"Hey Carma, you coming tonight?" Stan called before getting on the bus.

"No way!" the black-haired girl called back.
"Chicken!" Stan exclaimed, leaning out of the school bus and making a mock face at Carma. "We wanted our entire class to be represented. Kids are coming over from Bently High and Cedar High. Should be quite an affair. Sure wish you'd change your mind and come."

"No way, Stan," Carma said sweetly as she kept walking down the sidewalk. "I'm 'not with it', as they say, and I honestly have no desire for that kind of thing. I'm completely changed since Jesus saved and sanctified me. 'Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.'"

"I didn't ask for a sermon; just wanted you to come with us tonight. Sure you won't change your mind?"

"Positive, Stan."

"If you do change, call me; I'll be over faster than you can count to ten."

Carma smiled. "Thanks; no change is forth-coming, Stan. My entire life's been changed. The things I once loved I don't care for anymore. It's that simple. I'm new in Christ."

Stan grumbled then took his usual seat on the bus, not sure whether to be angry or pleased with Carma. She, of all the girls in school, could dangle him on the end of her finger, figuratively speaking. He preferred her company to that of any of the girls whom he had ever met or known in all his seventeen years of natural life. They had researched books together in the library for various book reports, gone to school functions together, and had agreed to 'going steady' as per their parents' set of rules of do's and don'ts, cans and can'ts.

Not until three weeks ago, when Carma had gone with Kendra Simms to a revival meeting and came home 'converted' (as she called whatever happened to her) had he realized how much he could miss her company. She had told him at school the following morning that she could no longer date him. It had shocked him to the core of his being.

"You mean we can't go down to Jake's Peppermint Stick for our weekly sundae even?" he had asked, incredulity registering in his voice and on his face.
With a shine on her face like he had never seen before, Carma said sweetly, "That's right, Stan."

"But . . . but why?" he remembered having asked. "Why? Haven't I been a perfect gentleman around you? Always; not just occasionally?"

He remembered the sad look in her eyes; the softness of her answer. "Yes, Stan," she replied, while tears shimmered in her morning-glory-blue eyes. "Yes you have been a real gentleman, and I have always enjoyed being with you. We've had a 'bushel' of pleasant memories . . . ."

"Then why? What's changed? I . . . I . . . mean . . . well, I can't understand it, Carma. You and I get along perfectly; we . . . we're compatible."

With a candid look came her equally-candid reply, "You're not a Christian, Stan. Until you become born again . . . really born again, not for me, but for your own soul's sake . . . I must break off with you. This morning while praying, the Holy Spirit made this plain and clear to me. I love the Lord, Stan, and I want to obey everything He tells me to do and not to do."

"So this is how it stands?" the boy had asked.

"Yes. This is how things stand. I'll be praying for . . . you."

"Hey there, stop mooning!" Gary Sales shouted to Stan from the back of the bus. "This isn't the end of the world for you. Find another girl and go on like nothing ever happened," he added, coming up to Stan's seat and sliding in beside him.

"I can't believe this is real! " Stan exclaimed, shaking his head in utter disbelief. "What's wrong with going to a haunted house and a big Halloween party afterwards?"

"That's Carma, Pal. I guess most of us respect her too much to say anything too derogatory about her. But since she's as adamant as a marble slab, why not pick Wendy Allister up. She's a sweet kid, and she's been wild about you. You know that."

"I'm not interested in Wendy, Gary, and you know it. Carma's my girl."
"Not anymore." Gary reminded his friend as kindly as he knew how. Turning and looking Stan full in the face, he asked, "Do you suppose she found another fellow over at that church where she's been going with Kendra?"

Stan sat on the edge of his seat. In quick defense of Carma he said, "No! everything hinges on that 'converted' experience she says she got. And I'll have to admit that she's different. She's always been a good girl; nobody can ever say anything different. But since this . . . this 'experience,' she looks like she has a bright light turned on inside of her that shines out through her. What do you think of it, Gary? Ever see anything like it, or know anyone who got this 'converted' experience?"

Gary shuffled his feet nervously. He cleared his throat several times. Then he spoke. "My grandma's got it, Stan," he admitted quietly, "and she's the most wonderful person on earth. Why, she prayed for me when I nearly died with pneumonia years ago, and God touched me instantly. It was a miracle. The doctor admitted it too. Maybe it's because I've seen what a beautiful change getting converted makes in a person's life that's kept me from making nasty remarks about Carma, like some others have done. My grandmother's got something real," Gary admitted with a far-away look in his eyes.

Almost immediately, Stan asked, "Would she go to a haunted house, do you think, Gary? I mean, well, I know she perhaps isn't thinking about things like Halloween parties and haunted houses at her age, but do you suppose she'd go if she were young again, like Carma?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Gary answered, "Gram go to such a thing? Absolutely not! Like I said, she's got something real. And know what Stan? I've never seen Gram fluctuate or change; she's always the same. "

Stan sighed. "Thanks Gary," he said. "Thanks much. You've helped clear my brain of the clogged up mess of mental cobwebs hiding there for the past three weeks. Frankly, I've wondered if Carma was losing her mind, or just what was happening. But I guess she isn't; not if your grandmother's still normal."
Gary threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Gram normal? Oh, Stan, you've never seen a more normal person that she! Brilliant. Smart. Alert. Spiritual. Spirit filled. And Super! That's my Gram! Well, I'll see you tonight," he said, hurrying back to where he left his books. "And give Wendy a thought, will you? She's OK."

Stan didn't promise; truth is, he didn't say anything. He just sat there, perplexed but relieved. Perplexed, because he couldn't understand this new Carma; relieved, to know she wasn't losing her mind. At least Gary's grandparent hadn't lost her mind.

He did his usual share of after-school work around the house then waited for the hour when he would meet his classmates at Charlie Bowers' place and they would go as a class to the pre-planned special for the evening.

For some reason, Stan couldn't get as enthusiastic as he had thought he'd be. What Gary had told him niggled the back of his brain fiercely and relentlessly. Maybe Carma and Gary's Gram were right; maybe he shouldn't be a part of the night's goings-on. But he wasn't converted, he reasoned, so why not? A lot of the religious kids were going; all of the religious ones but Carma.

The hands of the clock stretched slowly toward the hour of seven and Stan, telling his folks goodbye and that he'd be home by curfew time . . . eleven o'clock . . . hurried outside.

The night was nippy-cold with frost in the air. A full moon rode lazily across a cloudless, star-scudded sky. What a night; Stan thought, as he headed his trusty old Chevy down the road toward Charlie's house.

He pulled into the lane that led to Charlie's place and saw that the farm yard was full of cars. Everybody was there, he thought, seeing his classmates milling around outside and seeming to be having the time of their life.

He parked his Chevy beside the equally old one of Parke Ramey then, caught up in the spirit of his peers, he joined the crowd.
Gary came toward him with a mug in his hand. "A toast to you, my friend," he said, handing Stan the cider and clinking his own mug against the side of Stan's in mock banter.

"It isn't 'hard', I hope!" Stan exclaimed, searching Gary's face for the answer.

"Try it; you'll like it, Stan. This was fresh-pressed . . . today, Charlie said. His dad did it as a special favor for us. Great, huh?"

"Say, this is good!" Stan declared, sipping the delicious, sweet apple juice.

"There's another barrel over there," Gary said, pointing in the direction intended. "Charlie says that's for the 'graduates'."

"Graduates? What does he mean by that? We're going to be the next to graduate, come June."

Gary laughed. "Your guess is as good as mine. As for me, I'm sticking with this sweet, fresh-pressed juice. Watching some of the group, I think I may know what Charlie meant; they've been 'hitting' that barrel too often to make me feel comfortable. For one thing, I'm glad Rusty's not driving the old bus tonight: He's on his fourth mug from that barrel."

"Does Mr. Bowers know they . . . they're drinking that?"

"I'm sure he does; he's the one who told them that was only for the 'graduates'. It's his idea of a treat for those who find the sweet juice too 'mild', I'm sure," Gary said with a hint of disgust in his voice.

Stan felt shocked. Maybe Carma was right about not coming, after all, he thought, watching as Mr. Bowers backed the old school bus out of the barn and honked for them to pile in.

The bus wound around the mountain's side, up and down twisting, narrow roads and across narrow bridges, stopping, finally near an abandoned barn in a dark woods.
"I wondered where it was," Stan said to Gary speaking of the haunted house.

"I did too. So did everyone else. Fact of the matter is, I'm not sure I know where we are. This was Mr. Bowers' idea. He told Charlie it was a secret. He and some of his friends fixed the place up. Only it's not a house, like we thought; it's a barn. Well, we may as well go in, everybody else is. Even the kids from the other high schools. Mr. Bowers must know those other bus drivers; he's talking to them. Come on."

Eerie, weird, blood-curdling sounds and screams greeted the young people as they neared the deserted barn. Girls screamed, boys bellowed with raucous laughter. Lurid flashes of light penetrated the cracks of the barn and strangely-frightening whirring sounds filled the air, shattered, intermittently, by what sounded like the roaring-rumbling of thunder.

"I'm not going in there!" several girls screamed.

"Chicken!" chorused a host of voices. "Chicken!"

Stan felt indignation rise up within him. He wouldn't want Carma in there, he decided quickly. "Look," he said in a loud voice, "let them call you chicken, whomever you are that didn't want to go inside. Don't go if you don't want to. Some of us won't look down on you for being afraid."

"Who says?" came from several strange voices in the crowd.

"One of those girls is my girl, and she's going," another unfamiliar voice declared positively.

"You're certainly not being a gentleman," Stan declared vehemently.

"Gentleman! Ho, ho, ho! That's a joke! Who is a gentleman these days? That was for the dark ages."

"Stop it! Stop it! " Mr. Bowers shouted with authority. "Now, everybody line up and start through . . . the door," he ordered as he moved among the young people.
The heavy door moaned and creaked and groaned as they started through it. By the lurid flashes of light, Stan saw the likenesses of vicious looking flying bats and evil looking, grinning, black-garbed witches riding on broomsticks barely over his head, their devilish sounding cackle-laughter filling the cavity of the barn with a weirdly-wild echo. Screams, such as he had never heard, broke out from every side around him. Long, claw-like fingers reached out after him, grabbing his legs and going over his body. Something icy-cold and slimy slapped his face. Suddenly, he felt sick and disgusted with it all. It . . . it was almost, if not entirely, devilish and . . . and immoral, he thought, recalling the claw-like hands that grabbed his legs and went over his body. Something rose up inside him as he thought of the claw-like hands going over the girls. "Why, the dirty brute! " he exclaimed aloud. "The dirty, vile brute!"

"You say something?" Gary asked from behind.

"I sure did!" Stan exclaimed. "The sooner I can get out of this place the happier I'll be," he shouted above the screeching noises and thunderous crashings. "I wouldn't want Carma here; not for anything. There's a dirty brute of a man here whom I'd like to tell a thing or two."

"I know what you mean," Gary answered. "Stan," he said quickly, "wouldn't it be horrible to go to hell and spend eternity with . . . with a bunch of people like that?"

"I'd sure like to get my hands on that man, I know that. This is no place for a girl," Stan repeated.

"Maybe it's no place for us to be found, either," Gary added. "I know my Gram would be against it. She says Halloween is a pagan thing; that no real Christian would even so much as think of going to a Halloween party."

"I'm beginning to believe your Grandmother and Carma are right, Gary. At least Carma has peace on the inside. Right now, I have anything but peace; that claw-like 'handler' has me so mad I'm boiling. The idea! I know one thing, I'm not going to the Halloween party. As soon as we're off the bus, I'm leaving."

"I decided I'd do the same thing," Gary confided. "I don't feel comfortable with this crowd. Maybe it's Gram's prayers reaching through to
me after all these years. You know, Stan, you may see another converted person soon: Me. I sure want to go to Heaven when I die."

"Don't we all!"

"But only those who are converted . . . born again . . . can go there, Stan. I know; the Bible says so. I've been living a sad life," Gary confessed. "I'm not happy with this crowd . . . the worldly ones . . . and I'm not at ease around the Christians. It's a sad and lonely way of life. Seeing Carma, and the shine on her face and the look of peace written all over her, well, I'm going to change my way of living. I'm going to get saved. I called Gram today and told her I was driving to see her tomorrow, that I had some serious business I wanted her to help me with."

Tears flooded Stan's eyes. "Do you suppose . . . I mean, well, may I go with you, Gary? I need help too. .

"May you go with me! I'd be the happiest fellow in . . . the valley. And Gram's joy will spill over, sure enough."

"Then it's settled; I'll go, God willing. I feel I'm not far from knowing what real joy and peace is. It's certainly not found in this . . . this house of horror and wickedness. I'm ready to yield all there is of me over to Christ, Gary. I've been miserable for weeks. So miserable and . . . and wretched."

"That's a good sign, Gram says; a sign that you're under conviction and feel your need of a Saviour. Won't it be wonderful to have three born again Christians in class instead of only one, Stan? Just think what God can do with three of us . . . praying and witnessing for Him!" Gary added quickly.

"I only wish tonight were tomorrow," Stan replied. "I can hardly wait to get rid of my load of sin." A sudden thought struck him then Why wait for tomorrow? He would go home as soon as he could and pray tonight! He didn't know much about praying, but Carma had told him that, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." He would call upon God. Tonight!

The weird, wild noises shrieked and moaned around him; girls screamed blood curdling screams; someone yelled that someone fainted.
Still the crowd moved on, out of one chamber of darkness into another, one horror pit into successive horror pits.

Suddenly Stan realized why Carma wouldn't come: She was a child of God and God was light; this was all of Satan and of darkness. One could feel the very powers of darkness in the barn. Man-made and man-rigged contrivances and contraptions made the noises and the blood-tingling sounds, to be sure, but the power of Satan was not man-made or contrived; it was real, and it flooded every niche and cranny and corner of the place.

"Your Gram was right, Gary," Stan declared above the thunderous crashes. "This is paganism. One can feel the powers of darkness. This is my last time ever to participate in anything connected with Halloween."

Gary said a hearty Amen.