

## Grown With Love

When the giant pumpkin cannibalizes the neighbour's cat, she isn't quite sure what to make of it. Survival of the fittest? Did that apply to pumpkins? She kicks crumbling dirt over the blanched bones; she doesn't know. Either way, the surviving pumpkin is sizing up to be a lofty competitor at the Minnesota State Fair weigh-off. She had a fighting chance now that squirrels weren't frequenting the backyard like in years past. Considering the overdue medical bills and burial costs, plus months off work to grieve and attend her widows' support group, she could really use the prize money.

"THEO!" She beckons, and the boy comes running. "You stay out of my vegetable corner. I see a single footprint here and you're not leaving your room for a week. I don't want you mucking up my prize pumpkin." A fly sunbathes on the once-white tuft of fur peeking from under her boot. "We're going to win this year. No hiccups."

A few days later, when her catpiss-scented neighbour comes knocking at her door, she tells the old hag to keep looking elsewhere. Losing out on the missing cat reward would pay off when her pumpkin won first place.

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At the recommendation of the other widows, she has thrown herself into her hobby full force. It slots effortlessly into her days, where she'd previously scheduled emptiness. Daily watering progresses to twice-daily and tossing handfuls of fertilizer beads. On hands and knees pinching out weeds, she finds moments of respite, which the boy could smell from a mile away. He never understood the importance of her work.

"What are you bothering me for?"

"I" —the boy holds up the darkened spot on his blanket, matching the wetness on his pajama pants— "the bed."

"You're eleven, God's sake. Try acting like an adult and not a big baby and take care of it yourself."

She waters whenever the soil is dry, until moist – but not wet – and limes the soil to balance the pH. She beats away the onslaught of ugly black flies in her free time. When she runs out of fertilizer, she forces herself out of the house to buy more. She makes increasingly frequent trips to restock on fertilizer, even opening a new line of credit to pay for the stuff, but the pumpkin balloons accordingly. It'd pay itself off when her pumpkin won first place. One afternoon as she returns from the garden store, she catches the boy red-handed in her pristine pumpkin patch.

"Get your ass in here right now. I said RIGHT NOW!"

"I was getting rid of the squirrels! You said you didn't like the squirrels in the backyard. I haven't touched—"

She yanks the boy into the house, harder than intended, but it's better to make too strong a statement. "Go to your room. Or anywhere, as long as I don't see you."

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He frees his collar from her grip and scatters like flies to the swatter.

To her surprise, the pumpkin is untouched, and arguably more vivacious than ever. The same cannot be said for what remains of a gray squirrel – flayed, splayed, strewn across the pumpkin patch. Fat black flies cluster on the bloody blade of a fillet knife. The contorting obsidian mass sours her breath with stomach acid. Facing the squirrel, she arms herself with the garden hoe, but it doesn't budge. When she manages to peel it off the ground, springy green tendrils pull it back to the earth. Why did these God-damned squirrels insist on haunting her backyard endeavours, even in death?

"Well, that's staying there." She pulls her sleeves over her forearms to cover the goosebumps, and kicks dirt over the scattered squirrel in unceremonious burial. Just looking at it, she feels the aggregate of flies writhing against her skin. They can keep the knife.

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At present, the pumpkin's prognosis is unpromising.

Kicking the kid out of the yard should have allowed the beast of a pumpkin to flourish, but ever since she locked him in his room six days ago it had taken on a grey complexion no amount of watering or fertilizing or anguished tears could remedy. At least the flies were gone. She paces the kitchen, watching the clock advance; she would be doling out the second watering or moving the shade cloth to block the midday sun if it wasn't meaningless to. Nothing she tried would cure its sickly state, and having lived it once already, she knows all too well how it ends.

Her feet carry her out to the yard. Her knees sink into parched soil. She presses her temple against its clammy skin; she mourns. In the pallid pumpkin, she finds an odd sense of comfort. Both of them shrivelling in on themselves, devoid of life. Grief was inevitable, but at least this time she had company. Her fingers clench at the dirt.

"Ah!" She yanks her hand back. The cut on her palm is already oozing blood. The fillet knife glints under the soil. "Goddamn kid, leaving his junk everywhere." She hucks it into the grass. The blood snakes down her wrist and splatters on the pumpkin, sanguine on anemic grey.

Still cursing the boy, she tries to wipe it away with her sleeve. It's already gone. She lets a few more drops tumble from her grasp and soak into the flesh. Where the blood falls, the pumpkin regains its rosy, orange glow. It would be worth it, she reminds herself, when the pumpkin won first place. The knife finds its way back into her hand. Soon, the flies find their way back too.

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The scent of animal byproduct strewn across the yard, stewing under a plastic sheet is not one easily erased from the nostrils. Nor is the sight and sound of ten thousand black buzzing opals dancing under mid-September sun a forgettable one. She can never quite scrub the smell of iron off her skin. She tries not to think about it too much. It would all be worth it when the pumpkin won first place.

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She forgets to be surprised when they declare her the winner. She forgets to shake the organizer's hand before she grabs the cheque from the other. She forgets to dedicate her speech to her son. But she remembers what she rehearsed on the drive over, when some litterbox-liner journalist asks what her secret is.

"There's no secret. Just hard work and sacrifice. But you've got to believe it'll be worth it in the end, and so you do whatever it takes. That's all there is to it." There's no secret, she repeats until the reporters leave her alone. There's no secret. The secret is to use mentholated nose plugs to cover the stench, and disposable gloves, to always wear an apron you can bleach. There's no secret. The secret would die with the pumpkin. There's no secret. There's no secret.

By the time she fends off the final journalist and she's free at last, the boy has disappeared. She'd hoped to take him around the State Fair: try some carnival games, go on a few rides, get sick off cotton candy. A proper family vacation. Maybe blow some of her prize money to win the biggest stuffed animal they could find. But to get to that part, she'd have to find her son first.

"Ready for one last family photo?" The weigh-off organizer sidles up to her as she paces the crowded pathways. "They're about to saw it open."

"My son. I've lost sight of my son."

"Oh, that scrawny kid's your boy? Saw him heading the other way. I'll lend you a hand."

The organizer finds him watching a man juggle flaming torches. When the boy sees her, he pushes into a nearby crowd.

"Theo!" She catches him by the arm and drags him out. "How about we get our pictures taken, hm?"

"Let go of me!"

"Come on, Theo. We're going." She presses her thumb harder into his arm each time he thrashes.

"I don't want a picture. Leave-me-alone!" He twists out of her grasp as several passers-by shoot them concerned looks. The organizer steps in.

"Little boy, don't you want to be in the picture? It'll be in the paper. You'll be famous!"

"No. She deserves it all for herself." He cuts through the crowd, and by the time the camera flash's green ghost fades from her retina, he's long gone.