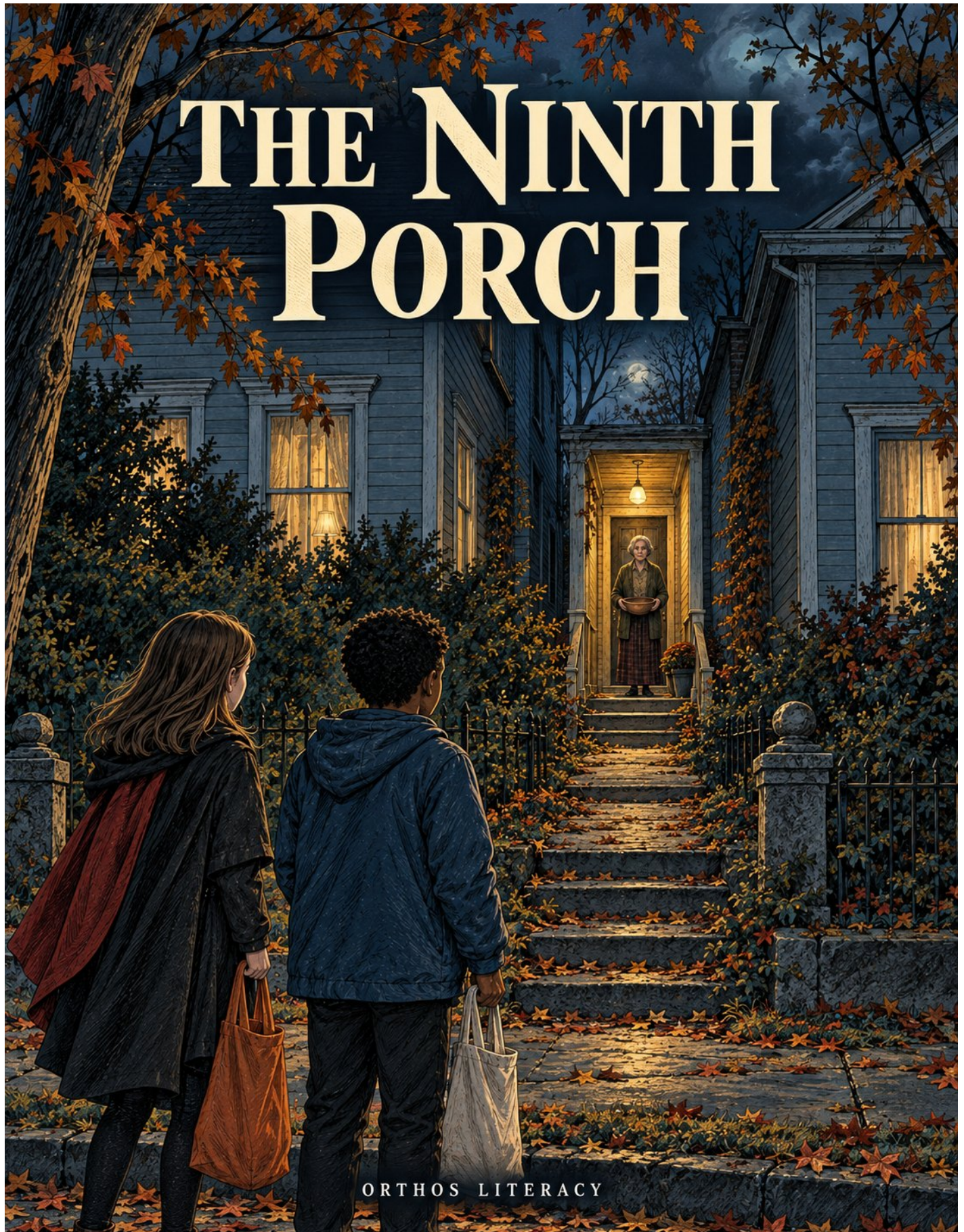


THE NINTH PORCH



ORTHOS LITERACY

This page is blank on purpose, so each part prints on its own sheet.

How the paired stories work

A short Halloween story for students in grades 5–9 who read below grade level. The story is written twice. **Version A** is easier. **Version B** is richer. Same plot, same names, same ending. Give each student the version they can read, then discuss it together: the questions work for both versions.

Story	Version A	Version B
The Ninth Porch	1,511 words · about grade 3	1,651 words · about grade 5

Reading level is an estimate from standard readability formulas (Flesch-Kincaid and Coleman-Liau). It is not an official Lexile measure. The story takes about 10–15 minutes to read.

One class period

- 1 Before reading.** Ask the Think first question and go over the six words. Both versions use all six.
- 2 Read.** Students read their version on their own or with a partner. Read Version A aloud to a small group if needed.
- 3 Story map.** Students fill in the story map. It is an easy way in and a quick check that they followed the plot.
- 4 Questions.** Questions 1 and 2 are right-there questions, so every student gets a start. Each question shows which paragraphs to look back at in Version A and Version B (the numbers are in the story margins) and starts the answer with a sentence starter.
- 5 Talk and write.** Mixed groups talk it through, then each student writes a short response. The answer key is right after this page.

Printing. Print two-sided. Each part starts on its own sheet, so you can print just the part you need: this page and the answer key pages 3–4, Version B pages 5–9, Version A pages 11–15, student pages 17–22.

A note on scary stories. This story is creepy, not gory. Nobody is hurt, and the ending stays a mystery on purpose. If a student is upset by scary stories, preview the story first or offer a different text.

The Ninth Porch

Sample answers. Accept any answer the story supports. Paragraph numbers are given as A / B.

Story map

Who: Ruby Chen and Marcus Bell, two thirteen-year-old friends, and an old woman with a glass bowl.

Where and when: On Orchard Lane and Pruitt Street, then at Ruby's house, on Halloween night.

First strange thing: Ruby counts nine porch lights, but Orchard Lane has only eight porches.

Stranger: The extra house is not in Marcus's photo, and then it shows up on Pruitt Street with copies of all their treats.

They decide: They leave their candy bags on the sidewalk and run home.

Ending: A yellow porch light comes on across from Ruby's window, and she pulls down the blind.

Questions

- 1 He eats half of it (B: "one finger"), folds the wrapper over the rest, and puts it in his hoodie pocket for later (A 9 / B 8).
- 2 She says no. She says it is just their (recycling) bins: "That's just our bins" (A 14 / B 13).
- 3 Accept any two supported details: they start at Ruby's house, where her mom gives out candy from a big metal mixing bowl; they must be home by 8:30; they take the same route (two blocks south on Bayard, left onto Orchard, back home on Pruitt); Marcus sleeps over and they trade candy until midnight (A 2-3 / B 2); they carry the same bags, hers orange and his white (A 4 / B 3); Ruby counts the porch lights at the corner (A 5: "as always" / B 4: "out of habit").
- 4 Accept any answer the story supports. They cannot tell which candy is really theirs, because everything in the bowl matches their bags ("Which one is ours?" A 41 / B 37). They do not want to take anything from the woman ("We're not taking anything" A 40 / B 36). They may be scared and want to give her what she seems to want so they can get away. The candy no longer feels safe to keep.
- 5 a. Eight (A 45 / B 41). b. At the start there were nine lights but only eight porches (A 3, 5-8 / B 2, 4-7), so one light was extra. At the end there are eight, so the extra light is gone from Orchard Lane. It was gone after the porch showed up on Pruitt Street (A 31-32 / B 29-30). The story does not explain how. Accept any answer the story supports.
- 6 Accept any supported idea; the story does not explain it. Possible ideas: the woman has been watching or copying their whole night, house by house; she knows them very well (the name stickers, the half Kit Kat with the same fold, A 36-37 / B 33); she wants them to take from her bowl, the way everyone on Orchard Lane holds out a bowl (A 39 / B 35); taking something might be a trade or a trap. Good answers use clues such as the exact matches and "Nothing in their bags was missing" (A 38 / B 34).
- 7 Accept any supported answer. The list lets readers check the bowl later and see that every treat matches (A 35 / B 32, compared with A 9-12, 25 / B 8-11, 24). It shows how normal and safe the routine feels, so the strange house stands out. Tiny details like the folded wrapper and the sticker letters (A: "tall letters that leaned to the right" / B: "tall, slanted capitals") make the copy creepier because they are exact.
- 8 Accept any two different ideas with a clue each. Possible ideas: the house has followed them home; it can appear wherever they are; the woman is still waiting for them to take something; leaving their bags did not end it; it may be waiting for someone to come out and stand under the light. Good clues: the strip of grass is too small for a house (A 52: "too thin" / B 47: "too narrow"), and Ruby pulls the blind down before she can see (A 54 / B 49).

The Ninth Porch



- 1 Every Halloween since second grade, Ruby Chen and Marcus Bell had trick-or-treated on Orchard Lane, and every year they did it exactly the same way.
- 2 They started at Ruby's house on Bayard Avenue, where her mom handed out candy from a big metal mixing bowl and reminded them to be home by 8:30. They walked two blocks south along Bayard, past the CVS and the bus shelter, and turned left onto Orchard Lane. Orchard was one long block with houses on only one side. The other side was the chain-link fence of the middle school ball field, so the whole street was a neat row of eight front porches, numbered 11 through 25. At the far end, Orchard met Pruitt Street, a quiet road under big oak trees, and Pruitt led them back to the footpath behind Ruby's garage. Then Marcus slept over, and they dumped everything on Ruby's bedroom floor and traded until midnight.
- 3 They were thirteen now, which was probably too old. Marcus was wearing his blue hoodie with his dad's old referee whistle around his neck, and Ruby had on a black vampire cape with a red lining. They carried the same canvas tote bags they had used for years, hers orange and his white. Neither of them said that this might be the last year, but they both walked a little slower than usual.
- 4 At the corner of Bayard and Orchard, Ruby stopped and counted the porch lights out of habit. From there you could see the whole block.
- 5 "Nine," she said.
- 6 Marcus squinted down the street. "Somebody left a garage light on."
- 7 "Maybe." She counted again and got nine again.

- 8 They started at number 11. Mrs. Alvarez still gave out full-size Snickers bars, because she said Halloween was no time to be cheap. At 13, Mr. Henderson opened the door in the same plastic vampire teeth he had worn for six years and dropped two Kit Kats into each of their bags. Marcus ate one finger of a Kit Kat on the way to the next house, folded the wrapper neatly over the other finger, and shoved it into his hoodie pocket for later.
- 9 Ruby had been looking for the ninth light since number 11.
- 10 At 15, Mrs. Ostrowski had her homemade popcorn balls, wrapped in orange plastic and tied with black ribbon. She wrote a name on a sticker for every kid she knew, and she had known Ruby and Marcus since they were babies. RUBY, said Ruby's sticker, in Mrs. Ostrowski's tall, slanted capitals. MARCUS, said his.
- 11 At 17, Mrs. Pham gave them each two packs of Skittles. Over the hedge to the right of the porch, Ruby could see the extra light. It was right where the Phams' driveway was. The driveway was barely wide enough for one car, and it held nothing but the two blue recycling bins the Phams always kept there.
- 12 "Mrs. Pham," Ruby said, "did somebody build something next to your house?"
- 13 Mrs. Pham leaned out the door and looked right at it. "Next to us? No, honey. That's just our bins." She smiled and closed the door.
- 14 Ruby and Marcus walked down her path to the sidewalk, and then they were standing in front of it.
- 15 It was a house, or the front of one. It was narrow, no wider than the driveway should have been, with gray siding and a single dark window. Three wooden steps led up to a small porch. Above the door, one bare yellow bulb was burning, the kind of bug light people put on back porches. There were no pumpkins, no fake cobwebs, and no house number.
- 16 An old woman stood on the top step. She was small and very straight, with white hair pinned up and a long brown cardigan buttoned to her throat. She was holding a wide glass bowl in both hands, and the bowl was empty.
- 17 She didn't wave or call them over. She just looked at them, patiently, the way a person waits for a bus.
- 18 A dad came up the sidewalk behind them with two little kids in dinosaur costumes, and the kids marched right past the bottom of the steps without turning their heads, the way

you would walk past a mailbox or a fire hydrant. Their dad was reading something on his phone. None of them looked up at the light.

- 19 "It's fake," Marcus said under his breath. "Like a haunted house thing. People build those fronts out of plywood."
- 20 It did not look like plywood. Ruby could see the grain in the steps and a thin crack across the window glass. She could not see the Phams' bins anywhere.
- 21 The bowl was empty, and the woman had not asked them to come up, so there was no reason to go up. Ruby did what her mom had always told her to do at a house that was out of candy.
- 22 "Happy Halloween," she said, with a small wave.
- 23 The woman didn't answer. Her eyes followed them as they walked on.
- 24 At 19, the Greens gave out Tootsie Pops. At 21, Dr. Reyes, who was a dentist, handed out orange toothbrushes, as he did every single year, and Marcus groaned about it, as he did every single year. At 23, the Baptistes had Reese's cups. At 25, Mr. Abernathy dropped a Milky Way and a green glow stick into each bag. Ruby said thank you at every door, but she kept looking back. The yellow light stayed between the Phams' house and the Greens', small and steady.
- 25 On Mr. Abernathy's steps, Marcus held up his phone and took a picture back down the block. He zoomed in and stopped walking.
- 26 In the photo, the Phams' porch light was on, and the Greens' porch light was on. Between them was a strip of dark driveway and two blue recycling bins.
- 27 "Okay," Marcus said quietly. "Okay. That's weird."
- 28 They walked to the corner of Orchard and Pruitt with their heads bent over the screen, zooming in and out as if the house might be hiding in the pixels. Ruby's phone said 7:26. Under the corner streetlight, she looked up.
- 29 The porch was in front of them.
- 30 It stood on Pruitt Street, just past the corner, squeezed between the garage on the corner and the house with the bent basketball hoop, where there had only ever been a side yard. Gray siding, one dark window, three wooden steps. The same yellow bulb. The old woman

stood on the bottom step now, so close to the sidewalk that Ruby could have reached out and touched the bowl. Up close, her cardigan had small pearly buttons, and her hands were perfectly steady.

31 The bowl was full.

32 The woman tilted it toward them, gently, so they could see. Ruby saw two full-size Snickers bars and three Kit Kats. She saw four packs of Skittles, two Tootsie Pops, two orange toothbrushes, two Reese's cups, two Milky Ways and two green glow sticks. She saw two popcorn balls in orange plastic, tied with black ribbon, and the stickers said RUBY and MARCUS in tall, slanted capitals. On top lay a single Kit Kat finger with its wrapper folded neatly over it.

33 Marcus reached into his hoodie pocket and took out his half Kit Kat. The fold was exactly the same. Ruby opened her bag and pushed the candy aside until she found her popcorn ball. RUBY, said the sticker. She looked at the bowl. RUBY, said the other one.

34 Nothing in their bags was missing. Everything was simply in two places at once.

35 The woman didn't speak. She just held out the bowl, the way Mrs. Alvarez and Mr. Henderson and everyone else on Orchard Lane held out their bowls, and waited.

36 "We're not taking anything," Ruby said. Her voice came out smaller than she meant it to.

37 Marcus looked from the bowl to his bag and back. "Which one is ours?" he said.

38 Nobody answered.

39 Marcus set his bag down on the sidewalk and placed the half Kit Kat on top of it. Ruby set hers beside it. Then they stepped backward, one step and then another, until they were out of the yellow light.

40 The way home was up Pruitt, past the porch and under the dark oaks. Neither of them suggested it. They turned around and walked back up Orchard Lane, fast, and then they were running. Marcus's whistle bounced against his chest. Ruby's cape came unclipped somewhere near number 21, and she did not go back for it.

41 As they passed number 17, Ruby looked. There was the Phams' hedge, the narrow driveway, and two blue recycling bins. Nothing else. She counted the porch lights as she ran. Eight.

- 42 They came out onto Bayard Avenue, where the streetlights were bright and a bus sighed at the stop and a family of pirates waited for the walk signal in front of the CVS. They ran the two blocks home along the main road, where there were people and cars and nowhere dark for anything to stand.
- 43 Ruby's mom was at the front door with the mixing bowl. "You're early," she said, and then, "Where's your candy?"
- 44 "We left it," Ruby said.
- 45 Her mom studied their faces for a second, and whatever she saw there made her hold out the mixing bowl. "Take some of these, then."
- 46 They each took two. Ruby checked the wrappers first.
- 47 Upstairs, Marcus sat on the floor of Ruby's room with his back against the bed and his whistle in his fist. Ruby went to the window to pull down the blind. Her room faced Bayard Avenue, and she had looked at the same view every night of her life: a white house and a brick house across the street, and between them a strip of grass too narrow for anything but a garden hose.
- 48 A yellow porch light switched on between them.
- 49 Ruby pulled the blind down before she could see whether anyone came out to stand under it.

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The Ninth Porch



- 1 Since second grade, Ruby Chen and Marcus Bell had gone trick-or-treating on Orchard Lane. They did it the same way every year.
- 2 They started at Ruby's house on Bayard Avenue. Her mom gave out candy from a big metal mixing bowl. She told them to be home by 8:30. They walked two blocks south on Bayard, past the CVS and the bus stop. Then they turned left onto Orchard.
- 3 Orchard was one long block, with houses on just one side. The other side was the fence of the middle school ball field. So the street was a row of eight front porches, number 11 to 25. At the end, Orchard met Pruitt Street. It was a quiet road under big oak trees. Pruitt led them back to the path behind Ruby's garage. Then Marcus slept over. They dumped their candy on Ruby's floor and traded until midnight.
- 4 They were thirteen now, which was probably too old. Marcus wore his blue hoodie and his dad's old whistle. Ruby wore a black vampire cape with a red inside. They carried the same cloth bags as every year. Hers was orange, and his was white. Maybe this was the last year. Neither of them said it, but they both walked a little slower.
- 5 From the corner of Bayard and Orchard, you could see the whole block. Ruby stopped and counted the porch lights, as always.
- 6 "Nine," she said.

- 7 Marcus looked hard down the street. "Someone left a garage light on."
- 8 "Maybe." She counted again and got nine again.
- 9 They started at number 11. Mrs. Alvarez still gave out full-size Snickers bars. She said Halloween was no time to be cheap. At 13, Mr. Henderson wore the same plastic vampire teeth he had worn for six years. He dropped two Kit Kats in each of their bags. On the way to the next house, Marcus ate half of a Kit Kat. He folded the wrapper over the other half. He put it in his hoodie pocket for later.
- 10 Ruby had been looking for the ninth light since number 11.
- 11 At 15, Mrs. Ostrowski had her homemade popcorn balls, wrapped in orange plastic and tied with black ribbon. She wrote a name on a sticker for every kid she knew. She had known Ruby and Marcus since they were babies. Ruby's sticker said RUBY, in tall letters that leaned to the right. Marcus's said MARCUS.
- 12 At 17, Mrs. Pham gave them each two packs of Skittles. Over the hedge to the right of the porch, Ruby could see the extra light. It was right where the Phams' driveway was. The driveway only had room for one car. It held the two blue recycling bins the Phams always kept there, and nothing else.
- 13 "Mrs. Pham," Ruby said, "did someone build something next to your house?"
- 14 Mrs. Pham leaned out the door and looked right at it. "Next to us? No, honey. That's just our bins." She smiled and shut the door.
- 15 They walked down her path, and then they were standing in front of it.
- 16 It was a house, or the front of one. It was no wider than the driveway, with gray siding and one dark window. Three wooden steps led up to a small porch. Over the door was one bare yellow bulb, like a back-porch bug light. There were no pumpkins, no fake cobwebs and no house number.
- 17 An old woman stood on the top step. She was small and very straight. Her white hair was pinned up. Her long brown sweater was buttoned to her neck. She held a wide glass bowl in both hands. The bowl was empty.
- 18 She did not wave or call them over. She just waited, the way you wait for a bus.

- 19 A dad came up the sidewalk with two little kids in dinosaur costumes. The kids walked past the steps without looking, as if it was a mailbox. The dad was reading his phone. None of them looked up at the light.
- 20 "It's fake," Marcus said quietly. "Like a haunted house thing. People make those out of wood boards."
- 21 It did not look fake. Ruby could see lines in the wood of the steps. She could see a thin crack in the window. But she could not see the Phams' bins.
- 22 The bowl was empty, and the woman had not asked them up. There was no reason to go. Ruby did what her mom taught her to do at a house with no candy.
- 23 "Happy Halloween," she said, with a small wave.
- 24 The woman did not answer. Her eyes followed them as they walked on.
- 25 At 19, the Greens gave out Tootsie Pops. At 21, Dr. Reyes gave out orange toothbrushes. He was a dentist, and Marcus groaned about it every year. At 23, the Baptistes had Reese's cups. At 25, Mr. Abernathy gave them each a Milky Way and a green glow stick.
- 26 Ruby said thank you at every door, but she kept looking back. Behind them, the yellow light stayed between the Phams' and the Greens'. It was small and steady.
- 27 On Mr. Abernathy's steps, Marcus took a picture back down the block. He zoomed in and stopped walking.
- 28 In the picture, the Phams' and the Greens' porch lights were on. Between them was a dark strip of driveway and two blue recycling bins.
- 29 "Okay," Marcus said softly. "Okay. That's weird."
- 30 They walked to the corner of Orchard and Pruitt, looking down at the phone. They zoomed in and out, as if the house might be hiding there. Ruby's phone said 7:26. Under the corner streetlight, she looked up.
- 31 The porch was in front of them.

- 32 It was just past the corner on Pruitt. It sat between the garage on the corner and the house with the bent basketball hoop. That had always been a side yard. Gray siding. One dark window. Three wooden steps. The same yellow bulb.
- 33 The old woman was on the bottom step now. She was so close that Ruby could have touched the bowl. Up close, her sweater had small, shiny white buttons. Her hands were very still.
- 34 The bowl was full.
- 35 The woman tipped it toward them so they could see. Ruby saw two full-size Snickers bars and three Kit Kats. She saw four packs of Skittles and two Tootsie Pops. She saw two Reese's cups and two Milky Ways. She saw two orange toothbrushes and two green glow sticks. She saw two popcorn balls in orange plastic, tied with black ribbon. The stickers said RUBY and MARCUS, in the same tall, leaning letters. On top was half of a Kit Kat. The wrapper was folded over it.
- 36 Marcus took his half Kit Kat out of his pocket. The fold was exactly the same.
- 37 Ruby dug in her bag for her popcorn ball. The sticker said RUBY. She looked at the bowl. That sticker said RUBY too.
- 38 Nothing in their bags was missing. Every piece was in two places at once.
- 39 The woman did not speak. She just held out the bowl, the way everyone on Orchard Lane did, and waited.
- 40 "We're not taking anything," Ruby said. Her voice came out small.
- 41 Marcus looked from the bowl to his bag and back. "Which one is ours?" he said.
- 42 Nobody answered.
- 43 Marcus set his bag down on the sidewalk. He put the half Kit Kat on top of it. Ruby set her bag next to his. Then they stepped back, step by step, out of the yellow light.
- 44 The way home was up Pruitt, past the porch and under the dark oaks. Neither of them wanted to go that way. They turned around and walked back up Orchard

Lane, fast. Then they were running. Marcus's whistle bounced on his chest. Ruby's cape came off near number 21. She did not go back for it.

- 45 As they passed number 17, Ruby looked. She saw the Phams' hedge, the thin driveway and two blue bins. Nothing else. She counted the porch lights as she ran. Eight.
- 46 On Bayard Avenue, the streetlights were bright. A bus sighed at the stop. A family of pirates waited to cross in front of the CVS. They ran the two blocks home on the main road. There were people and cars there, and no dark places.
- 47 Ruby's mom was at the door with the mixing bowl. "You're early," she said. "Where's your candy?"
- 48 "We left it," Ruby said.
- 49 Her mom looked at their faces for a second. Whatever she saw made her hold out the bowl. "Take some of these, then."
- 50 They each took two. Ruby checked the wrappers first.
- 51 Upstairs, Marcus sat on Ruby's floor with his back against the bed. His whistle was in his fist. Ruby went to pull down the blind.
- 52 Her window faced Bayard Avenue. She had seen the same view every night of her life. Across the street were a white house and a brick house. Between them was a strip of grass too thin for anything but a garden hose.
- 53 A yellow porch light came on between them.
- 54 Ruby pulled the blind down before she could see if anyone came out to stand under it.

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Words to know

Name _____

Date _____

Think first. Do you have a tradition you do the same way every year? What is it?

wrapper

the paper or plastic cover around a piece of candy

My sentence: _____

hedge

a row of bushes planted close together, like a wall

My sentence: _____

siding

boards that cover the outside walls of a house

My sentence: _____

bulb

the glass part of a lamp that lights up

My sentence: _____

steady

staying the same, without moving or changing

My sentence: _____

blind

a cover you pull down over a window

My sentence: _____

Story map

Name _____

Date _____

Fill this in after you read. Look back at the story: the small numbers in the margin are paragraph numbers.

1 Who is in the story?

2 Where and when does it happen?

3 What is the first strange thing?

4 What makes it stranger?

5 What do the characters decide to do?

6 How does the story end?

Questions

Name _____

Date _____

1 What does Marcus do with his Kit Kat on the way to the next house?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 9 Version B 8

Marcus ____.

2 Ruby asks Mrs. Pham if someone built something next to her house. What does Mrs. Pham say?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 13–14 Version B 12–13

Mrs. Pham says ____.

3 Ruby and Marcus do Halloween the same way every year. What do they always do?

- a. Give one thing they do every year.
- b. Give a second thing they do every year.

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 1–5 Version B 1–4

Every year they _____. They also _____.

4 Why do Ruby and Marcus set their candy bags down on the sidewalk and walk away?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 38–43 Version B 34–39

They leave their bags because _____.

Questions (continued)

Name _____

Date _____

5 At the start, Ruby counts nine porch lights. Orchard Lane has only eight porches. Later, she counts again as she runs home.

- a. How many lights does Ruby count as she runs home?
- b. Why does it matter that the number changed?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 44–45 Version B 40–41

As she runs home, she counts _____. This matters because _____.

6 The woman's bowl holds a copy of all their treats. Nothing is missing from their bags. What does this tell you?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 34–39 Version B 31–35

I think the woman _____, because _____.

7 The author tells us what each house on Orchard Lane gives out. Why does the author include so many small details?

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 9–12, 25, 35 Version B 8–11, 24, 32

The author includes these details so that _____.

Questions (continued)

Name _____

Date _____

8 At the end, a yellow porch light comes on across from Ruby's window. What could this mean?

- a. Give one idea and a clue for it.
- b. Give a different idea and a clue for it.

LOOK BACK AT PARAGRAPHS: Version A 51–54 Version B 47–49

One idea is _____. A clue is _____. Another idea is _____. A clue is _____.

Date _____

Write about it. Write a short warning note that Ruby and Marcus might leave for next year's trick-or-treaters on Orchard Lane. Use at least three sentences and details from the story.