



# Thoughts on History

-Autumn, 2017-

## Happy Halloween!

### Contents:

Pp 1 & 2 The Tale of Stingy Jack

P 2 Goosebumps?

Pp 3 & 4 All-Hallows (from A Good Place)

P 4 Sources & About Helena's Stories



## The Tale of Stingy Jack

*This Irish story is said to go back many centuries and is one of the reasons given for the existence of jack-o-lanterns.*

**STINGY JACK:**  
**NOW HE** was a man who earned his name. Jack knew of only one

thing to do with his money, and that one thing was to buy drink. For himself, that is. He never paid for others' drinks, and often sneaked away without paying for his own. He also was sly at getting others to buy drink for him or even to lend him money he never returned.

One night, Jack ran into the Devil just outside the pub. "Good evening to you," he said, politely removing his cap. "Do you have business with some poor soul here?"

"I have business with your soul, Jack. I will take it with me to Hell." The Devil laid his hand on Jack's arm, saying, "Now, don't give me any trouble. It is useless to resist."

"Aw," said Jack, "I would make no fuss if you would do one thing for me. I would like to have one drink with you,

to toast my future." Even Jack winced at using the word 'toast' in this circumstance.

"Well and good," the Devil agreed, for he liked a drink also, just as he liked toasting.

The Devil and Jack entered the pub, and each had a drink. When it came time to pay, Jack said, "I have no coin—do you?"

"I don't carry money," the Devil said.

"Hmm, well, can you not turn into a coin and then turn again into yourself after I have paid?"

"Easily," said the Devil. He suddenly vanished, leaving a sixpence on the table. Jack snatched it up quick as lightning and put it in his vest pocket with his silver cross. The cross kept the Devil from turning back into his real shape. Jack sneaked away from the pub without paying and with the Devil in his pocket.

As he was walking home, the sixpence started talking to him. "You must let me change back into my own form. You know that. You don't want to anger me." There was a rumble of thunder on the horizon, which caused Jack to stop and think.

"Here is what I'll do," he said, "I'll set you free if you swear to not try to collect my soul for ten more years."

Ten years is much like a minute to the Devil, so he easily agreed. Jack released the coin from his pocket and the Devil took his own form and said, "I will see you in ten years." Then he vanished.

Ten years passed and again Jack came upon the Devil, who said "Your time has come, man. I will take you to Hell now."

(continued next page)

## The Tale of Stingy Jack, cont'd

Jack thought a bit. "Do you see that tall apple tree, over there? I would like to have a bite of one of those very fine apples before I go."

The Devil rather liked Jack, as he felt they had a lot in common, including a fondness for apples. "All right, then." The Devil climbed high up into the tree, looking for a very fine apple to give Jack.

While the Devil was in the branches, Stingy Jack used his knife to carve a cross into the tree's trunk. When the Devil had picked the apple and was ready to come down, the cross blocked him and he could not. He was more amused than angry. "What is it you want, Jack?"

Jack considered. "I want your promise that I will never go to Hell."

Having no choice, the Devil grudgingly agreed, and then vanished.

Not long after, Jack died. His soul climbed to Heaven and knocked on the gate. St. Peter peered out, saying, "What do you want, Jack?"

"Well, I have died, and I want to come in."

St. Peter laughed, "You into Heaven? That will never happen. You have lived a bad life and must go to Hell."

So, Jack walked down to the gate of Hell, but the Devil would not admit him. "A deal is a deal, Jack. Though I would like to, I cannot let you in."

Stingy Jack knew then that he was caught between Heaven and Hell, in a dark and uncertain place. He said to the Devil, "What will I do? I can't even see where I am."

The Devil took pity on him and gave him an everlasting ember from the fires of Hell, which Jack set into a hollowed-out turnip. "Now Jack, you will have to wander forever, but you will have a light to keep you company."

And so, Stingy Jack's spirit wanders through eternity, without any drink to keep him jolly, and carrying a turnip with a flame in it. Some call him Jack-o-lantern.

*For centuries, on All-Hallows Eve, people in Ireland and other parts of Britain have hollowed out a turnip, potato or beet, \* cut a face into it and set in a candle to frighten away evil spirits. They do it because of Stingy Jack. Or anyway, that is one story.*



\*The New World's native pumpkins, hard squashes and gourds also came to be used, and of course pumpkins in particular are widely used for jack-o-lanterns today.



## Goosebumps?

*We all know what goosebumps are. Do you know how they got their name?*

**EXCITEMENT, FEAR, BEING** startled, getting chilled: all

these can literally be hair-raising experiences that produce temporary goosebumps. Halloween is an excellent time for them.

Goosebumps occur when tiny muscles at the base of each hair tighten, causing the skin to bunch up a bit. The reaction is involuntary: we can't control it. It's part of what is called the "fight or flight" response to a perceived threat. We also may get them when we feel cold, presumably to raise our hair, giving it better insulating power.

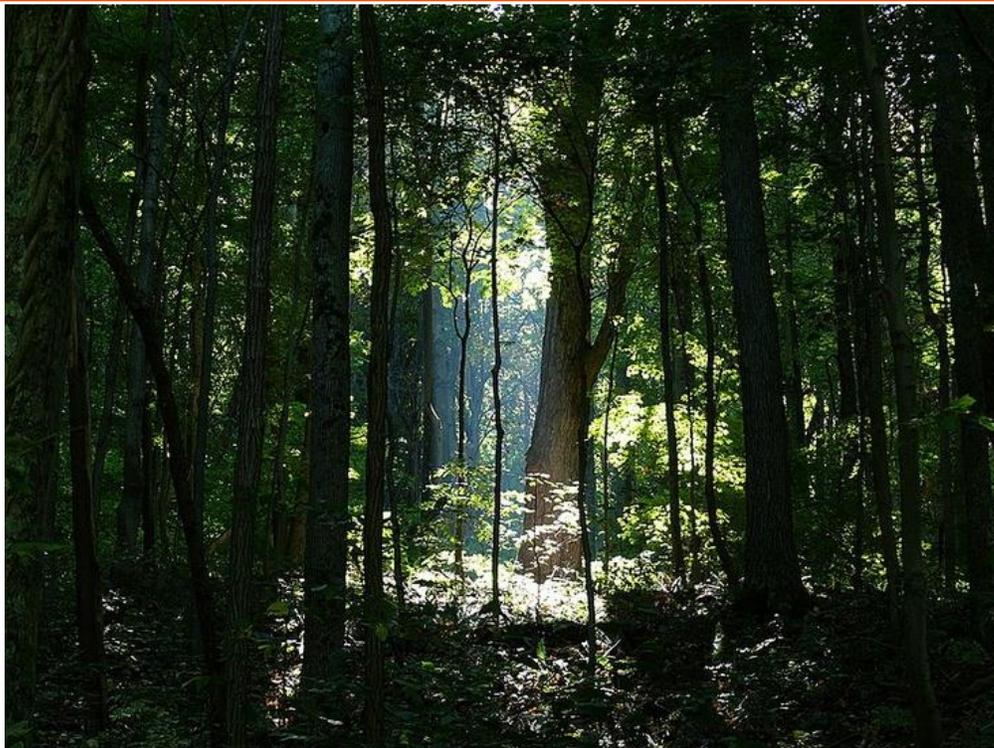
The name "goosebumps" is not hard to figure out. If you look at a raw chicken or turkey (or goose), you'll see bumps on the skin where feathers had been. But... why is it we don't get "chicken bumps," or "turkey bumps," or, generically, "poultry bumps?" Why "goose?"

Geese have been popular livestock in Britain since very early times. They are sturdy, they forage well, can fight off predators and are successful parents. A goose offered the household of the Middle Ages more than just supper: the abundant fat rendered by cooking was the base for homemade poultices and rubs as well as skin-soothing creams and lotions. The feathers were used to fletch arrows. And the rich, moist meat was luxurious in an age when fattening animals for slaughter was expensive and often just was not done. A butchered goose was a source of great benefits.

But, living geese provided another highly prized substance—soft, fluffy down. For centuries, the plentiful down produced by geese the insulator of choice for clothing as well as a soft fill for bedding. And, it is a renewable resource: down could be collected off a living goose as many as five times each year for household use or, even better, to sell. So, a flock of goose waddling around with wide stretches of exposed skin was a common sight.

When a bare-breasted goose feels chilled, up pop—you guessed it—goose bumps. The goose's skin is trying to raise the feathers and down (which happen to be missing at the time) to increase insulation.

So, this Halloween, if you start feeling goose bumps, stop and think a kind thought for geese. They fed and warmed our ancestors and gave a colorful name to a trick our skin sometimes plays on us.



## All Hallows

**Powell's Hundred, Virginia Cittie  
All Hallows Day, November 1, 1621**

**Katherine Burgess Powell**

I LAY IN BED most of last night without falling asleep. John did not have that problem at all: he snored contentedly beside me. In the cradle by the bed, our babe Tomkin slept sweetly, dark lashes resting against his flower-like cheeks. Our mastiff Rufus snored too, on his pallet by the door.

In her alcove, John's daughter Mary was asleep as well. She had retired early, fatigued from the day's work. She had been like a woodland elf all the long day, climbing as high as she could into hickory trees to gather the sweet nuts. She made up little funny songs that she sang to the trees and laughed with me from her golden, leafy perches while I gathered fallen nuts off the ground. Now she slept, but I did not. I lay wide awake—listening too hard, too much, wishing sleep could take away my uneasiness.

Last night was All Hallows Eve, when the spirits of the dead can so easily enter the realm of the living. As a child in England, for me, it was a fearsome but fun time. Here, the Virginia wilderness, dark and mysterious, loomed around us. Death and life felt too closely intertwined in the woods.

For the two years since I had arrived at Jamestown and married John Powell, I have been too aware of the trees. Any night of the year I could feel them almost pressing in on our little

cabin. It was as if the damp mosses, the rotting leaves, the creatures and wild people of the woods all wanted to disrupt our good fields and steal our livestock, even breach our cabin walls to take from us what we labored each day to achieve. Perhaps these huge, ancient trees wanted to push us away from their domain, which I knew continued eternally unbroken to the west.

All Hallows' Eve was the most frightening time. Then, I feared that not only the trees but ghosts, too, strove to take us, to turn us into mossed-over bumps rotting into the soil, becoming part of the woods. At that thought I crawled further under the bedcovers. I sometimes feared that I'd lose my mind living next to the forest.

In England, we used brightness—parties, gaiety, and games—to shield ourselves from fear and danger on All Hallows' Eve. Here, though, except for Jamestown, there were no real towns, no parties, no gaiety. Virginia held only endless trees and the quiet, dark, incomprehensible people, such as the Powhatans, who dwelt among them.

I tried to comfort myself by remembering my parents' house in Tisbury—giggling in bed with my sisters, smelling the tang of leavening as Father started the dough before dawn each day. The town was big enough to support his bakery, and we always were busy. With nearly 300 people, Tisbury was larger than Jamestown, this so-called capital of this so-called colony, and it was surely a safer place. And there, no wild forest pressed in on us. Outside the town were only grassy downs grazed smooth by the sheep.

Why did I come here? Had I known, had I understood what the Virginia wilderness was like, I might not have. I would have found a husband in a town somewhere near my home. I could have had a good life. But, then I would never have known what else the world had to offer and I would always wonder. And I would not have married John, so mature, so steady and unafraid. I was happy to be his wife.

Feeling the warmth of him sleeping by me, I began to relax and at last became drowsy, but then my contentment was rattled when I heard something stirring outside. Though the door was securely closed, and windows shuttered, I drew completely under the bedclothes, closer to John. Was it a ghost or a faerie I heard? I could not help but think of Stingy Jack, dead but never at rest, cursed to walk between worlds, lighting his way with a hellish ember in

**All Hallows, cont'd**

a hollowed turnip. How my sisters and I had loved to scare each other with tales like this one.

The old stories felt less comfortable among these impenetrable woods. It was harder to laugh about ghosts here, although this evening Mary said lightly that perhaps Mr. Evans was Virginia's form of Stingy Jack. Mary is so like her father, practical and unafraid.

I know I am too fearful. If she were still alive and was here, Grandmother would have scolded me. "Katherine, you are not a child any longer. You have a fine husband and a house and baby of your own. What are these foolish thoughts?" She never liked our girlish, silly games. I remembered her frowning over her sewing while she listened to our All Hallows' Eve stories. "My girls, you must keep your minds on life and faith and be happy in what God has given you." Grandmother was so strong and so confident of what is right. But, she lies in the churchyard in Tisbury. She never had wild forests threatening her reason.

Yesterday I had wanted to explain my fears to John, who tries very hard to understand, and is in all ways gentle and kind with me. But, he could not comprehend what I said. "My sweet, All-Hallows' fears mean nothing compared to the horrors people inflict on each other." His eyes darkened, and I knew he was remembering bloody battles in the Lowlands. There, he had fought against Spaniards and Dutchmen alongside his good English companions, many of whom were horribly wounded or killed.

But then last evening, he and Mary started to make a jack-o-

lantern from a hollowed gourd. They said it was for me to give it a face. We had a fine time carving into the gourd a peculiar, twisted expression, which Mary said looked like Mr. Evans. We lit a bit of candle to shine through the cuts, then I told them the tale of Stingy Jack and we laughed. I did not say this, but to me, our laughter seemed small, with little power against the looming trees.

Later when John was nearly asleep he caressed my cheek and smiled. "You must learn to remember your dead with love, Kate, not with fear. That way, they will become memories that help you through life." It made me wonder if he was thinking about Margaret—his first wife, Mary's mother. I hope that someday he will come to love me the way he loved her.

Through the night's darkest hours I pondered until my mind returned to Grandmother. She had loved us, and I knew she would never do us harm—neither living nor as a ghost. John's words, Mary's joy in the hickory trees, and thoughts of Grandmother began to soothe me. I wondered if perhaps the ghosts I feared belonged to a different time and place. Maybe the ghosts of England stayed there. Virginia, the woods, will have their own ghosts, which fit this place. I can learn to understand them and not to fear them.

John, our little Tomkin, and Mary are my family now, and Virginia is my home. Despite my fears, I feel more and more that it is a good place.

Excerpted from *A Good Place*, Vol. 3 of *Helena's Stories*

*A Good Place* is the story of historically documented people: John Powell and Katherine Burgess Powell, John's daughter Mary Powell, and the indentured servant Thomas Prater. They were settlers on the banks of the James River in the early years of the Virginia colony. This is the third volume of *Helena's Stories*, historical narrative about the personal lives of documented people in interesting historical circumstances. *A Good Place* is scheduled for publication early in 2018.

All other characters depicted or mentioned are fictional and not intended to represent actual persons, living or dead. To learn more, please visit my website: <https://carolynowrites.wordpress.com/>  
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