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Along the Frontage Road

by Michael Chabon

I don't remember where we used to go to get our pumpkins when I was a kid. I grew up in a Maryland suburb that, in those days, had just begun to lay siege to the surrounding Piedmont farmland, and I suppose we must have driven out to somebody's orchard or farm—one of the places we went to in the summer for corn and strawberries, and in the fall for apples and cider. I do remember the way that my father would go after our pumpkins, once we got them home, with the biggest knife from the kitchen drawer. He was a fastidious man who hated to dirty his hands, in particular with food, but he was also a doctor, and there was something grimly expert about the way he scalped the orange crania, excised the stringy pulp, and scraped clean the pale interior flesh with the edge of a big metal spoon. I remember his compressed lips, the distasteful huffing of his breath through his nostrils as he worked.

Last month, I took my own son down to a vacant lot between the interstate and the Berkeley mudflats. Ordinarily no one would ever go to such a place. There is nothing but gravel, weeds, and the kind of small, insidious garbage that presents a choking hazard to waterfowl. It is a piece of land so devoid of life and interest that from January to October, I'm certain, no one sees it at all; it ceases to exist. Toward the end of the year, however, with a regularity that approximates, in its way, the eternal rolling wheel of the seasons, men appear with trailers, straw bales, fence wire, and a desultory assortment of orange-and-black, or red-and-green, bunting. First they put up polystyrene human skeletons and battery-operated witches, and then, a few weeks later, string colored lights and evergreen swags. Or so I assume. I have no idea, actually, how this kind of business operates. There may be a crew of Halloween men, who specialize in pumpkins, and then one of Christmas men, who bring in the truckloads of spruce and fir. The Halloween men may be largely Iranian, and the Christmas men Taiwanese. And I don't know if someone actually owns this stretch of frontage, or if it lies, despised and all but invisible, open to all comers, a freehold for the predations of enterprising men. But I don't want to talk about the contrast between the idyllic golden falls of my Maryland youth and the freeway hum, plastic skeletons, and Persian music that spell autumn in the disjointed urban almanac of my four-year-old son. I don't want to talk about pumpkins at all, really, or about Halloween, or, God knows, about the ache that I get every time I imagine my little son wandering, in my stead, through the deepening shadows of a genuine pumpkin patch, in a corduroy coat, on a chilly October afternoon back in, say, 1973. I don't mean to imply that we have somehow rendered the world unworthy of our children's trust and attention. I don't believe that, though sometimes I do feel that very implication lodged like a chip of black ice in my heart.

Anyway, Nicky loves the place. Maybe there is something magical to him in the sight of the windswept gray waste transfigured by an anomalous outburst of orange. In past years, the rubber witch hands and grinning skulls had intimidated him, but not enough to prevent him from trying to prolong our visits past the limits of my patience and of my tolerance for the aforementioned ache in my chest. This year, however, was different, in a number of ways. This year he took the spooky decorations in stride, for one thing.

"Dad. Look. Look, Dad. There's a snake in that skull's eyehole," he said.

We were just getting out of the car. The gravel parking strip was nearly empty; it was four o'clock on a Monday afternoon, with three weeks still to go until Halloween. So I guess we were a little early. But we had both wanted to get out of the house, where ordinary sounds—a fork against a plate, the creak of a stair tread—felt like portents, and you could not escape the smell of the flowers, heaped everywhere, as if some venerable mobster had died. In fact the deceased was a girl of seventeen weeks, a theoretical daughter startled in the darkness and warmth of her mother's body, or so I imagine it, by a jet of cool air and a fatal glint of light. It was my wife who had suggested that Nicky and I might as well go and pick out the pumpkin for that year.

There was only one other car in the lot, a late-model Firebird, beer-cooler red. Its driver's-side door

stood open. In the front passenger seat I saw a little boy, black, not much older than my Nicky. The Firebird's radio was on, and the keys were in the ignition: a sampled Clyde Stubblefield beat vied with the insistent pinging of the alarm that warned of the open car door. The little boy was looking out, toward a small brown structure, beyond the wire fence, that in my three years of visiting this forlorn place had escaped my attention completely. It was hardly bigger than a drive-in photomat. On its sign there was a picture of a fish struggling with a bobber and a hook, and the single word "Bait." From the muscle car, the bait shop, and a deadened air of resentment exuded by the kicking, kicking foot of the little boy left alone, I inferred that he was waiting for his father.

"What if that snake was for real?" Nicky said, pointing to the skull that sat atop a bale of straw. It was hollow, like the genuine article, and some clever person had arranged a rubber snake so that it coiled in and out of the eye sockets and jaws. Nicky approached it now, boldly, one hand plunged into the rear of his polar-fleece trousers to scratch at his behind.

"That would be very cool," I said.

"But it's only rubber."

"Thank goodness."

"Can we get a skull, too, and put a snake inside it?"

"We only do pumpkins in our family."

"Is that because we're Jewish?"

"Why, yes, it is," I said. "Come on, Nick." I tugged his hand out of his pants and gave him a helpful nudge in the direction of the pumpkins. "Start shopping."

The pumpkins lay spilt like marbles in scattered bunches around the cashier's stand, which was tiny, a rudimentary wooden booth painted red and white to remind somebody—myself alone, perhaps—of a barn. Straw bales stood posed awkwardly, here and there, exuding a smell of cut grass which only intensified my sense of having borne my son into a base and diminished world. There was also straw strewn on the ground, I suppose to provide a rural veneer for the demolition-rubble paving material of the vacant lot. And there was a scarecrow, a flannel shirt and bluejeans hastily stuffed with crumpled newspaper, and token shocks of straw protruding from the cuffs and throat of the shirt. The legs of the bluejeans hung empty from the knee, like the trousers of a double amputee. The head was a pumpkin fitted out with a "Friday the 13th"-style goalie's mask. I forbid myself, absolutely, to consider the proposition that in the orchards of my youth it would never have occurred to anyone to employ a serial-killer motif as a means of selling Halloween pumpkins to children.

Nicky walked slowly among the pumpkins, pondering them with the toe of his sneaker. If the past two years were any guide, he was not necessarily looking for the largest, the roundest, or the most orange. The previous lucky victims had both been rather oblong and irregular, dented and warty specimens that betrayed their kinship to gourds, and scarred with that gritty cement that sometimes streaks the skin of pumpkins. Last year's had not even been orange at all but the ivory that lately seemed, at least in our *recherché* corner of California, to have become popular. I had no idea what Nicky's criteria for selecting a pumpkin might be. But I had remarked certain affinities between my son and the character of Linus in "Peanuts," and liked to imagine that he might be looking for the most sincere.

"Cute," said the man in the cashier's stand. He was of indeterminate ethnicity—Arab, Mexican, Israeli, Armenian, Uzbek—middle-aged, with a grizzled mustache and thick aviator-style glasses. He sat behind a table laid out with a steel cash box, a credit-card-press, a cellular telephone, and five demonstration models, XS, S, M, L, and XL, priced according to size from ten to twenty-two dollars. "How old is he?"

"Four," I said.

"Cute," the pumpkin man said again. I agreed with him, of course, but the adjective was offered without much enthusiasm and after that we let the subject drop. A door banged, and I looked across the lot. A man was walking from the bait shack out to the frontage road. He was tall and light-skinned, with a kettledrum chest and the kind of fat stomach that somehow manages to look hard: the body of a tight end. He wore white high-tops, big as buckets, barely recognizable as shoes. On his head was a Raiders cap, bill to the back, on his chin the quick sketch of a goatee. He nipped around the fence where it met the frontage road, approached the car from the driver's side, and dropped into the bucket seat, with his back to the boy. The boy said something, his voice rising at the end in a question. The man offered only a low monosyllable in reply. He reached one hand under his seat and felt around. A moment later his hand emerged, holding what looked to my not entirely innocent eye like a rolled zip-lock baggie. Then the man stood, and I heard the boy ask him another question that I couldn't make out.

"When I say so," the man replied. He walked back around the fence and disappeared into the bait shack. The boy in the Firebird turned and, as if he had felt me watching, looked over at me. We were perhaps twenty feet apart. There was no expression on his face at all. I suppressed an impulse to avert my gaze from his, though his blank stare unnerved me. Instead I nodded, and smiled. He smiled back, instantly, a great big winning smile that involved every feature of his face.

"That your kid?" he said.

I nodded.

"He getting a pumpkin."

"Yep."

The boy glanced over at the bait shack. Then he threw his legs across the driver's seat and slid himself out of the car. He was a handsome kid, dark and slender, with a stubbly head and big, sleepy eyes. His clothes were neat and a little old-fashioned, stiff bluejeans rolled at the ankle, a sweater vest over a white-collared shirt, as if he had been dressed by an aunt. But he had the same non-Euclidean shoes as his father, or as the man I assumed was his father. He took another look toward the bait shack and then walked over to where I was standing.

"What he going to be for Halloween?"

"He's still trying to make up his mind," I said. "Maybe a cowboy."

"A cowboy?" He looked appalled. It was a hopelessly lame, outmoded, inexplicable thing for a little boy to want be. I might as well have said that Nicky was planning to go trick-or-treating as a Scotsman, or as Johnny Appleseed.

"Or he was thinking maybe a cat," I said.

I felt something bump against my leg: it was Nicky, pressing his face to my thigh. I looked down and saw that he was carrying a remarkably tiny, rusty-red pumpkin, no bigger than a grapefruit. "Hey, Nick. What's up?"

There was, heavily, profoundly, no reply.

"What's the matter?"

The voice emerged from the fabric of my pant leg.

"Who is that guy you're talking to?"

"I don't know," I said. I smiled again at the kid from the Firebird. For some reason I never feel whiter than when I am smiling at a black person. "What's your name?"

"Andre," he said. "Why he got such a little one?"

"I don't know."

"How he going to fit a candle in that midget?"

"That's a very good question," I said. "Nicky, why did you choose such a small one?"

Nicky shrugged.

"Did you already get yours?" I said to Andre.

He nodded. "Got me a big pumpkin."

"Go on, Nick," I said. "Go find yourself a nice big pumpkin. Andre's right— you won't be able to put a candle in this one."

"I don't want a big pumpkin. I don't want to put a candle in it. I don't want you to cut it open with a knife."

He looked up at me, his eyes shining. A tear sprang loose and arced like a diver down his cheek. You would have thought I was asking him to go into the henhouse and bring me a neck to wring for supper. He had never before shown such solicitude for the annual sacrificial squash. But lately you never knew what would make Nicky cry.

"I want to call Mommy," he said. "On the cell phone. She will tell you not to cut up my pumpkin."

"We can't bother Mommy," I said. "She's resting right now."

"Why is she resting?"

"You know why."

"I don't want her to rest anymore. I want to call her. Call her, Dad. She'll tell you not to cut it up."

"It ain't alive," Andre argued. He was taking such an interest in our family's pumpkin choice that I was certain his earlier boast had been a lie. Andre had no big pumpkin waiting for him at home. His father was a drug dealer who would not bother to take his son shopping for a pumpkin. This conversation was as close to the purchase of an actual pumpkin as Andre had any reason to expect. These may not in fact have been certainties so much as assumptions, and racist ones at that. I will grant you this. But what kind of father would leave his kid alone in a car, with the door open, at the side of a road that skirted the edge of a luckless and desolate place? What kind of man would do that? "It don't hurt them to be cut."

"I want this one," said Nicky. "And I'm going to name it Kate."

I shook my head.

"You can't do that," I said.

"Please?"

"No, honey," I said. "We don't name our pumpkins."

"We don't believe in it?"

"That's right." I did not want him telling all the people who set foot on our front porch the name that we had been tossing around the house over the past month or so, with an innocence that struck me now as wanton and foolish. My wife and I were given no real choice in the matter, and yet every time I look at Nicky's fuzzy knees poking out of his short pants, or smell peanut butter on his breath, or attend to his muttered nocturnal lectures through the monitor that we have never bothered to remove from his bedroom, I cannot shake the feeling that in letting ourselves be persuaded by mere facts and statistics,

however damning, we made an unforgivable mistake. I had stood by once in an emergency room as doctors and nurses strapped my son, flailing, to a table to stitch up a gash in his forehead. I could picture, all too clearly, how your child looked at you as you betrayed him into the hands of strangers.

"Andre!"

The father was coming toward us, his gait at once lumbering and methodical. When I looked at him, I saw where Andre had learned to drain the expression from his face.

"What I tell you to do?" he said, softly but without gentleness. He did not acknowledge me, Nicky, the ten thousand pumpkins that lay all around us. "Boy, get back in that car."

Andre said something in a voice too low for me to hear.

"What?"

"Can I get a pumpkin?" he repeated.

The question was apparently so immoderate that it could not be answered. Andre's father pulled his cap down more firmly on his head, hitched up his pants, and spat into the straw at his feet. These appeared to be a suite of gestures intended to communicate the inevitable outcome if Andre did not return immediately to the car. Andre had reset his own face to zero. He turned, walked back to the Firebird, and got in. This time he went around to the big red door on his side of the car and heaved it open.

"Your son is a nice boy," I said.

The man looked at me, for the first and last time.

"Uh-huh," he said. "All right."

I was just another pumpkin to him—dumb and lolling amid the straw bales, in the middle of a place that was no place at all. He went to the car, got in, and slammed the door. The pinging of the alarm ceased. The engine came awake with a rumble, and the Firebird went scrabbling out of the lot and back onto the frontage road. Nicky and I watched them drive off. I saw Andre turn back, his eyes wide, his face alight and hollowed with an emotion that I could not help but interpret as reproach. I had abandoned him to a hard fate, one that I might at least have tried, somehow, to prevent. But there was nothing that I could have done. I didn't have any illusions about that. I dressed and fed my child, I washed his body, I saw that he got enough sleep. I had him inoculated, padded his knees and encased the twenty-eight bones of his skull in high-impact plastic when he got on his bicycle and pedalled down our street. But in the end, when the world we have created came to strap him to a table, I could only stand behind the doctors and watch.

I took Nicky's half-grown red runt and balanced it on my palm.

"Hey, Nick," I said. "Listen. You can name it Kate if you want to."

"I don't want it," Nicky said. "I want to get a bigger one."

"All right."

"Kate can have that one."

"All right."

"Because she didn't get to have a pumpkin, since she didn't get to ever be alive."

"Good thinking," I said.

"But I still don't want to cut it up," he said. Then he went back again into the world of pumpkins, looking for the one that would best suit his unknown purposes.