

Halloween Dreams  
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Kevin didn't have any trouble deciding on his Halloween identity. He loved animals, especially dogs, and dalmatians were in season. His bedroom had dalmatians on the walls, a spotted pillow on the bed, and plastic pawprints circling the room. Dalmatians were everywhere, and for a day Kevin got to be one.

Well before school began, Kevin's mom decked him out in white sweat pants and hooded sweatshirt with random dalmatian spots sewn on and spotted ears attached. Face and hands got their share in makeup. Big and small, regular and odd; the more, the better. If you're going to be a dalmatian, no sense not making the most of it.

The dalmatian barked and whimpered, scratched and pawed his way through the school day. This was how school ought to be. After school, in the darkening suburban streets, he really hit his stride. Begging came as naturally as breathing, and this Halloween beggar-keen animal observer and unselfconscious ham to boot-made the most of it. He wasn't alone, of course. An array of fire-fighters, football players, witches, cheerleaders, soldiers, and ghosts prowled the neighborhood, along with enough other dalmatians to cast a movie. But this dalmatian knew how to beg, and the loot he returned with and spilled out on the livingroom floor showed how very good he was. This Halloween was a triumph.

A year is a lot of time for an eight-year-old, and the next Halloween Kevin was a little too old to make it as a dalmatian. He was starting to know what cool meant, and being a dalmatian didn't fit. But he couldn't quite let go. Dalmatian, no. But veterinarian, why not? White coat, stethoscope, note pad-the same animal instincts dressed up in a new guise. And if he had a stuffed dalmatian or two climbing out of his pockets, why not that too!

Not long after, mom and dad broke down and brought home a real dog, a pup of mixed ancestry but heavily labrador that older brother Quinn had picked out. The dog, promptly named Augie, belonged to the whole family; but she and Kevin had a special bond. He walked her, played with her, kept her well fed. She waited for his return home from school, and when he rushed in he dropped to the floor and let Augie lick his face and hands in enthusiastic gratitude for his coming back. They were fast friends.

One night Kevin, Quinn, and dad were outside playing catch. Augie, left out of the fun, sprawled out by the door waiting for them to come back in. At one point Kevin dashed into the house and threw open the door, which caught Augie's left paw under it. Her sickening howl brought everyone running. Kevin hugged her and tried to stop her pain, but the hurt seemed deep. She whimpered and moaned, and everyone was scared, Augie in pain, Kevin in guilt.

Dad called the veterinarian, who recommended a simple treatment: roll a Tylenol in peanut butter and get her to eat it. That ought to get her through till morning. Augie took her medicine and then lay down on the big pillow that was her nighttime bed. She seemed to relax. It might not be so bad.

But Kevin couldn't be so calm. He got dressed for bed and dragged out his blanket and curled up on the floor next to his wounded friend. Augie would not suffer alone; they would face this hurt together and find healing together. Kevin patted her gently and cried a little with her. When morning dawned, both the dog and her young healer felt a whole lot better.

Historians and anthropologists have a lot to say about Halloween. England and harvest festivals. Church celebrations of all the saints and holy souls. Facing our fears of the things we cannot see by donning their dress and acknowledging their power. Confronting the darkness of northern winter with our own defiance. All of these probably play their part.

But maybe Halloween is most powerfully a chance for kids to try things out, to snarl like a witch or goof off like a clown without a reprimand, to be brave like the firefighter or police officer they will never be. Maybe it is a great time for the older folks who load the loot bags with candy to smile at the young possibilities and to wonder at all the things that they once thought they'd like to be. Or maybe too it is a hint at the dreams and the powers that young kids carry in their hearts, dreams of breaking out into something new, of being something even more wonderful than they are.

Maybe it is a chance to get a start-to go from dalmatian to dalmatian's doctor, to grow from imagining to being what we imagine, at least for a short time. Halloween, the "holy evening," makes lot of things possible.