked on the doors really pathetically, is that why everyone in Spooktown's got weak handshakes?

ED: No, it's because, um, the – they are hollow. And whatever's inside them, I assume it's a big bug, Kath.

KATH: Oh, yeah.

ED: Is inside them. It's sort of too weak to get to the end of the arm.

KATH: Okay, yeah. I got it, yeah.

ED: Um, the reason everyone's got a weak handshake here is because they're cowards.

KATH: Oh, is that what it is? Okay.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: That stacks up.

ED: It's because they're fucking cowards and you're not.

KATH: Yeah, yeah. Thanks.

[Spooky music]

ED: Got any more questions for this story that I didn't even write, I just read it from a book?

KATH: What is the smell of – of when you've got – the inside of your nose when you've got a cold?

ED: Do you know the smell I'm talking about?

KATH: Yeah, and I don't – what is that?

ED: Yeah, okay great. Um –

KATH: It's like when – it reminds me of when the radiators have been off and then you turn the radiators on in winter and you get that weird dust smell. It reminds me of that.

ED: Interesting. Yeah. I think – and I don't want to say this – it's mucus.

KATH: I didn't want you to say that either.

ED: It's the smell of mucus, Kath. Ill mucus. Mucus that's trapped. Illness is the smell.

KATH: That's horrible. I don't know why I didn't make that connection that that's what it was.

ED: Yeah. Yeah. It's, um, it's fucking horrible. I hate – I hate the smell. Especially when you can't even blow your nose.

KATH: Yeah, it's awful.

ED: Ugh.

KATH: Ugh.

ED: Ugh, sorry. Sorry. I – I genuinely just thought about it too much and yeah, that's the smell. The smell is, um, just mucus.

KATH: That's grim.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: That's pretty much all my notes. I wrote down, 'blocked nose smell.'

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Uh, uh, oh, I wrote down 'sheep wolf.'

ED: Oh yeah?

KATH: The sheep's having wolves.

ED: Yeah, that happens quite a lot here, though.

KATH: Yeah, I know. That – I just – I thought that was a sort of universal thing. I didn't know that was exclusive to Spooktown.

ED: Oh, are you sort of saying that it's weird to differentiate the year as that year when it happens so often?

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: You can't be like, 'oh, it's the year that that –' it's like, 'oh, it's the year we had Christmas.'

KATH: Yeah, it's – yeah.

ED: It happens every year.

KATH: It's – it's every year, yeah.

ED: Apart – apart from last year. Thanks, Boris Johnson. But every other year is the year that – that was about Christmas, not about sheep giving birth to wolves. He’s – he had nothing to do with that.

KATH: Oh yeah, I also wrote down, ‘what does gossamer mean?’

ED: Oh, it’s like a, um, a thin film of like spider web.

KATH: Oh.

ED: So you know when spiders have that like horrible net that they sit in and look at you from?

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

ED: I think that’s gossamer.

KATH: And they’re always looking.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Right.

ED: I think that’s gossamer.

KATH: That’s pretty cool.

ED: I would also argue, though, that whoever wrote this used a lot of words that they don’t quite know what it means but they know it sounds nice or clever.

KATH: Hm, yeah. Yeah, I got that vibe. I got sort of the thesaurus vibes from whoever wrote this.

ED: Not just the thesaurus. Rhyming dictionaries too, because there's a poem at the top.

KATH: Oh, oh really? Are you – are you sure that they used that as well? Interesting.

ED: Yeah yeah yeah. I – I had to – little peek behind the curtain, I had to use a – I had to google a rhyming dictionary to rhyme 'appear' with 'hear'.

[Both laugh]

ED: Pretty embarrassing.

KATH: And it was great. It was great. It was really good. Really creepy, actually. Genuinely creepy.

ED: Good, that's what I want.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: That's what he wanted, the author. It says at the top of the story.

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

ED: 'Hope this doesn't scare you too bad, dickhead,' it says.

KATH: So is that – that's how trick or treating was – was sort of – came about?

ED: I guess so, yeah. Yeah.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah, and I know you – you think – you’ve got that whole thing about Halloween comes from All Hallow’s Eve, but it’s All Hollow’s Eve because they’re hollow men.

KATH: Yeah. That makes loads more sense.

[Spooky music]

ED: Oh, should we go and knock on this house?

KATH: Yeah, yeah. Looks like a – looks like they’ll have a good stash in there.

ED: I hope they’ve got sweets. Otherwise we’re going to have to take their skin. I hate that part of Halloween.

KATH: I know. It is – but it’s – you know what, though? It’s – it’s on them. They know it’s going to happen, so just get some sweets in.

ED: Get some sweets in or we’re taking your flesh. It’s an oral tradition.

KATH: Yeah.

[Soft knocking]

[Door creaking]

ED: Trick or treat.

KATH: Trick or treat.

ED: Hi, do you have any sweets, please? Oh.

KATH: Oh.

ED: Ugh. Come on, then. Let's have your skin, mate. Kath, do you want to wear this one? I've got – I'm wearing so many already.

KATH: I – yeah, I know you're getting sweaty. Yeah, all right.

ED: Does my tongue look weird poking out of all their mouths, though?

KATH: Oh, that's so gross. I love it. Happy Halloween!

ED: Happy thank you Halloween.

KATH: Happy thank you Halloween.

[Spooky music]

This has been a Little Wander production. Music from Rhodri Viney. Local artwork from Suze Hughes. Voice from Melanie Walters. With special thanks to Beth Forrest, Steve Pickup, Sam Roberts, Henry Widdicombe, and Jo Williams. Other podcasts from Little Wander include Here to Judge and I Wish I Was An Only Child. Subscribe now on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.