

Ralph Twigger, Ghostbuster?

Ralph Twigger's Super Sizzling Spectacular Summer had come to an end. He'd done well for a 70-something-year-old gentleman taking care of two very active young boys. The big pay-off was dinner every night made by Debra, their mom. Her meatloaf, spaghetti, chicken and rice casserole brought back an appetite that Ralph hadn't had in years. Josh, Jeremy and their mom made Ralph feel important, needed and loved every day and because of their kindness, Ralph was a better neighbor and friend. "It's a funny thing how giving of yourself to others can give you something back."

The new school year had started and Ralph, Josh, and Jeremy were finally in a rhythm. Things were going really well for Ralph and the boys, before and after school. Homework was a breeze with Ralph's assistance. The only subject Ralph took issue with—the two sets of spelling and vocabulary words every week.

Ralph thought the list was pretty skimpy, so he added to their 20 words with his own sage and salty vocabulary. Words like *kerfuffle*, *falderal*, *nincompoop*, and *rigmarole*. Even a more festive word like *the hobgoblin*, with Halloween approaching.

Ralph signed the boys up for karate lessons. For artistic balance they were both taking a children's art group and a mime class at the Innovo Physical Theatre studio.

"Now, you boys can draw a box and find your way out of one!" He thought that was a pretty funny joke, but the boys did not think it was funny at all.

Halloween was nearing and Ralph was hard at work (as was his habit every Halloween) hanging cobwebs and giant spiders, grinning pumpkins, and ghosts everywhere. And Ralph was working on this year's *Halloween Spooktacular* with the local sheriff's department. It broke down law enforcement stereotypes and gave the Pinecrest Sheriff's Department a friendlier face. *And boy, do they need one*, thought Ralph. *Well... maybe not that friendly a face*. Every year the officers dress up like zombies and host the annual Haunted Jail House.

That night after dinner, Debra had a huge surprise for Ralph and the boys.

“Our costumes are done! I’ve been working on them for weeks and they’re finally done, boys.”
And with that Debra disappeared into her room.

“What is she talking about boys—*our* costumes?” Ralph inquired.

“Mom makes our Halloween costumes every year.”

“I bet you’ve been some really scary stuff, huh?” said Ralph.

“Not really, unless you count the lioness and her two cubs as ferocious and scary.”

“Anything scarier than that?”

Josh and Jeremy thought for a minute. “Um, a spatula and two pancakes?”

“Yeah, and the spatula chased the pancakes. Mom was the spatula,” grinned Jeremy remembering that Halloween.

Just then Debra walked into the room dressed like a bright pink crayon displaying a small blue and green crayon and a much larger golden colored crayon.”

Surely this is a joke, thought Ralph. Debra loves playing practical jokes.

“Put them on boys.”

“Mo-oom...” protested Josh and Jeremy.

Ralph could tell that this was *not* one of Debra’s jokes but four carefully crafted crayon costumes made late at night when moms should be sleeping. “Come on, boys. Let’s go try these on.”

“I’m so excited! Here are your matching Converse hi-top tennis shoes that you’ll be able to wear *after* Halloween, but maybe at Christmas.”

“I didn’t know they made gold Converse hi-tops,” said Ralph.

“They don’t! I had to paint yours, by hand,” said Debra as she looked at the flecks of gold paint still under her fingernails.

Ralph and the boys grabbed their shoes and costumes and headed off to change.

It was taking longer than usual. Debra walked into the hallway, “How are you all doing?”

The boys stood in front of the long dressing mirror totally embarrassed by their reflection.

“We’re in grade school, Josh, “ whispered Jeremy. “Crayons are for pre-schoolers. What are we gonna do about this?”

“Coming Mom... Ralph is our only hope. Let’s see what he says.” Josh knew Ralph would not want to be a gold crayon.

Ralph stood in front of Debra’s dresser room mirror checking his velcro closures. “These must have taken weeks to make,” thought Ralph as he put on his golden pointy crayon hat. “Coming Debra. I know I can’t hurt her feelings.”

“Okay, I’m going to close my eyes and on the count of 5, all three of you walk down the hallway together for the big reveal. They’re closed now.” Debra started counting backward, “Five-four-three-two...”

The boys and Ralph had walked out into the hall as Debra finished her count-down and they just about fell over at the sight of one another. Ralph gave them a look that meant “cut it out,” and they did.

“Two, one! I am opening my eyes now.” Debra saw her three favorite people in the whole world and started to cry a little.

“Mom, don’t cry.”

“Are we wearing them wrong?” asked Ralph.

“No, they’re perfect. It’s just that... with the three of you standing there, there’s four of us again. I made four costumes this year, not three, and it was just so special to make four crayons.”

“She misses Dad,” whispered Josh.

“And these are incredible costumes, Debra!” Ralph started talking really loud. “I think we need to get a picture of all four of us in these spectacular crayon costumes, don’t we boys?”

Debra quickly pulled out of the sad moment. “I have my camera right here and I think if we all stand in front of the bookcase.”

In moments the picture was captured. And it’s a good thing because these four crayons costumes would never see the light of Halloween night.

As the days drew closer to Halloween, Ralph’s apartment became more festive. Bats hung over the dining room table where the boys did their homework, a fuzzy rat sat next to the chocolate milk in the fridge, and Frankenstein held the toilet paper in the bathroom. Ralph had even changed out his friendly doorbell to something festive —the howl of a wolf.

The boys begged for spooky things at their apartment, but their mom felt one scary place was all that they needed.

Friday night had arrived and their new *fall ritual* of Ralph cooking dinner for Debra and the boys. Ralph made a crockpot of chili that would have rivaled the best of cooks and Fire Station No. 5. Debra loved chatting with Ralph after dinner. It was so nice to relax and sip a warm mug of Ovaltine and reminisce with Ralph. There was a pause in the conversation and Debra decided to voice a small concern.

“Mmmm, this is delicious.“

“I put a half of a drop of Oil of Peppermint in it. Rachel Ray said to try that in your cocoa. It works like a charm in Ovaltine too.”

“Hey, the boys told me about the new toilet paper holder.”

“My wife never liked my Frankenstein toilet paper holder. ‘Fake Frank’ she called him.” Ralph smiled to himself remembering his wife’s joy over every holiday. “Rachel was the one who bought ‘Ratty-Rat’ and stuck him in the fridge and then he appeared in my shoe one morning.”

“And your doorbell, it sounds like a ...”

“A werewolf doesn't it? Like the howls in the 1941 classic ‘The Wolfman.’ I bet your boys have never seen that one?”

“No, I don’t care for scary movies,” Debra stated matter-of-factly. “Ralph, there are people—really good people—who think these kinds of things are a little too scary for children and that we give the devil a playground at Halloween.”

“The devil, huh? Let’s not give him more credit than he deserves. It’s just a little bit of fun. It’s decorations that are as old as you, Debra. They’re antiques! The boys and I have seen scarier things on the History and the National Geographic channels. Are they having nightmares?”

“No, they’re sleeping fine.”

“Good, because I told them that if these decorations disturb their sleep or interrupt any other waking activity, it all comes down that day.”

“Alright then, I like that rule. I draw the line at gory stuff like eyeballs, missing body parts, and blood.”

“Me too. That’s too scary for me. Actually, Debra...,” Ralph’s voice now became hushed in its tone. The boys were absorbed in a weekly show in his little office.

“I need you to know there is something going on in and around our building, and it’s a little scarier than the plastic bats hanging over our heads right now.”

“What are you talking about Ralph?” Debra was concerned and confused by Ralph.

“We’ve had some vandalism here at our building and the *new* management company wasn’t responding. Sheriff Andrews and I started to look into it. And from the data we’ve gathered from our recognizance, something is brewing for Halloween night, right here, at the Westwinds Apartments.”

“No?!”

“Yes. I don’t want you to be alarmed. I am going to be doing some double-duty and kind of be Sheriff Andrew’s eyes and ears of the Westwinds Apartments, and the Eastwinds, Northwinds, and Southwinds, if you *catch my drift*.”

Debra giggled at the phrase "catch my drift.”

“What’s so funny? This is very serious, Debra. I will be on duty *all* Halloween night. Rather than working the Sheriff’s Station’s Haunted Jail House, I’ll be working here on ‘Operation Ghostbuster’ at our building.”

“Operation Ghostbuster?”

“Lean in again, Debra.” Debra leaned in and could tell this was very serious, at least to Ralph.

“These ‘hoodlums’ ...”

“Hoodlums?!”

“That’s what we called ‘em back in my day. It has to be a group of teenagers. Pretty obvious from the evidence of their debris piles which consist of concert flyers, school papers, Starbucks cups, fast food trash, gum and candy wrappers, and soda cans. ”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, there’s been some minor defacement of common property. An attempted break-in to a tenant’s storage area and a note was left in the laundry room on the bulletin board which read, “Wait until Halloween Night!” *with* an exclamation point. We’re pretty sure the note was from this group’s. They misspelled the word ‘night’.”

“So what *is Operation Ghostbuster?* I hope we’ll be able to do a little trick or treating in our crayon costumes?”

“I’ve worked that into the evening’s plans. At some point, I will need to assume another disguise.”

“Like what, and please don’t say a zombie costume?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of a ghost costume as in ‘Operation Ghostbuster.’”

“Of course, a ghost.” Debra was really trying hard not to laugh at this thought of Ralph dressed up as a ghost.

“Sheriff Andrews and I think the more ghosts hanging from the trees, around bushes, etcetera; the easier it will be for those on the dragnet detail.”

“What’s a ‘dragnet detail’?”

“Police term. Those in ghost-like apparel can be hidden and yet, very present. Debra, you’re really great with a sewing machine, and a ghost would be a cinch to make for you, right?”

Debra agreed.

“We’d like to hire you for a sewing job.”

“How many ghosts are we talking about?”

“Well, with the permission of the management company, I think maybe 50-60.”

“60 ghosts?! Are you kidding?”

“Too many?”

“We won’t really know until we start making and hanging them. We’ll need to get to *Fabrics Galore* early tomorrow morning, Ralph. We’re going to need a lot of fabric and cheesecloth.”

He could tell Debra was getting excited about *Operation Ghostbuster*.

“You name the time and breakfast at Denny’s is on me. Let me check with Mr. Beven about the ghost count?”

“Mr. Beven? Is our building back with *Beven & Brock Property Management*?”

“Yes indeedy. Forgot to tell you the news. It seems this other management company couldn’t satisfy the owner’s expectations. Good management is good management. All of the tradewinds are back under Beven & Brock Property Management’s care.”

“I’m glad for that.” Debra stood up and starting clearing away the remaining dishes. “Come on boys, it’s time for bed.”

An eruption of complaint arose from the boys as they came out of Ralph’s office where they’d been watching a show.

“It’s Friday night and it’s only nine o’clock! There’s a special on *Giant Squids* coming up next on National Geographic. We’re going to miss it and it’s probably the largest squid ever caught.”

Ralph made promises to DVR the show. Still, there was more of the yammering (belly-aching).

Once the caterwauling quieted down, Ralph did the remaining dishes and quickly settled into bed feeling rather satisfied that *Operation Ghostbuster* was moving along nicely. *Oh, we’ll catch these kids.*

By late afternoon on Saturday, Debra's apartment looked like the 1969 version of Disneyland's Haunted Mansion ride. Ghosts were draped or hanging from kitchen cabinet and bedroom doors, furniture, and the boys. Ralph and Debra hadn't shared the reason for all the ghost-making with them ... just that it was *more* of Ralph's decorations for the apartment building. She even made a ghost costume for herself with some girlish shape, puffy sleeves and a little bit of sparkle. Debra was seriously thinking of holding back the crayons and going with the ghost costumes for this year.

That afternoon Ralph had accomplished a special meeting of the *Westwinds Senior Bingo-Scrabble-Bridge Group*. Seniors crowded into Ralph's apartment to hear of *Operation Ghostbuster* and the growing concern over these menacing teens. Several tenants had their own stories about these kids, but no one had caught one... yet. Employing the watchful eyes and creativity of senior adults was going to be quite stealth as well. Seniors know how to keep things on the down low.

That night, Ralph helped Debra clean up her apartment and put the boys in bed. He did have a nagging thought about these teenagers. *What if these kids were just a bunch goofy teenagers leaving trash and silly notes? What if there really wasn't going to be an 'incident' on Halloween Night?* Ralph would look ridiculous, not to mention all the worry of the Westwinds' tenants would have been for nothing.

Ralph couldn't sleep that night. He decided to take a walk around the building to check the doors on the laundry room and the recreation room to make sure they had been locked at 10:00 p.m. The laundry room was locked. However, there was some kind of odd light on in the rec room's kitchen and the door was unlocked. Ralph decided to call Debra before going in. "If I am not back in my apartment in 5 minutes, call Sheriff Andrews."

"Ralph, you're scaring me."

"I'm just checking on something in the rec room."

“Be careful Ralph.”

“10-4.”

Ralph walked back to the kitchen area and found a white piece of cloth draped over part of the small little lamp that was usually on the side table. Attached to it was a little sign with familiar handwriting. It read, “Boo to you!”

Ralph laughed nervously and then he got ticked. *Operation Ghostbuster* was a go!

(Note to Readers/Storytellers: This is a nice place to take a break for cocoa, coffee or tea.)

Halloween fell on a Saturday that year and so Ralph had a full week to plan and train his troops. Each senior volunteer was fitted for a ghost costume. The interior garden of the apartment complex had been transformed into a ghost-filled wonderland. It wasn't scary at all. Just very white and it worked. When a costumed volunteer stood among the ghostly garden, it was impossible to tell where they were. It was like camouflage wear, but very white.

Training meetings ran each night for the different quadrants of the building. Thursday evening came and the final walk-through with Sheriff Andrews and Deputy Fife. Now, don't laugh because that's his last name—Fife—Tom Fife. The recreation room had been turned into the ‘Operation Ghostbuster’ headquarters and party room.

“We’re looking at one of two possible scenarios Halloween night,” said Sheriff Andrews. “One, these kids will try to crash the party or two, they make a move and do something thinking you are distracted with the party and that's when ‘Operation Ghostbuster’ goes into effect. Officer Fife will be here with you the whole evening. I’ll be doing sweeps of the other Tradewinds apartment buildings with another deputy and meeting up with you at 23 hundred.”

Deputy Fife loved word pictures and just had to add one: “Think of your party as a big piece of cheese—the bait—if you will. All we need are the mice and snap we got ‘em in our trap. We call this the old ‘bait and switch.’ Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

Sheriff Andrews saw the look of fatigue on everyone's faces and was ready to call it a night.

“Thank you, Deputy Fife. We're hoping for an end to the things you've had to deal with at your building. At the same time, we're hoping we can set these kids on the right course, once again.”

Deputy Fife started in again, “We'll be a compass, a GPS for them in the...”

Sheriff Andrews interrupted Fife: “At this point, the building's owner has agreed to not to press charges if there's no further damage. We'll set up some community service for them. We want to thank you for your service already given. Goodnight, and sleep well.”

The meeting was closed by Ralph and he felt everyone was well prepared for Halloween night.

That night, Ralph taped up a few flyers for the 'Halloween Party' marked with a 10:00 p.m. start time. The cheese had been set in the trap. All they needed were the little mice to show up.

Friday was a quiet day. Not one teenager or sign of them anywhere. In the afternoon, although tenants began to notice that each flyer had a little note scribbled in a red marker with the words 'See you there. Beware!'

Ralph turned this information over to Sheriff Andrews and he found it quite encouraging that something *was* going to happen Halloween night.

On Saturday everyone was busy preparing for the party. The smell of delicious foods filled the courtyard. By late afternoon little trick or treaters began walking through the building. The Westwinds was famous for their treats and their decorations. And this year, returning visitors remarked about the spectacular display of the ghosts.

Debra told the boys the good news about the crayons being used at a later date and that they could wear their ghost costumes all evening.

“You rock Mom!” They jumped into their ghost costumes, grabbed some pillow cases, and were off to trick-or-treat at their neighbors.

The trick-or-treaters thinned out about 9:00 p.m., leaving the ghostly gardens eerily quiet and cold. Ralph and the captains for each quadrant were in position and ready on their walkie-talkies.

They waited. And they waited and waited some more.

Every now and then, if you knew the code words, you'd hear "four is on the floor" and "silver eagle to white marshmallow" or "white knight guards the three."

By 10:00 it looked like a real party was going on in the rec room. Those in the field could smell Mrs. Batesole's homemade pizza, Mrs. Jensen's Swedish meatballs, and Mr. Talbot's Irish Potato Soup which everyone in the field really needed a cup of about now. It was a cold Halloween night.

It was 11:00 and Ralph was sure they'd be seeing Sheriff Andrews very soon. It was strange that Deputy Fife hadn't shown up at all.

About 11:15 Ralph became a little concerned. *Where are Sheriff Andrews and Deputy Fife? And where are these kids?* It was a little too quiet for Ralph.

Ralph sent out a call over the radio: "Silver Eagle calling Drum and Fife Corp."

Everyone in the field knew what this meant. Something wasn't right or something was definitely up. Ralph had been given Sheriff Andrews private cell phone number and decided to make a call.

"Deputy Fife here."

"Where are you, Fife?"

"We're at the Eastwinds Apartments and we have the mice. They ate different cheese."

"What?!"

Ralph could hear Sheriff Andrews in the background. "Fife, give me my phone."

In seconds Sheriff Andrews explained that the kids had been caught and they were all on their way over to the Westwinds Apartments. He instructed Ralph to gather everyone into the rec room. He also asked if there was any Swedish Meatballs left.

What? Any Swedish meatballs?! Ralph couldn't believe Sheriff Andrew's nerve—no Operation Ghostbuster after all of this work! This was not going to go over very well with the tenants. Ralph rounded up the field troops and headed over to the rec room. Everyone was quite surprised to see the group of guarding ghosts walk in looking rather disappointed.

“Sheriff Andrews will be here shortly to explain things. It seems law enforcement has done their job. The kids were caught at another building.”

There was an audible gasp from everyone, and then a whole lot of questions.

“I don't have any answers. Simmer down, simmer down now,” said Ralph. “We'll have some answers soon enough.”

People fell into groups and began to quietly whisper and guess about what had happened. Debra refilled the punch bowl while Mrs. Batesole refilled several platters, bowls and checked crock pots. Josh and Jeremy sat together with a big bowl of popcorn watching everything transpire with the happiest little faces ever to be seen on two ghosts. They were up past 10:00 and this was better than anything they'd be doing right now on a Halloween night.

Sheriff Andrews walked in with six teens walking single file, looking like they were headed for *the big house*. Behind them was Deputy Fife looking like he was in trouble, as well. Everyone was instructed to sit down, except for the teens.

Sheriff Andrews stepped forward to address everyone. “This evening at 22:30 (10:30) we caught up with these six young men and women in the back parking lot of the Eastwinds Apartments building down the street. These young people had done some shopping and collected over 12

dozen eggs, 14 pumpkins, several sacks of flour, 3 bottles of olive oil, and numerous cans of whipping cream. They told us they were headed to a friend's house to *make pumpkin pies*.

"Ingredients for pumpkin pies? I don't think so," interrupted Mrs. Batesole.

"Exactly Mrs. Batesole. After several minutes of collecting I.D.s and making phone calls to parents, a couple of them shared about how they were going to make *pumpkin pie* here at the Westwinds Apartments."

There was a bit of silence and quiet murmuring as everyone realized the mess they'd narrowly escaped.

"I advised these young people that I needed to drop by here and that I would allow them to say a few words before their parents picked them up at the station. I explained to them how very fortunate they were to have been caught by Deputy Fife and me. And that *if* they had attempted to *make pumpkin pie* here they would have met up with the likes of a truly brave group of tenants who were not about to let their apartment building be defaced, littered or broken into one more time. I told them these people that are the backbone of this community."

Sheriff Andrews then turned to a young man, "Charles, I believe you wanted to speak first."

A young man stepped forward, unable to look at anyone. "I'm very sorry. Sorry that you might think all teenagers are like me. They're not."

Another young man stepped forward and said, "It was a really dumb thing we were going to do. We're really sorry."

Two girls stepped forward, wiping away tears, embarrassed and said, "Sorry."

Another teen stated, "I'm sorry we scared you and made you feel unsafe in your own homes. The last one to speak was a young girl who actually looked at everyone before she spoke. "I am sorry for the disrespect I have shown people that I don't even know. I disrespect my mom and

dad all the time because they're always telling me what to do. But to disrespect people you don't even know, that have done nothing to you, well that is really messed up. I mean wrong. I hope you will let us come back here and make up for the trouble we've caused you. I can't speak for my friends, but I'd like to come pull weeds or wash windows, tutor some of your kids if you'd even let me near them. I'm sorry."

Everyone was visibly moved by the apologies, especially that last one.

Ralph took a deep breath. He was maybe speaking out of turn, but he just had to keep this moment alive, "When can you start and what's your name?"

"My name is Megan and I can start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Sunday, Megan."

"Tomorrow is a new beginning for me."

"Let's make it 1:00 p.m. then."

Deputy Fife then led the group of teens away. Before he left, Sheriff Andrews said to all of the Westwinds Apartment tenants gathered, "One kid. If we can make a difference in one kid's life, it's worth it. Thank you, and we'll be in touch. Goodnight."

What a night! 'Operation Ghostbuster' was a bust, or was it? Everyone seemed genuinely happy about the outcome and ideas were shared about what they could do with all the ghost costumes for the following year.

"Maybe we can help run a 'Haunted Apartment Building' and raise money for a charity," volunteered a resident.

The Westwinds Halloween party continued on until all the potato soup, Swedish meatballs, pizza, caramel apples, cookies, tarts, brownies, and treats were consumed or carried away.

The next day, at 1:00 p.m., Megan showed up ready to do whatever the Westwinds tenants had for her to do. Two weeks later a couple of other teens joined Megan. Each week they tutor Josh, Jeremy, and a few other kids, and then they pick up their list of work assignments from Ralph Twigger, one of which usually involves a senior citizen needing a little extra help. Ralph always thanks them and reminds the teens of how *giving of yourself to others can give you something back to you*.

Sometimes Megan and her friends stay for dinner, making their rounds to different dining room tables that welcome them with great joy. Likely, that particular tenant has a ghost costume hanging in their closet.

Oh, and Mrs. Batesole taught three of them how to make *real* pumpkin pie, from scratch.

©Melea J. Brock October 10, 2009, debuted at *A Snorey-Night Storynight*