

# When spirits walk

by *Leona Francombe*

**T**he gale had claimed the city for its own, lurking around corners, shouting across the Grand'Place with gothic cries. It was almost midnight; the square lay empty. No one with any sense wanted to be out. It was All Hallows' Eve, after all: the night when the dead come walking.

I'm not sure what drew me to the place that evening. Like all memories, this one is part dream, part yearning, and although I try to remember the details, they seem wrapped in an opaque veil. Stand alone on such a spot and you will see why. Beneath your feet, stones pulse with history, while all around, the centuries take on spectral forms that press against you, breathing their stories. On the Grand'Place that Halloween night, the air was crowded with such phantoms.

Whatever benign celebration Halloween may have become for fun-hearted Americans, it has not always been so. Halloween arrived in America with Irish immigrants and quickly shed its ill-lit past. But forget the pumpkins for a moment – the candy, cute ghost costumes, and fake spider webs. Millennia ago, when nature still ordered our world, the end of October brought the Celtic festival of Samhain: pagan Feast of the Dead and rite of passage from summer to winter, light to darkness. Samhain was, in fact, the Celtic New Year, the time for both harvesting the summer crop and planting winter seeds, thus ensuring a seamless cycle of endings and beginnings whose life-affirming rhythm we have largely lost. The early Christian church, hoping to convert a pagan or two, turned Samhain into All Hallows' Eve and followed it with All Hallows' Day – or All Saints' Day.

Gallic peoples also celebrated Samhain. The Belgian village of Gouy-Lez-Pieton still observes this festival, and just last year a group of Druids gathered at Oostduinkerke to perform a Samhain ritual on the beach, complete with dark robes and a modest bonfire.

In Belgium, 'cakes for the dead' were eaten in the belief that each one downed would relieve a soul of its suffering.

These practices seem dark and forbidding to us now, what with their hooded priests, strange rituals and

bonfires that gave precious light and warded off the tomb of those ancient, yawning nights. But it is really the presence of death, looming close at Samhain, that most unnerves us. And no wonder: for it was said that on this night, the veil between our world and the next becomes thin and porous, letting the souls of the dead drift through.

The thought sent a chill through my fingertips as I stood alone on the Grand'Place, savaged by the wind. I glanced up. The carved tower of the Town Hall was like black lace against deep-blue silk. Behind it, huge, tattered clouds were racing as if possessed, laying siege to the moon. Dark shapes crept across the façades of the old buildings. The golden mount of Charles de Lorraine atop the Maison des Brasseurs seemed to shy and skitter on its pedestal.

Suddenly, a host of shadows crowded around me. They clung, chattering, to my coat. Who were they? The victims of the 1695 bombardment, perhaps, when the French levelled the town; or the poor architect of the wondrous Town Hall, who according to legend leapt to his death because the building wasn't symmetrical. Something brushed against my hand, and I remembered that a dark cloth had covered the scaffold of the Counts of Egmont and Horne, beheaded by the Spanish Inquisition in 1568, right where I was standing. And not to forget Everard 't Serclaes, the populist hero who liberated Brussels from Flemish occupiers in 1356, only to be captured in 1388 and carried, bloodied and dying, to the market square. His tongue had been cut out and his foot severed. His burnished, recumbent statue lies under the portico of the house where he died, and if you rub his arm, as countless visitors do every day, it just may bring you luck.

The shadows vanished as quickly as they had appeared, spinning away into the narrow alleys off the square. At once I realised that I occupied their empty space – that I, along with all of you, must continue where they left off, and from their ends create beginnings, carrying the flame of their stories as bravely as our forebears carried their torches into the abyss of winter. But not now, mind you; not on this reckless night. It would be best to wait until dawn.

*The village of  
Gouy-Lez-Pieton  
still observes  
Samhain, the  
pagan Feast of  
the Dead*

