

The Portal



Private Taha
By Etheridge G. Lovett

“Listen up Marines; we’re heading into the city of Fallujah. As you all know, many innocent Iraqis have already lost their lives to the insurgents. This is why it is necessary for us to help crush their aggressive infiltration. I want all of you to remember your training and cover for each other. Do you hear me Marines?” Captain Richard Brown questioned, his deep voice competing with the loud twirling sound of the Chinook helicopter blades.

“Yes—Sir!” the platoon of Marines shouted back to their fearless leader.

“Private TAHA, since you recently arrived, I want you to stay with my squad until you learn the ropes out here,” Captain Brown ordered.

“I’m at your disposal, Sir,” Private TAHA replied in an almost child-like voice.

The other Marines snickered as one of them blurted out, “I’m at your disposal? What kind of response is that for a Marine?”

Unable to hold back their laughter, the Marines exploded with jeers and taunts. Private TAHA dropped his head, remaining silent.

“Alright, that’s enough clowning around... Calm down and get focused... Let’s keep our minds on the mission at hand,” Captain Brown reminded.

Some of the Marines continued to laugh as they checked their weapons, ammunition and other combat gear.

Feeling sympathy for young Private TAHA, Staff Sergeant Ronald Smith approached him saying, “I gather that this is your first mission to Iraq.”

“Yes, it is,” TAHA answered.

“Don’t let the boys get to you. They’re like a bunch of children sometimes, but they’ll give their lives for you when the time comes,” Sergeant Smith explained, patting TAHA upon the shoulder.

“So will I,” TAHA said to Sergeant Smith as he continued checking his combat gear.

“So, where’s your hometown?” Sergeant Smith asked in an attempt to create conversation.

“The Pentagon,” TAHA answered.

“So, you served at the Pentagon before you arrived here?” Sergeant Smith asked.

“No, the Pentagon is my home... I was born there,” TAHA answered, releasing a slight smile. He then tightened the straps on his ammunition vest.

“Well, so much for an honest, in-depth conversation,” Sergeant Smith said.

“Listen up Marines; we’re now crossing into the city of Fallujah. Everyone look alive and put on your helmets and prepare to exit the Chinook as soon as we land,” Captain Brown said to his platoon.

No sooner than he finished his statement, something struck the side of the helicopter with a deafening blow. The smell of fuel permeated the aircraft, filling everyone’s nostrils. Thick, black smoke billowed from the helicopter spiraling radically towards the ground.

“Everyone hang on, we’re going down!” One of the pilots shouted back in the cabin.

The Marines held on with all the strength they could muster. The heavily damaged helicopter struck the earth with a bone-crushing thud, instantly killing several of the Marines on board. Fire and smoke spread throughout the downed aircraft. Only ten Marines emerged unscathed, but confused and dazed. Once they regained their

senses, with no thought for their own safety, the surviving brave Marines scrambled to pull the bodies of their comrades away from the rising flames. They covered their dead with tents gathered from the wreckage. Many of the Marines wept bitterly for their fallen friends. They watched aimlessly at the surreal and gruesome scene playing out before them like an epic horror flick.

“Tell me, what the hell happened?” Captain Brown asked in anger while looking upon the bloody carnage.

“By the large hole in the side of craft, it looks like we were hit by a shoulder fired missile, Sir,” Sergeant Smith informed.

Many of the surviving Marines fought back their tears for the loss of their friends, but it was useless. The warm tears ran like a summer rain shower.

Like flying arrows cutting through the wind, machinegun fire whizzed pass them through the black smoke rising up from the helicopter’s charred remains.

“The insurgents are coming after us and we’re sitting ducks out here... Follow me, let’s run for cover and set up shop inside that old bombed out building up ahead and return fire!” Captain Brown shouted.

The Marines ran with their gear and weapons in hand until they made it safely inside the bombed out, concrete edifice.

“Sergeant Smith, take half of the men and set up a sniper’s nest upstairs, I’ll setup the remaining Marines down here. Anyone who comes within several yards of this building, I want you and your men to cut ‘em in half with the .5 caliber Barrets and M249 SAWs, you got that Marine?” questioned Captain Brown.

“I got it, Sir!” Sergeant Smith shouted back. He was determined to survive Fallujah at any cost. As he thought of his fellow Marines lost in the crash, tears rolled down Smith’s dusty, ash covered face. Anger and revenge quickly replaced the sadness he felt in his heart for his men who were killed. Checking his ammunition and

weapons, Smith led his men up the stairwell, taking their positions near various windows.

“TAHA, I don’t know what you’re capable of doing, but you came to me highly qualified from the US Pentagon... I want you to stay near me,” Captain Brown said.

“Those are my initial orders, Sir, to protect the top brass, as well as all fellow Marines,” TAHA said.

A loud explosion followed TAHA’s response, sending dirt and black gravel through the window of the already battered building. Sporadic gunfire followed from the insurgents, pinning the Marines down inside the building. The Marines returned heavy gunfire with their lethal weapons, causing the insurgents to run for cover.

Competing with the loud rapid gunfire, a man’s amplified voice praying in an Arab language could be heard filling the smoky air. Gunfire from the insurgents ended abruptly.

“Cease fire! Cease fire Marines!” Captain Brown shouted to his men. “Count this as a blessing because we’re now in the eye of the storm. The insurgents are summoned to their daily prayer, so save your ammunition. As soon as their prayer ends, you better believe they’ll be on our asses like flies on cow dung so remain prepared and alert!”

“Captain Brown, do we have a moment to smoke a cigarette?” Private Shane Johnson questioned.

“Go ahead, but smoke in intervals... While two are smoking, the others must stay on watch at the windows,” Captain Brown said.

“If you have cigarettes, light ‘em up... TAHA, I know that you’re not a smoker so keep an eye on any suspicious activity outside the window,” Captain Brown ordered.

“I will, Sir,” TAHA said, grabbing his weapon, kneeling at the window, peering out.

The other men sat alongside one wall, pulling out their cigarettes. They lit them, and smoked them in order to calm their nerves. Some of them drank

water from their canteens. Even the Captain smoked a Cuban cigar he brought along from headquarters.

“TAHA, what kind of weird name is that?” one Marine asked, as the others snickered, blowing smoke from their cigarettes towards TAHA.

TAHA glanced back at them; then gazed back out of the window as instructed without responding.

“Private Reyes, have you reached anyone on that radio yet?” Captain Brown asked.

“Sir, I’m afraid it was damaged in the helicopter crash, but I’ll keep trying to fix it and eventually be able to contact someone,” Reyes answered.

“Good idea... Carry on, Marine,” Captain Brown said, patting Reyes on the back.

Staring at the almost perfect haircut and doll-like smoothness of TAHA’s skin, Private Chuck Andrews tossed a small pebble over, striking TAHA on the side of the face to get his attention as he asked, “TAHA, you look like a Mama’s boy. How long did it take you to cut your neat head of hair, or shave your smooth little girly face?”

“I was created with smooth skin and neat hair, Marine,” TAHA answered.

“Created? How weird... Are you kidding me? So I guess you were created with a full head of hair,” Private Andrews said.

“Yes, I was,” TAHA answered.

Everyone who was in earshot of hearing TAHA’s response, laughed aloud.

“Okay, knock it off... Knock it off Marines... We’re supposed to be like brothers out here... Don’t forget your training,” Captain Brown reminded.

As quickly as it began, the praying in the mosque ended. The surreal silence was followed minutes later by a heavy barrage of gun and ear-pounding explosions. Before they could effectively return gunfire, many insurgents poured out of nearby buildings, running towards the building where the Marines were held up.

“Shoot them—kill them!” Captain Brown shouted, but it was too late. The

building was successfully overrun by the insurgents. All of the Marines in the building were captured and quickly taken to be interrogated.

“You can strike me until your hands turn raw, I don’t know a damn thing!” Captain Brown shouted to ten men wearing black fatigues with a black scarf tied around their faces.

A frown formed in the reddened eyes of the insurgents, the only part of their face visible. They continued beating Captain Brown for information. One by one, they bound and shoved each Marine into a dingy, blood-stained room, beating them mercilessly.

Crouched down in one corner of the room with other battered Marines, TAHA carefully observed the three insurgents guarding them with Ak47’s in hand. TAHA whispered to the Marine nearest to him, saying, “When I begin my attack, you help the others get out of here.”

With blood soaked lips, the Marine beside TAHA whispered over to him, “Listen up you nerdy little twit, don’t you make one foolish move or else they’ll kill all of us.”

“They plan to kill all of us regardless,” TAHA whispered. He snapped the thick restraints from around his feet and wrists like strands of thread, standing to his feet. He also snapped the restraints from around the Marine sitting beside him. The Marine was shocked. A frown formed upon TAHA’s child-like face. The insurgents were stunned to see the young, slender Marine standing to his feet in defiance.

“Hey—you American... sit down!” shouted one of the insurgents in a demanding voice, but TAHA only stood, gazing at the insurgent and his comrades.

Aiming his weapon at TAHA, the insurgent yelled again, “Sit down before I blow your American face off!”

One of the Marines nearest to TAHA tried to pull him downward by his pant leg, but couldn’t. TAHA’s legs were as stiff as a board. With a look of anger burning in his green eyes, TAHA approached the insurgent who ordered him to sit down. The insurgent

squeezed off several rounds from his Ak47, but the rounds fired didn't harm the fast approaching Marine. Each round ricochet from his chest like rice flung against steel. TAHA grabbed the man, tossing him around the room like a rag doll. He then flung the insurgent's lifeless body out of a nearby window. TAHA then grabbed the weapons from the other insurgents with lightning speed, snapping the weapons in half with his bare hands. He also attacked the other insurgents, tossing their bodies out of the window.

This is not happening... What the hell is this I'm seeing?" questioned Sergeant Smith with his eyes stretched wide in amazement.

TAHA proceeded to the next room where other insurgents were on the verge of beheading the defiant Captain Brown, who was blindfolded on his knees before them. TAHA caught the wrist of the machete wielding insurgent, crushing his wrist just before the blade touched the Captain's neck. One insurgent approached TAHA from behind with another machete in hand; swinging the blade across the back of TAHA's neck with great force. The blade struck TAHA's neck, but didn't penetrate his pseudo flesh.

"You really shouldn't have done that," TAHA warned, his voice deepening to a robotic tone. He grabbed the man, lifting him up over his head. With one effortless pull, TAHA snapped the man's spine in half like a twig, tossing his lifeless body to the ground.

One insurgent grabbed a bazooka, firing upon TAHA, completely severing his right arm. TAHA struck the insurgent so hard that he slammed up against the wall, snapping his neck and back.

Glistening steel and computerize components, all covered in blood, rapidly grew out of the wounded area of the severed arm, creating a new arm.

One insurgent was stunned as he watched TAHA's new arm emerge. The arm that was severed by the bazooka blast, lying on the ground, dissolved in the sand before everyone's

very eyes. Seeing this, all of the insurgents yelled aloud in a panic as they fled out of the building.

"Captain, you and your men stay in here until I finish eliminating the insurgents... I'll give you the all clear signal when I'm done," TAHA commanded in a deep, robotic voice.

"TAHA, tell me... what will be the all clear signal?" Captain Brown asked.

"You'll know when it happens, Sir," TAHA promised. The young Marine bolted out of the building after the fleeing insurgents. He was met with the heavy pounding of rapid gunfire and grenade explosions. Amidst the black smoke billowing up from each explosion, TAHA continued to charge and attack the insurgents. His artificial green eyes were seen glowing through the billowing smoke as he fought courageously against the enemy. Eerie bone-chilling yells were heard coming from the insurgents as the sound of explosions, gunfire, and bones cracking, followed. Hundreds of insurgents died at the hands of the once shy new Marine recruit.

Curious over the incident, Captain Brown remembered what he had read in TAHA's initial top secret, highly classified documents sent when he first arrived under his command. He remembered reading the words – android-Marine, written at the bottom. It all made sense now. Captain Brown smiled.

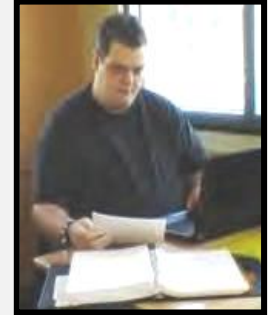
"Sir, we should go outside and help TAHA... he can't fight the insurgents all alone," Sergeant Smith said.

Captain Brown wiped blood from his split lip, saying, "TAHA won't be in need of our help anytime soon."

"Why not, Sir?" Sergeant Smith asked in a voice of concern as the other Marines looked on.

"TAHA's definitely no coward, as you Marines first assumed. Fear has no place in him. He's a new breed of Marine sent to protect all of us... TAHA's a god-damn one man Marine Corps... T A H A actually means **Technically Advance Human Android**... Fallujah's already in our hands, thanks to those intelligent minds

up in the Pentagon... HOORAH!" Captain Brown shouted.



Under the Bridge
By Edward White/CP Bialois
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The warm breeze blew over him as he sat under the base of the pier. Out of habit, he leaned his head back his head and breathed in the scent of the saltwater the wind carried. It was a reminder of how insignificant he was in the greater scheme of the world and cosmos around him. Ten years before he was one of the mindless automatons rushing around trying to find his place in the world around him. The rat race was what sent him over the edge and into the blissful embrace of understanding.

Every day he sat and watched the people coming to the beach to relax, to take a break from the stress of their daily lives. If only they understood what he knew. The thought brought a chuckle out of him and caused a young boy playing in the sand a few feet away to look at him. After waving to him, the boy went back to work building his sandcastle. The joys of being an innocent in the world was something he'd give anything to experience once more. Even after all of the years he spent living under the pier, nothing compared to the carefree days of his youth.

Those days a young man could meet the right people and have the world at his fingertips without a worry creasing his brow. Such a thing was

unheard of anymore, but then so was the type of people he grew up with. In his world, a person was allowed to make their own choices while being expected to deal with things when they went wrong. How would he have turned out if he relied on his parents to wipe his nose and make things right? The choices he made helped form him into the man he was, for better or worse.

Then came the one mistake he couldn't clean up. He wanted more, so his daughter didn't have to make the same difficult choices he did. It was something he chose to keep to himself to keep his family safe. Yes, he had more freedom than a majority of the people in the world, but there was a price to pay. A wiseguy turned accountant for the Family, he invested money that wasn't his into what looked to be a sure thing. When the market crumbled, there was no one to blame for the hundreds of millions of dollars lost but himself.

It wasn't something he liked to remember, but saw each day when children were brought to the beach by their family. They were often too young to understand the hardships awaiting them when they grew older. Everything from disease to economic strife and murder loomed on the horizon of their futures. The idea of them facing such a thing depressed the man so he pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the waves cascading onto the sand instead.

All of those problems were no longer his concern. Sure, he still needed to worry about disease but given the fact few people wanted anything to do with him meant the chances of him catching something was slim to none. Besides, he kept to himself and didn't bother anybody. Even the other homeless people and thugs left him alone. He was harmless and didn't pose a threat to anyone. He was little more than a forgotten ant in society. Now his person consisted of an old olive-green military coat, long brown stringy hair, and a scraggly, graying beard. In many ways, the only thing

that tied him to his old life was his pale green eyes.

His thought process was interrupted by a group of teenagers running and splashing at the edge of the water. One of them paused long enough to look his way and appeared to want to say something. After a moment the young man decided staying with his friends was better than talking to an old homeless man. The sight caused the man to chuckle. No doubt the boy's parents told him the homeless were a diseased group needing to be avoided at all costs. As much amusement as he gained from the brief scene, he couldn't help but wonder what the kid's parents would say if they knew who he'd been just a few years earlier.

With his amusement sated, the man stood from his perch under the pier and ambled his way towards the porto-potties the city kept on the beach. They were a new addition, added the previous month for sanitary reasons. While a side note to most, they were a welcomed sight for him as he could relieve himself without having to bury it in the sand or swim into the ocean. He never did the former, although he saw others do it, as he didn't want to pollute his beach. The water wasn't as bad to use since it washed away the countless waste of millions of sea creatures. What more did the little bit from him matter? Following his brief deposit in the city's temporary establishment, he'd go for a swim to clean off then dig through the trash from the restaurant for dinner. All in all, he found his life fulfilling and didn't want to give it up.

Making his way back to his spot under the pier, he paused to watch a young girl sitting next to his things. As he drew closer the girl looked up and he could see she'd been crying. Wiping her eyes, she moved as if to leave but he motioned her to remain.

"Sit, sit. There's no need for you to run off on my account. What's your name sweetie?"

The young girl looked up at him as he knelt next to her. Her bottom lip trembled when she spoke, "Susie."

He smiled at her, "What brings you here to visit me?"

"I... lost my mommy." Her tears began to flow once again and she started to hiccup as sobs shook her.

He reached a gentle hand out and patted her on the shoulder. "There, there. I'm sure she's around here somewhere."

Susie paused in her crying long enough to look at him and after a moment she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

Hearing her brought a smile to his face and nearly caused him to laugh. "That's a good rule to follow. Why, then, are you taking to me?"

Susie's face twisted in thought for a moment before her shoulders rose and fell in an awkward shrug.

Still smiling, he rose to his feet and held out a hand. "How about we see that lifeguard over there? Maybe he knows where your mommy is." Susie nodded and wiped her nose again with the back of her hand before taking hold of his.

He led her the thirty feet to the lifeguard's seat before knocking on one of the support legs. The lifeguard was looking the other way when they were approaching and turned his attention to them. At seeing the odd pairing he took off his sunglasses and stared for a second. "Harry?"

"Hi, Luke. This little girl lost her mommy and found her way to my spot. I thought you'd be able to help her."

After pausing for a few seconds, Luke got out of his chair and climbed down from the tower. He knelt next to the little girl and began asking her questions leaving Harry to go back to his spot and choice in life.

Feeling he did as much as he was capable of, Harry turned and started his trek back to the comfort of his spot under the pier. He walked about four steps when Susie's voice found him.

"Thank you!"

He turned and smiled at her, "My pleasure, darling." Without another word he continued back to his spot.

A little over an hour later a woman walked towards him and stopped to kneel less than a foot from where he was laying back sleeping. Hearing her footsteps in the sand, he opened his eyes and lifted his head. He didn't expect another visitor, but pushed himself into a sitting position.

"I understand you helped my daughter earlier." The woman's voice was low and she looked nervous.

It was easy for him to see she was nervous being so near a homeless man and part of him ached at her not recognizing him. He wanted to reach out and hold her, as he did when she was a young girl. Instead, he nodded. "Found her waiting here when I got back. Glad she's alright."

The woman's eyes were a light shade of green and were threatening to tear up when she looked at him. For a moment, she appeared as if considering something but the thought was dismissed and her expression changed back. "I don't know what I would've done without her. Thank you."

He nodded and smiled at her. "There's no need. Some sacrifices are worth more than others."

The woman looked at him as if recognizing him again then shook her head. "Still, can't I offer you something?"

He gently shook his head, "You already have. Look after your daughter. You'll never find anyone so precious again."

The woman watched him for a moment as if she should say something but couldn't think of what. When ready she nodded and pushed herself to her feet.

He watched her walk away and welcomed the pang of regret as it pierced his heart. Some sacrifices were worthwhile. By faking his own death, he assured his wife and daughter's safety, even if their lifestyle would forever change. While it'd been twenty years since he last saw her, he never forgot his daughter's face or eyes. Indeed, it appeared he found a way to clean up his mess after all. If doing so meant tricking one Family led to the benefit of

another, then he proved himself as a father.



Sweet Revenge?

By Jamie White

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It seemed like a good idea at the time. Okay, so I wanted it to be a good idea. In my defense Regina was asking for it. She's been pissing me off since we were in kindergarten. She used to take my favorite toys at playtime. Regina never liked them; she just wanted to make sure I didn't get to play with them.

I still can't figure out what I ever did to get on her bad side. It was as if I had one of those "kick me" signs taped to my back, only mine said "Regina's punching bag". Either way, she had it in for me. Big. By the time we got to second grade, she started telling the teachers I was saying bad things or that I cut in line. Since Regina was the 'good' kid and one of the smartest in the class, they usually believed her. Sucks to be me, right? I remember one time when she lied and told Mrs. Stewart I threw a rock at her. I got in big trouble over that one. I missed recess for a week and got grounded by my parents for a month. I was lucky I didn't get suspended over that one.

The other big problem? Her family had tons of money, so she was one of the most popular kids in school. None of them would dare to contradict her when she made up her stories about me. I guess I can't hate on them too much for that. I mean, I was the weird kid who dressed funny and didn't say

much. Why wouldn't they back up the one who could invite them to huge birthday and pool parties over someone like me? I think sometimes I was scared to. I figured if I bothered, whatever I said would just get twisted to get me in trouble anyway.

I know that sounds weak. Sometimes I want to kick my own ass for not fighting back more. I should've, no matter how completely futile it would've been. Even at that age, I knew school was a jungle and I was the zebra trying not to get eaten by the pack of lions.

In Middle School, I had this brief glimmer of hope. Our grade school fed two different middle schools so there was a chance we'd end up in different ones. I can't say how many times that year I wished on shooting stars, birthday candles and other stuff it would happen. I even made it my wish on Thanksgiving when I got the bigger half of the wishbone. Words can't even express what I felt when I saw her standing in the hallway the first day of school. Needless to say, I stopped believing in that wishing crap.

We shared a homeroom that year, among other classes. I tried to sit as far away and be as inconspicuous as possible, but it didn't work. Like we had some telepathic link, she turned around and saw me. Her eyes were like a shark's as she smiled and started whispering to the group she was talking to. My stomach dropped as I contemplated what on earth she was going to do this time. That was the worst part- never knowing what was coming.

There were times where she'd do something totally innocent like make some nasty comment about what I was wearing. Other times, she'd get more inventive and I'd end up getting into trouble with the teachers over something I hadn't done. As we got older, those tricks got boring for her and she moved on to more ambitious ways to annoy and torture me.

It started the second week of school. I was running late after gym class and barely got to English on time

that day. I couldn't wait to get to lunch! I was starving and it'd been a long day. As soon as the bell rang, I grabbed my stuff and ran for the cafeteria. The line to pay for my food felt a million miles long, but I finally made it to the front. I pulled my wallet out of my backpack and opened it up. I couldn't believe what I saw. It was completely empty! I knew for a fact I had money in there this morning before I left. There was no way I forgot it. I looked up at the cashier and bit my lip. "Um... something happened to my money. I had it this morning when I left, but now it's gone."

"What's your name, dear?"

"Megan Brooks." My voice came out almost a whisper. I was so embarrassed! I could hear the kids in line behind me giggling and making rude comments.

She picked up a pen and made a note. "Alright, Megan. You can pay for that tomorrow."

"Thank you." I grabbed my tray and walked as fast as I could to get away from the giggles and taunts that continued to echo in my ears. I saw an empty table in a corner of the cafeteria and hurried towards it, plopping down in the seat. As I was taking a bite of my hamburger, I saw Regina walk by. She and a few of her friends were talking amongst themselves. As soon as they saw me they burst out laughing and Regina winked. I knew she had to have stolen it, but I couldn't prove it.

By the time I noticed it was gone, it was too late to say anything. Regina was too smart to keep the money with her. She had it somewhere no teacher would think to connect with her. I ended up having to make up some story to explain losing the money. After that, I kept it in my pocket at all times. During gym, I'd hide it in my socks. Needless to say, I never had that problem again. That didn't make a difference, though. She and her friends just had to find something else to do for fun now.

They moved on to stealing other things from me- homework, pens. It didn't matter. If it belonged to me, it was fair game. I must've looked like the

most paranoid kid in the world! I never let my bag out of my sight anymore. I would also show up late to gym and use different lockers all the time so they wouldn't know what one was mine.

The worst came later. It was also the thing that finally made me say enough. Years of crap from her made me hate the sight of her, but I could deal as long as it was just stuff. Then there was Josh. He was this really hot guy who was pretty much the only person in that school I thought was worth anything. He was sweet, fun... and he liked me.

I met him in my history class during our sophomore year. He was new in school and had no idea where anything was. Why he asked me for help, I have no idea. There were plenty of other people in the room who were way more popular than I could dream of being. Still, Josh wanted me to help him find his way around. I, of course, was more than happy to help.

A few weeks later, I started to get the idea he liked me. We were hanging out all the time and he'd give me these looks when he thought I couldn't see. I, never having been in that situation before, had no idea what to do. I mean, seriously? Me flirting with a guy? I wanted to laugh just thinking about it- that was so not me. Plus, I was a little too nervous to try.

Lucky for me, he didn't bother waiting for me to get over myself. We were walking down the hall after class when he saw a poster about the Homecoming dance.

"Hey, have you been to one of those?"

It took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. When it came to dances, I might as well have been blind and deaf. "Oh, the dance? Um... No, I haven't." I could feel my cheeks burning and my stomach felt like I'd just come off a roller coaster.

"Looks like it might be fun." He looked over at me. "Maybe you could come with me?"

"Really?" I wanted to smack myself so hard. I couldn't believe the tone in my voice- I was sure he could smell the

shock and desperation all over me. "Y-yeah... sounds like fun!"

He smiled. "Great. I'll come by at six. Okay?"

"Sure." I still wasn't sure I'd heard right. I even wondered for a second if this was some kind of set-up. It seemed so strange to me that he'd ask me when they were so many other prettier and cooler girls to take to the dance instead.

"Great. See ya then." He shifted the books in his arms and waved before heading the other way.

I spent the next couple of hours that day in a daze. Nothing could bring me down; not even running into Regina in the hall after the final bell. As I walked by her, she made sure to bump me, knocking my stuff out of my hands. I just rolled my eyes and bent over to pick it all up.

"What a klutz. I swear, some people should not be allowed out in public."

Normally in that situation, I'd lose my cool and storm off while I mentally ranted and raved about what a jerk she was. This time, I got my stuff together and stood up straight, looking her right in the eye. "Maybe so, but even someone as nasty as you deserves the right to try and live a normal life with the rest of us."

It was the first time I'd ever said anything like that back to her. I swear, I thought she was going to blow a fuse or something. Her face was bright red and she looked like she had no idea what to say. I considered that a victory and just left her standing there.

A small part of me knew I was going to pay for that one somehow, but I didn't care. Why should I? It was about time I stood up for myself and I was in too good a mood that day to care what she might do to get back at me. I guess that was a mistake on my part. I let my guard down and didn't see I was heading for a disaster.

The night of the dance, I was having a great time. Josh was a pretty good dancer, too! Then it happened. Right in the middle of a slow dance,

Regina came up and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hi, Josh...” She smiled that sickening Regina smile at him. “You know, I was watching you dance a minute ago and are awesome. You totally need to dance with me.”

“I don’t think so, Regina. I’m here with Megan...”

Regina waved a hand in my direction. “Oh, she won’t mind. It’d just be one song- besides, you’d be doing a good thing. I mean, my date’s hot but he’s also a klutz. It’d be nice to get one dance in without getting my feet stepped on.”

I thought he was going to say no. I wanted him to. Instead, he looked to me for permission. I was so surprised, I didn’t know what to say. Plus, I knew if I objected, I’d just look like an insecure loser and I think that’s what she wanted. “I guess if you want to, one song would be okay.”

“You sure?”

I knew if I said no, he wouldn’t do it. Still, I just put on a smile and gave Regina a look. “Sure. I’ll see you over at the punch table after the song’s over.”

With that, I walked away and stood by the table to wait. That one song seemed to take forever and I noticed that Regina wasn’t exactly being shy. She was practically hanging all over him, and I could see she was flirting with him hard. I’d see her do it enough to recognize when she was trying to steal a guy. I was so mad, I wanted to rip her eyes out. When the song ended and they kept dancing, I wanted to scream.

Another song later, and I’d had enough. I walked out of the gym and headed home. Since we lived close to the school, Josh and I walked to the dance that night. I was happy for that, because I wouldn’t have to explain the lack of an engine motor and headlights. As soon as I got in my room, I walked over to the closet and pulled out a box.

Inside were herbs, candles and other ingredients for a spell. I never did mention that, did I? I started getting into witchcraft once I started high school

and ever since, I’d been dreaming of getting her back good. I decided that this was it. I was going to finally make her pay for everything she’d done to me since we were five.

For the first time in a very long time, I was actually excited to get to school. I wanted to see if the spell I’d done the night before worked. I walked into Home Room and took my seat. It didn’t take long for Regina to get there. She, of course, bragged to all of her friends about dancing with Josh. She even threw a smug look my way. Then it happened.

Right in the middle of her bragging, the strap to Regina’s backpack broke. “Stupid thing! I just bought that...”

It was all I could do to keep from laughing at her. It looked like my spell was working and I couldn’t wait to see what was next. Just then, the bell rang and the teacher told everyone to take their seats.

It didn’t take long to find out what was next. After lunch, I was walking back to class when I spotted Regina in the hallway. I know she saw me too, because she gave me a nasty look before whispering something to one of her friends. They were just about to walk into a classroom when the heel of Regina’s shoe broke and she stumbled. Her friend caught her before she could fall, but she looked mad. I watched as she grabbed the heel and limped into the classroom. I couldn’t help the smile that came over my face.

The next few days were a lot of fun. She spilled something all over her favorite shirt on Tuesday. On Wednesday, she lost her music player and on Thursday, she got caught passing notes in class and ended up with detention. That was just the stuff I saw. I was feeling pretty good. It was about time she suffered for all the crap she pulled on me all those years. As for Josh? I ignored him. I know the whole thing was just as much his fault as it was hers, but well... she was the one who started our war.

I don’t know about Regina, but my Friday started out bad. When I woke up and looked at my alarm, I noticed I’d

overslept. While I was rushing around to get myself ready, I stubbed my toe on my dresser. To top it all off, I accidentally grabbed my mom’s disgusting smoothie on my way out the door instead of mine. I also gagged when I took a sip. It was already looking like it’d be a long day.

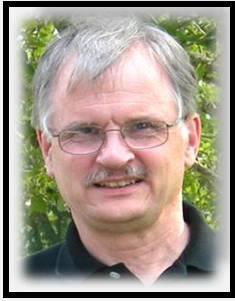
The rest of the day only got worse. I was late to a couple of classes and ended up with a week of detention. In English class, I found out I failed a paper and I almost sprained my ankle in gym. I couldn’t understand it, it was like I’d cast a spell on myself instead. Maybe I’d made a mistake when I cast it? I made a note to check the book I’d gotten the spell from as soon as I got home.

When the bell rang at the end of the day, I never ran so fast in my life. I was surprised I didn’t manage to kill myself along the way, with all the other accidents I’d had that morning. It took me about half the time it usually did to get home.

I dropped my bag in the entryway and ran upstairs. I rummaged through the closet to find the book I’d used. I sat on the floor, flipping through the pages. I didn’t find the spell I was looking for, though. Something else caught my eye that told me everything I needed to know.

Mind the three-fold laws ye should. Three times bad and three times good.”

Like I said- it seemed like a good idea at the time...



Not Serene By Rick Weber

The winds of December blew snow across the path in front of them. Above them loomed the snow-capped peak of Mount Index and below them was the placid surface of Lake Serene. To Chad Li, this was a whole new experience. It was hard for him to believe that this majestic and remote scene was less than a two hour drive from Seattle. The sight of Bridal Veil Falls alone was almost enough to take his breath away. As a software engineer from the Silicon Valley, he spent most of his time indoors writing code for the latest computer applications. In his free time, he would go to Hawaii for time on the beach where the Pacific waters were warm. This was before he met Rachel Hampton, a shy, reserved market analyst who worked at the same corporate facility he did.

Their chance meeting at a company softball game six months earlier had grown to a serious relationship. At the time, softball was the only outside activity that Chad did and only because his co-workers in the product development unit needed another person to fill their roster. Matched up against the marketing division in the first round resulted in defeat for Chad's team but not after he caught the eye of the woman with red hair and blue eyes playing first base. She tagged him out his first time at bat and proved to be a worthy competitor, better than some of the men on both teams. After the game both teams met for a few beers and Chad got up the nerve to ask her out. Of course, Rachel said yes.

It was close to Christmas and Rachel's family asked them to come up to share the holiday with them. Rachel told Chad that her father was an "outdoorsy" soul and would show them the great northwest. Chad could not decline her family's request because his own parents were in Tokyo until after New Year's Day visiting his elderly grandparents. Chad acceded to Rachel's request figuring that it was time for him to meet the family.

Ahead of them on the path was John Hampton, Rachel's father, who spent a lot of time in the great outdoors; hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking. Both Rachel and Chad came up to Seattle the week before Christmas so that her parents could show them around. On the schedule was a weekend camping trip to Lake Serene. Although Chad did not have the necessary gear, John made sure that he was outfitted for the trek with a new parka, boots, backpack, and a sleeping bag before they set out.

In the morning they parked at one of the visitor centers and walked down an old service road to the beginning of the over six and a half mile trail to Lake Serene. After pitching their tents and setting up camp in an area not too far from the lake, John announced that they were in for a treat after lunch, a hike into a not well known part of the forest where there was a lot of wildlife to see in their native habitat. Chad was a bit sore from the hike to the campsite and was not looking forward to more walking, at least not right now.

The switchbacks on the trail had been hard on his slender but strong frame. After seeing the smile the announcement brought to Rachel's face, he gave his tacit approval. They set out on a path off of the main trail going southwest of Lake Serene up the slopes to Mount Index.

Along the way among the maple and evergreen trees, John pointed out a coyote to them who scampered back into the forest after spotting them. A couple of hours into the hike, John pointed to a bald eagle soaring

overhead. The sight was awesome, watching the eagle soaring with the peak of Mount Index as its backdrop. As John was commenting to them about the eagle, part of the pathway gave way under his feet and he was sent tumbling down the rocky slope. Rachel let out a scream as she watched her father plummet. Chad peered into the ravine and saw where John had stopped. "Stay here," he commanded Rachel, "I'll go and see what kind of shape he is in because you might have to go for help."

Rachel shouted out to her father but got no response.

On the way down, Chad kept hollering out, "John, John, John!" but heard nothing. As he got closer, Chad finally got a reply, "Chad, Chad, I'm over here. I think I broke a leg." When Chad got to John lying on the ground, he saw John's left leg twisted at an odd angle.

Chad stood up and waved to Rachel who was barely visible up on the path and yelled up to her, "He's hurt but I think we can make it up to you." With that, Chad put John's left arm around his neck and lifted him up taking the weight off of John's left leg. Chad could see that John, a sixty year old mountain man with a mane of white hair, was in severe pain. One look into John's green eyes told him so without asking.

"Besides your leg, are you hurt anywhere else," Chad asked. John could only shake his head no. "If I help you, do you think you can make it up the hill," Chad continued.

"Yes," John groaned.

"Okay, then we'll do it one step at a time," Chad said. Before going up, Chad waved to Rachel and yelled, "We're coming up but it's going to be slow."

This time they heard Rachel yell back to them, "I'll be here waiting for you!"

The journey up the mountainside was very slow and arduous to say the least. About every ten steps or so, they had to stop so that John could rest his good leg and Chad could get his

breath. It took the two of them the better part of an hour to make it back up to the path where Rachel stood waiting.

“It’s his left leg,” Chad gasped to her as he helped John down to sit on a large rock. As Rachel assessed John’s injury, Chad took a swig from a quart bottle of water from his backpack.

“You have a compound fracture,” Rachel calmly told her father.

“Oh great,” John groaned, “Just what I needed.”

“We were lucky to get you back up to the path,” Chad said to him, “but we are going to need help to get you out of here. There’s no cell phone reception here. So, I’ll see if I can at least get down to the main trail before dark. Hopefully, I’ll be able to get some help or at least a cell phone signal.”

John once again could only nod. “Be careful,” Rachel said to Chad.

“I will,” Chad replied as he turned to go down the path.

Retracing their route back to the lake proved to be difficult for Chad. The light snow, which had been falling had stopped but the sky remained overcast with a light fog settling around the cascade. As darkness began to fall, Chad became lost. He decided before he became completely disoriented that he would go back to the spot where John and Rachel were waiting. Chad turned back on the path and then heard a loud roar from the woods behind him. Thinking that he may have spooked a bear, Chad looked back to see what may have made the sound. Just inside the trees, he spotted a large hairy shape covered in thick black hair. He heard a second roar come from the shape which was too large to be a bear. Being unarmed, Chad knew that his only option was to run and hope that this creature would not pursue him. With that he hurried back up the path. In a short period of time, he finally made it back to Rachel and John. Out of breath and visibly shaken, Chad related the details of his encounter with the creature to Rachel and John.

After hearing Chad out, John gave his comments in a painful tone, “It had to be a bear. If I heard something let out a roar behind me like you did, I would have been scared enough to think that it was ten foot tall, too. It may have been a female trying to protect her cubs. Did you see any little ones there?”

“No,” Chad replied, “But you may be right. It had to be a bear but WOW! It scared the living daylights out of me.”

“As it should have,” John said in a soft groan with Rachel watching in amazement. “It’ll be dark soon,” John added, “We have to get a fire going and build us a shelter if we’re going to make it through the night up here.”

As he sat on the big rock, John told Rachel and John to gather wood and brush to start a fire, as well as, evergreen limbs to make shelter for them to spend the night at the foot of Mount Index. With the fire started and Rachel tending to it, John gave Chad step by step instructions to build a lean-to of sorts for them to keep out of the weather for the night. With a nice fire going and their lodging built, they sat around the fire and dined on some granola bars and bottled water for supper. Even though John was in pain, he kept his spirits up by regaling Chad and Rachel with one good story.

“You know, Chad,” as John started his tale. “That thing you saw earlier may have not been a bear.” With that, both Chad and Rachel stared intently back at him. John continued, “The Pacific-Northwest has had the most sightings of “Sasquatch” or “Bigfoot”, as he is called, than anywhere else in the country.” Chad and Rachel then relaxed their expressions and grinned at John, who pressed on by telling them the legend.

“The first sightings of him or things like him here go back to the mid-nineteenth century. They were made by Indians to some of the first white men who moved here. They called these ape-like creatures, *skoocooms*. Some of the accounts have it that they possessed divine powers. Others said that they were evil. Whatever they

were, the sightings kept on being reported for the past hundred and fifty years. A couple of times in the 1920’s some miners reported being kidnapped or attacked by them.

To be honest, I think that the miners had their incidents with the creatures after drinking too much whiskey that they smuggled in from Canada during Prohibition. In any case, the sightings continue to be reported to the present day. Chad, I hope you’re not looking to become famous or infamous from your encounter this afternoon.” Chad and Rachel both smiled and were amused by John’s story telling skills. John’s expression then turned serious as he said, “However, if what you saw was a bear, I think that it is in our best interest to take turns watching our little bivouac tonight in the event the bear comes looking for food.” With that John issued a watch schedule for the three of them for the night.

Chad stood the first watch which turned out to be quiet. A couple of hours later Rachel relieved him and Chad went into the shelter to get some sleep. Her turn started quietly but a short time into it, she heard a rustling in the bushes and saw the large hairy creature Chad had described earlier emerge. At first, she was stunned but was shaken from her trance when she smelled a strong putrid odor as she stood downwind from the creature. Rachel let out a scream. This roused John and Chad from their slumber causing them to come out of the shelter with John hopping on one leg. Before they could make it out to Rachel, the creature fled back into the woods. John, once again, told them that it was a bear which she had seen.

In pain and unable to sleep, John took his turn guarding the campsite early allowing Rachel to go back to sleep in the shelter with Chad. Not long after, John heard the roar again coming toward them from outside the encampment. This time, John saw the creature as described by Chad, which ran at him. John reacted by pulling a burning log from the fire and waving at

the creature, which had a vile odor about it. This time, Rachel and Chad came from the shelter each picking up a burning log and waving it at the creature in the same manner as John was doing. The creature was apelike with long dark hair similar to a yak. The creature scared by the flames, fled back into the forest. They succeeded in fending off the creature, hopefully, for the night.

Rachel and Chad gathered around John, who said to them calmly, "It wasn't a bear." Then, Rachel asked, "Well Daddy, what was it?" Chad remained silent looking at John and Rachel as each spoke.

John chuckled and shook his head before saying, "I think we just saw Bigfoot."

Chad then asked him, "Are you sure?" John replied, "There are no other animals around these parts that fit the description of the thing we just saw. I don't know if it's man or beast. It certainly isn't a college kid pulling a prank on us. Nothing human could smell that bad."

Suffice to say that there would be no sleep for any of them. They sat around the fire trying to explain what they had just seen.

It was now Chad's turn to play the skeptic. As an engineer, his schooling and professional career were rooted in logic. Everything was explainable. To Chad, the very thought of being visited by a mythical being was absurd.

"If there are no other indigenous animals fitting this description around here, could it have been some kind of exotic pets that someone let loose up here when they could no longer care for it," he offered.

"That might be a possibility," John answered, "but the state enacted strict laws a few years ago banning private individuals from owning any type of exotic animal. It does allow for them to be on game reserves but there are none around here. This area is nothing but federal and state forestlands."

Chad could just shake his head trying to come up with a logical reason for their encounter.

"When was the last reported sighting of Bigfoot here, Daddy?" Rachel asked.

"In this area alone," John replied, "There have been about a hundred in the past year. They're all over the internet. I tend to side with Chad. There has to be some sane, logical explanation for what we saw. I don't want to end up in the loony bin because I reported seeing Sasquatch."

Both Chad and Rachel laughed at John's last comment. Their discussions, which went on for the rest of the night, were a search for reason not a philosophical debate.

As dawn peered through the darkness, no conclusions had been reached by the three hikers. As the path became illuminated, the discussion turned to making an action plan to get help. Chad once again volunteered to be the one to go.

"I wish I could get up on top of that mountain," Chad said pointing to Mount Index. "Maybe, up there I could get a good cell signal."

"The climb up there can get quite rough," John said, "Mount Index, like Everest, has its own North Face. When I was younger, I scaled it a couple of times. Those climbs ruled out any intentions I had about going to Nepal to conquer the Big One. You're better off going down-hill."

Rachel added, "Daddy's right. I tried that climb myself once but I never made it."

With that Chad did not question the merits of going downhill any further and set out to find help.

Before setting out, John gave Chad some last minute guidance about the trip down to the main trail giving him landmarks to look for as waypoints.

The fog, which covered the slopes the day before, had lifted and the path was clear. Chad found the landmarks where John had said they would be and he became more confident that he would not get lost.

About an hour into his hike, Chad heard rustling in the trees above him on the slope as he went down the path. This time, there was no roar or putrid

stench coming from the direction of the noise. He picked up his pace but the rustling of the branches seemed to be getting closer. Chad was too far from John and Rachel to run back to them this time. He was alone and had to make a stand. He picked up some dried brush near his feet and lit it with the lighter which he had. The dried shrubbery caught fire immediately as he turned to face the noise.

"Does this creature come out during the day?" he asked himself. His heart pounded and sweat came from his forehead in the cold weather. He waited for the creature to reappear but the rustling in the trees had suddenly stopped. Chad figured that the time had come for the final encounter.

His thoughts of a confrontation were interrupted when he heard a mechanical shaking sound from overhead. This was followed by a rustling sound in the trees going away from him. He looked up to see a King's County Sheriff's helicopter hovering above him. He waved the burning shrub up at the helicopter and saw a hand wave at him from an open door on the aircraft. Fear suddenly turned into relief as a harness was lowered down to him on a hoist. He stomped out the burning brush and put himself into the harness. As he was lifted up to the helicopter, Chad looked down into the trees but he could not see the creature.

Inside the helicopter, Chad told one of his rescuers about John and Rachel. The pilot retraced Chad's route up the path and after a short aerial search of the area, both of them were located. John was still seated on the big rock with Rachel beside him.

One of the crew, a paramedic, was lowered down in the hoist to tend to John, who was conscious but in great pain. While the paramedic tended to John, Rachel was hoisted up to the helicopter and reunited with Chad. They embraced each other with Rachel saying, "My hero".

Back on the ground, John asked the paramedic, "How did you know we were out here?"

The paramedic shouted into John's ear over the rotary engine's noise, "When the rangers saw that your car had been left on the lot overnight, they checked your campsite. After they saw that you were not there and the campsite had not been used overnight, the rangers called up a search party which included us. Now, we got to get you up into the bird." Shortly thereafter, John was hoisted up to the helicopter on a litter with the paramedic by his side.

Once inside the helicopter, John, Rachel, and Chad related their encounters with the creature to the crew. After hearing their accounts, the paramedic advised them, "You're not the first people we've met who saw Bigfoot. We fly up here all the time but had no luck ever seeing him ourselves."

"I am glad that we're not the only ones you met who saw him. I thought you were going to put us all in straight-jackets if we told you," John said. Everyone laughed as the helicopter headed to the Harborview Medical Center where John would be treated.

As the Medivac flight headed to Seattle, John said to Chad with a smile, "I guess this makes you a member of the family now."

While the mechanical bird flew to the southwest, the creature, hiding near its den among the trees on Mount Index, looked up at it and roared.



Red Pumpkins By DiVitto Kelly

No one in the rural coastal town of Wickford, Rhode Island had ever seen red pumpkins before; orange of course,

maybe white or green, but pumpkins as red as tomatoes, never. That was, until they started appearing on Mitchell Rey's rundown farmhouse property five years ago.

Mr. Rey, late middle-aged, tall with straight straw-like silver blond hair and wearing thick black rimmed glasses, resembled a cross between Andy Warhol and Michael Myers of slasher film fame. He moved into the old country home, abandoned for nearly a decade, on a blistering cold Halloween night, paying in cash. There was talk of it being haunted so no realtor seemed enthusiastic to show it. And in a town as small as Wickford, population 1,975, word spread quickly. But the new arrival didn't care.

No one was sure where he'd moved from. Mr. Rey managed to drive his vintage 1964 Ford F-100 red pickup truck, partially rusted, and without a license plate into town. He was the type of person you wouldn't ask for an explanation. Mr. Rey wasn't mean or rude, but you felt like if Hollywood was looking for an expressionless faced horror villain, he'd be it.

Halloween was his time of year, cold, bleak, barren trees, and blustery winds. The nighttime sky fell earlier, shadows jumped out on ancient, cobblestone streets. Fireplaces were in use; their billowing smoke blending in perfectly with the charcoal gray skies. The perpetual fog from the coastline was icing on the cake.

The kids in the neighborhood nicknamed him Mr. Gloomy. Sheriff Michael Schiff, the one-man police force, did a little investigating and unearthed the stranger had inherited a substantial sum of money from his parents, who died mysteriously two decades earlier. The family was on a vacation cruise sailing north out of Halifax, Nova Scotia and somehow, both his elderly parents had fallen overboard, drowning in the frigid Atlantic surf. At age thirty-eight and an only child, Mr. Rey inherited their home, pickup truck, and a sea of ambiguity.

The man's garb was a habitual primer gray, usually wearing the same

line of clothing daily with an occasional black checkered flannel shirt once a week. According to the local newspaper editor, you could describe Mr. Rey in three words: indifferent, intimidating, and eerie. Maybe the strangest quality to Mr. Rey was his pumpkin patch, a sweeping field of tangled vines that almost surrounded the two-story home like barbed wire. Attached to those vines were basketball-sized red pumpkins, matching the peeling red paint of his old Ford truck.

The whole parcel of land, nearly four acres in total, sat atop a small hill. Every Halloween season, anyone who was brave enough (or foolish) to approach him would ask if he would sell even one of his curious-looking pumpkins, but Mr. Rey always declined. He finally hammered in a few *No Trespassing* signs along the rickety, three-foot picket fence surrounding his property. It was safe to say everyone in the town of Wickford, Rhode Island familiar with Mr. Rey, got the message loud and clear.

The pumpkin patch was partially visible from the country road. Lost motorists occasionally stumbled upon his property, some taking pictures or hoping to purchase a one-of-a-kind red pumpkin. Their requests were usually met with Mr. Rey brandishing his gleaming double barrel shotgun or razor sharp pitchfork and a raspy-voiced threat. But one late October afternoon . . .

"Oh my God, Tommy! Pull over, pull over!" Maria Casanova said, grabbing her husband Tommy's rock-solid shoulder. He slammed on the brakes, making an abrupt right-hand turn up the gravel driveway. Tommy parked the car under a soaring, lifeless tree, with a two-foot carved wooden owl hanging from a heavy branch. A large black mailbox stood with the name Rey painted in white letters.

"I gotta have two of those Tommy; Zoe and Chloe will go gaga!" boasted Maria, in her mid-thirties, short, curvy, with long black hair and heels so long it would keep her dry in floodwater. She sauntered over to the handmade white

picket fence surrounding the pumpkin patch like a graceless show horse, a sea of jewelry slinking up and down her skinny wrists. The woman's grating Long Island New York accent, thick and rich, was headache-inducing.

Mr. Rey was working on his tractor in the decaying barn, but stepped out as he heard the irritating voice. His cold wrinkle-free face, always without a speck of facial hair, almost doll-like in complexion, seethed. He stalked over to the car, clutching his infamous wrought-iron pitchfork, the foot long tines gleaming in the partial sun.

"Get out now," he said, his voice coming out in a harsh, sandpaper rough whisper. "Can't you read? It says no trespassing!"

"Huh?" the woman replied, turning her head slightly like a dumb animal. "I couldn't hear you." She continued to snap away on her neon pink bubblegum. Maria explored her Samsonite-sized gold purse and pulled out a pair of twenty dollar bills.

"Sir, I gotta have two of your gorgeous red pumpkins; there for my nephews!" Her husband leaned against his car, arms crossed, bored. The man moved closer to the woman's ears, which held hula-hoop sized gold earrings.

"Get off my property before I kill you," he repeated. The other couple standing behind her milled around just outside the fenced.

"I'm sorry, what did you say? inquired Maria. "My hearing ain't so good."

"They're not for sale, so get off my property before I kill you!"

"Tommy, he says he wants to kill me!" she said, turning to her husband in mock horror.

"Really? Do us all a favor old man!" replied her husband, joking with a half-smile. Built like a fire hydrant and from the looks of it, as smart as one, Tommy pulled down his gray and black sweater to cover his early middle-aged gut.

"Tommy," said Maria, drawing out her husband's name. The stout man walked up to the towering Mr. Rey, who was at least a foot taller.

"Did you really threaten my wife?" asked Tommy, who had no problem tapping into his well of mob wrath. "Because if you did, I may need to rectify the situation, you understand me?" The two other couples froze their conversation in an instant. They knew Tommy Casanova was a mob pro and had no problem 'taking care of people' before.

He stepped closer to the tall man until he stood no more than a foot away. "I'm talking to you doll face," said Casanova, staring directly at Mr. Rey. Tommy was irritated, yet slightly unnerved by the man's blank complexion. Tommy pointed his sausage-thick index finger in Mr. Rey's face, almost touching his nose.

Mr. Rey returned a cold stare, then took his enormous left hand and grabbed Tommy by the throat, lifting him off the ground.

"Holy manicotti," shouted his cousin Mikey, stunned by the man's strength.

"Oh Tommy!" Maria screaming hysterically, "It's just pumpkins you jerk face."

Mr. Rey tossed Tommy onto the ground. Landing on the trampled grass and leaves, he reached for his gun tucked in to the right of his belt buckle, but before he could extend his arm, Mr. Rey knocked it out of his hand with a kick then pointed the pitchfork tines directly at Tommy's throat.

"Hey, let's just remain calm, shall we?" said Mikey as he picked his cousin off the ground and straightened his ruffled sweater. Tommy swatted Mikey's arms away, boiling over with anger.

"I'd killed you wacko right here and now, but as a rule, I don't kill no one with my wife present."

"Oh that's so sweet Tommy," said Maria, picking a pair of leaves off the back of his dirtied sweater, still chomping on her gum.

"For the last time, get off of my property . . . now," Mr. Rey barked, with more graveled authority this time. The four walked over to Tommy's ink black Mercedes, a top of the line S600 sedan complete with bullet-proof windows that

set him back over a hundred and fifty grand.

"You picked the wrong person to mess with psycho!" bellowed Tommy, as he stepped into his car, bumping his head as he got in.

"Enough honey, let just get out of here!" said Maria, in her patented Long Island caw.

"What a horrible voice," said Mr. Rey in a low voice, as he watched a dozen or so crows fly overhead. He squinted his eyes, clutching the pitchfork in his right hand, looking like Grant Wood's 1930 American Gothic painting.

Tommy floored the gas, leaving a spray of gravel and dust. As they sped away, Tommy whispered to his cousin, "We're coming back here tonight to finish this, you hear me?" Mikey paused, then nodded in agreement. The wives chatted amongst themselves, oblivious to their husband's intensions.

Halloween night reached half past eleven, temperatures hovering in the lower forties. After a subpar dinner and tasteless bottle of red wine at the bed and breakfast, both men left their spouses, both in blissful cozy coastal sleep.

"Is this really necessary?" asked Mikey, a bit drunk from all the wine. "I was gettin' ready to watch SportsCenter."

"Zip it linguini spine," answered Tommy. "That freak . . . no one grabs my throat and lives. You should know that by now!"

"Yeah, you're right Tommy," replied Mikey, a near physical replica of his cousin, only an inch or two shorter and a few pounds lighter. "Strong dude, huh?"

Tommy stared straight ahead and shook his head, "Yeah."

Mikey looked over at Tommy and saw concern. He'd never seen his cousin unnerved before, not even before his wedding or new York Jets playoff game. Tommy turned the lights off as the approached the farmhouse, stopping short of the uphill driveway. He parked the car under a line of oak

trees, standing out like skyscrapers, their branches reaching out like spindly fingers.

“If any birds crap on your car Tommy, I’ll torch these trees personally for ya,” bragged Mikey. Tommy knew his cousin was serious. He was nicknamed “The Torch” by his mob buddies and always carried his trusty lighter and hefty five-gallon metal gasoline can in the back of his custom painted glittering tangerine orange Cadillac Escalade.

They closed the car doors, Mikey’s a bit too loud – causing Tommy to give him a stare. Tommy closed the drivers’ side door then gave it a gentle thump with his hips.

“You don’t broadcast when you’re about to whack someone, doofus. That’s why they call me the quiet one. Here, get the gasoline can in the trunk – you got your lighter, right?” asked Tommy.

“You’re asking me if I have a lighter?” said Mikey, almost insulted that his cousin would second guess him. Mikey then displayed his thousand dollar custom-made gold lighter in his right hand, in his left, a book of matches just in case. “Yeah Tommy, I got your lighter right here!” Tommy smirked.

The two men were clad in the same attire they wore earlier in the day, including their expensive, white Italian dress shoes. They hiked up the leaf-covered incline, both slipping in the damp earth.

“Not exactly the ideal hiking shoes, eh Tommy?” joked Mikey, doing his best to lighten the mood. His cousin found nothing funny about ruining three hundred dollar shoes.

The house stood two hundred feet away. The front porch light was on, along with a room upstairs. A murder of crows sat perched on the naked trees circling the property, none making a sound. The two men noticed the pair of large barn doors open, “Maybe he’s in there?” proposed Mikey, itching to warm things up a bit. The frost covered ground crunched with every step the two made.

“Ready to jump it?” asked Mikey, as they approached the old fence.

“And ruin my clothes? Hell no,” replied Tommy. He started ripping slats from the decrepit fence with his bare hands, creating plenty of space. “After you.”

The two hunched down as they entered the pumpkin patch. The infinite vines covered the whole back yard and part of the side closest to the street, their leaves spread out like veins.

“Look at these things?” gulped Mikey, staring at the sea of red pumpkins, “I mean; they all look a little too, you know, fake, don’t they?”

“Like that guy’s face,” answered Tommy, gritting his teeth.

The two followed the trail of vines towards the back yard, the far reaches scattered with apple, oak and pine trees. As they approached, the two squashed and slipped on rotted apples. Tommy catching himself, but Mikey took a tumble, landing straight on his back, the gasoline can he was carrying nearly falling his head.

“What are you, the Three Stooges or something?” said Tommy. “Enough of the slapstick, nippie-head.”

“Sorry, sorry,” replied Mikey, not meaning to piss off his cousin. But for some reason, he had a knack for doing it.

A thick congregation of pumpkin vines seemed to venture out from a solitary location about thirty yards from the back of the house, an area already cluttered by rusted out farm equipment. Both men noticed a rotting smell, like dead animals.

“I know we don’t visit pumpkin patches too often, Tommy, but jeeze, this place smells like . . . where we ‘dump the bodies,’ you know what I mean?” said Mikey, making air quotation marks with his fingers. Tommy hated when he did that, but nodded in agreement.

The two men tiptoed between the foliage. Tommy took out a pen flashlight and bent down to touch one of the pumpkins. “You know Mikey, this feels weird,” he said, rubbing his fingertips together, “They’re soft like . . .

skin, or something.” His cousin reached down and did the same.

Mikey flicked out his silver six-inch folding knife from his back pocket and placed the blade under a hearty vine, thick and flexible like rope. He struggled. “I can’t cut it.”

“My sentiments exactly,” replied Tommy, getting a verbal barb in at his cousin. “Gimme that!”

Tommy took the knife and attempted to cut the pumpkin free. “See, I told ya,” said Mikey, watching his cousin struggle to cut the vine as well. “I’m tellin ya, this whole thing is getting strange – you know it’s Halloween tonight?”

“Don’t get stupid,” said Tommy, boiling over annoyed. “Maybe we just need to try something different. Here, hold the flashlight.”

“What are you gonna do?” questioned Mikey, feeling anxious.

Tommy bent down on one knee like he was going to propose to the plump, red pumpkin. Studying it for a moment, the mobster clutched the knife in his right hand and poked the tip of the blade into the pumpkin’s smooth surface. A minuscule drop of red fluid leaked out like a drop of ink.

“Juicy, ain’t it?” observed Mikey.

Tommy placed the blade in the same spot, but this time, plunged the blade straight into the pumpkin’s flesh. Blood squirted from the wound as the impaled vegetable let out a light, high-pitched wail.

“What the hell was that?” yelled Mikey, as he looked over at Tommy, his face now painted with blood. “Oh, this is messed up; let’s get the hell out of here!”

Getting to their feet, Tommy reached into his back pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the red liquid off his face. He then kicked the pumpkin, making a dent, but hurt his foot in the process, his shoes stained in red. “Let’s torch this place, now!” growled Tommy. Mikey always made sure he had enough gasoline to bring down a building or two.

Suddenly, the back door opened with Mr. Rey brandishing his double-

barrel shotgun. The tall man stared at his field of red pumpkins. A pair of crows took off from a branch just above the two men, now lying flat on their stomachs, hiding. Mr. Rey fired, blowing both birds from the sky; their remnants falling on top of the two men. The decapitated head of one of the birds landed two feet from Mikey's peering eyes, still twitching. He almost barfed on the spot. Mr. Rey, standing as still as one of his ghoulishly posted scarecrows, finally went back inside.

Tommy got to his knees and called to Mikey. "Time to barbeque this son of a bitch, and take out the pumpkin patch with it."

The two men stood up, but Tommy stepped on something solid near the base of the pumpkin vines. He waved his cousin over. The men felt a wood board under their collective feet, partially covered by hay and dead grass. Tommy shone his flashlight and noticed two handles.

"Maybe it's a trap door that leads to his house," surmised Mikey. The weight of the two men suddenly broke the one-inch thick, eight foot square area, throwing them down into a pit.

The two men found themselves in total darkness, "Tommy, can you hear me?" Mikey called out. "Oh my God, what is this?" The two men tried to stand up, but the footing was difficult -- soft, hard, and uneven. The smell was rancid and overwhelming.

Tommy found his flashlight, the small beam partially hidden under something. He picked it up and pointed it at his cousin -- behind him were a stack of rotting corpses. They were surrounded by dead bodies, in various stages of decay. The smell was unbearable, unfathomable. Mikey couldn't hold in the nausea any longer, vomiting in a corner. Tommy frantically waved the flashlight back and forth. What he saw was impossible.

A forest of thick clear-green roots dropped down from the ground above. Both men flung their arms through the dangling vegetation; it was everywhere. Tommy dragged the flashlight beam from top to bottom, the ends of the

roots burrowing into scattered dead bodies.

"Oh my God," said Mikey, his mouth agape. Tommy looked closer at the translucent roots, blood now flowing upward into the . . .

"Those pumpkins," Tommy uttered, "Those freaking red pumpkins are living off the blood of dead people. We gotta get out of here!"

Just then, the roots starting swaying, wrapping around the arms and legs of the two men. "Aagh!" screamed Mikey. "My knife, where's my knife?" One particular root reached into Tommy's ear, searching for nourishment. He grabbed it with his bare hands, ripping it out from the dirt, blood raining down on him.

Tommy threw the knife to his cousin. "I got it," shouted Mikey, snapping the blade out and cutting away at the flesh-eating root system. Blood squirted out like water through a tattered garden hose. Both men continued to fight with the killer roots, pulling at anything hanging. It was then Tommy heard the back door open.

"Quiet Mikey, I think he's coming!" exclaimed Tommy. The tall man was outside again, firing at more crows.

"Over here!" hissed Mikey, pointing to a tunnel that was free of the tentacle-like roots. Tommy handed his cousin the flashlight as he lead the way. The two men crawled on their hands and knees about twenty-five feet before Mikey noticed an opening.

He cleared away a portion of dirt with his hands then poked his head out from the hole. Before Mikey could climb out, he was impaled by Mr. Rey's pitchfork, one of the three tines going straight through Mikey's neck; the other two hitting his shoulder. He gurgled, blood filling up his windpipe. Quivering in pain, he slumped over, motionless.

"What's wrong Mikey?" asked Tommy, panic in his whisper. He tugged on his cousin's leg, but there was no response, the bloodied flashlight dropped at his feet. Tommy picked it up and flashed it upward, only to see streams of blood cascading

down his cousin's neck. Tommy speechless in horror.

He turned around in the tunnel and headed back to the compost of dead humans. Frantic, he scrambled for the gasoline can, spreading half the contents around the dead bodies then climbed up, using a handful of the thickest roots as a rope. He nudged his face out of the hole between the pumpkin vines and leaves. Tommy saw Mr. Rey withdraw the pitchfork from his cousin's neck, the tines now dripping with blood. He grabbed Mikey around the collar and pulled him up.

"The hell you're feeding my cousin to your freak show pumpkin patch," said Tommy under his breath.

With one hand, he placed the gas can onto the grass and whipped his legs upward. A few stray vines were wrapped around Tommy's ankles, but he ripped them off with his hands, then crawled and hid behind a tree. All Tommy was thinking about of was burning everything down to the ground . . . and below.

Mr. Rey was halfway to the human compost pit when he was startled by more crows, dozens of them, the barren trees now looking full like black leaves. Tommy reached in his back pocket searching for matches, but came up empty. "Crap," he said. His cousin -- the Torch, he had them.

Tommy crept on his knees through the sea of red pumpkins and hid behind an old tractor. Somehow, he needed to take out porcelain face, but how? Tommy looked over at the back porch and saw the shotgun there. Good, at least he didn't have his gun, Tommy thought, but Mr. Rey still had his pitchfork. Tommy circled behind the tall man nearly stepping on a rusted shovel. It wasn't much, but he'd take it as a weapon. There was no way Tommy was going to watch Mr. Gloomy drop his cousin's body down that hole. No way!

Part of the shovel blade was broken away, but it had a nice point. If these pumpkins were filled with blood and had feelings -- what a bizarre concept Tommy postulated, he could

draw Mr. Rey over to him by jabbing at his revolting creations.

Tommy eyed a large, fleshy red pumpkin just in front of him. Still on his knees, Tommy harpooned the vegetable. It made a high-pitched sound as blood gushed out. Mr. Rey turned, dropping Mikey's body. Tommy stood up and began jabbing at more pumpkins. There were more high pitched cries, and more blood spilling out of the wounds.

"Stop now or I'll kill you rat bastard!" hollered Mr. Rey, his evil voice louder. Tommy kept up the attack, plunging the shovel blade into anything round and red. Mr. Rey stormed over in Tommy's direction, but the mobster was ready. As the tall man raised his pitchfork, Tommy launched the shovel, hitting Mr. Rey right in the gut. The old man cringed and doubled over in pain, but didn't scream. Tommy ran to his cousin and found a pack of matches tucked in his back pocket, not wanting to toss Mikey's prized gold lighter, a Christmas gift from the his wife, Ginger.

He scrambled over to the hole, ready to drop a pair of lit matches when Mr. Rey hit him on the back with the shovel, causing Tommy to recoil in pain. The burly man tumbled over, but got to his feet, his side now bleeding. As the blood touched the ground, pumpkin vines swirled toward him, like a shark sensing injured prey. Tommy hurtled over and picked up Mr. Rey's pitchfork and began circling him. Tommy glanced over to the pit, pressing the crazed man in that direction, backing him up.

"You're a freaking wacko aren't ya?" yelled Tommy. "Think you can kill people to feed your zombie pumpkins?" Mr. Rey didn't reply. Blood continued to drip from Tommy's wound. The tall man was only a few feet from the pit now.

Tommy stood still, staring at the man as he started talking under his breath.

"I told you to get off of my property, didn't I?" said Mr. Rey, "But your yappy wife had to have one of my pumpkins.

Now both you and your friend will be dead."

"I don't think so old man," bested Tommy, ready to harpoon the man, but now starting to feel extreme pain and weakness from the loss of blood.

A stream of vines curled around Tommy's feet. As he stepped forward, he tripped, falling down on his face. Turning his head, he witnessed the vines in attack mode, their leaves fluttering up and down in a feeding frenzy. He was almost completely covered in pumpkin vines.

"Now if you don't mind," said Mr. Rey, as he reached down and pried the pitchfork from Tommy's hand.

Mr. Rey raised the pitchfork above his head, ready to plunge the tines straight into Tommy's chest. But Tommy seized the knife from his pocket, flicking the blade open before stabbing Mr. Rey in the thigh. He toppled over; this time in vocal agony. Tommy cut himself loose from the entanglement of vines and bounced back up. Mr. Rey, still in pain, stood up as well, removing the weapon from his leg. Tommy launched a clean left hook to the side of Mr. Rey's pallid face, shattering his left cheek. "What the fu . . . ?"

The rest of Mr. Rey's broken face fell to the ground, like an antique ceramic doll. Inside, a harsh, narrow dark facade emerged, eyes red with anger, teeth small, but sharp like a piranha. Two, long incisors slowly emerged. Tommy threw another thunderous punch; this time in the midsection. Crack. Mr. Rey began peeling off his gray clothing, revealing a shattered plastic-looking human frame. Tommy connected again. This time, the rest of Mr. Rey's body fractured away, pieces falling on top of pieces.

It hissed at Tommy. "I told you to get off my property!" said Mr. Rey, the words coming out wobbly and artificial.

It hoisted its sinewy limbs skyward; displaying three-pronged lengthy fingers like his pitchfork then aimed them at Tommy. The stocky man jumped back, the finger blades narrowly missing him. He reached for

the pitchfork on the ground and thrust the tines into the thing's chest. It staggered backwards and toppled over into the pit. Tommy quickly lit a handful of matches for good measure and tossed them in, the flames soaring up through the hole. Agonizing cries filled the whole back yard, scarring off the dozens of perched crows.

Tommy jogged around the surrounding pumpkin patch, dousing it with more gasoline. He dropped more matches, setting the back and side yard on fire. He picked up his cousin and placed him on the back porch. Tommy ran to the barn and poured gasoline on the decrepit, wood structure. He looked around the hay-filled floor and spotted an oak barrel full of pumpkin seeds. "Oh God," he uttered, as he doused the fluid on them.

Tommy emptied what was left of the gasoline can then dropped another match. The old structure ignited quickly; smoke billowing out the gaping front entrance. As Tommy ran out, he glanced at a rusted gasoline can sitting next to the red pickup truck. He struggled, but managed to remove the cap, taking a quick sniff. "You smell like gas to me."

Tommy circled the whole yard, front to back, creating a ring of fire. As the pumpkins heated up, they began to explode, a burst of red liquid showering the cool grounds. He headed back to retrieve his cousin's body, but it wasn't there.

"You shit monster!" He heard noise inside the house and tried to open the back door, but it was locked. Tommy lifted up his stocky leg and busted the door wide open; no time to be quiet now. The darkened interior smelled just as bad as the pit. Tommy stumbled across the kitchen, but found a filthy sauce pan on the dated mustard yellow stove. He filled it halfway with gasoline, spilling some on the counter.

He entered the rooms on the first floor, but found nothing; the whole place void of furniture. Tommy hustled upstairs, but found the same thing, nothing. As he walked downstairs, he

heard a groaning cry from the basement.

Tommy went back into the kitchen and picked up a half-melted candle he'd spotted on the window sill. He lit the candle and walked over to the basement door. He cautiously stepped down each plank, not making a sound. Reaching bottom, he shielded the candle with his hand and followed a strange noise, like buzzing flies. Tommy heard his cousin moan again. He walked over to a rotted door, filled with cracks. Tommy paused then gazed through the large keyhole. Through a low wattage light bulb dangling from the ceiling, Tommy could see the thing about to bite into Mikey's bloodied neck, who was lying flat, motionless on a folding table.

"Not a good idea doll face!" said Tommy, who kicked the door in a fury. The creature turned, but Tommy hurled the gasoline straight into its eyes. He reached into his front pocket for the matches, but came up empty.

"Oh crap, where are they?" he screamed. The creature, screeching in agony and shaking its head, but started to regain its composure. Tommy frantically looked for anything to save both he and his cousin. In the corner he found a broom . . . and more containers of pumpkin seeds.

"What are you gonna do Tommy, brush me aside?" asked Mr. Rey, now sneering, his emaciated dark gray body, partially charred like a briquette.

Noticing his cousin moving his right arm, Tommy poked the broom at the thing, hoping to keep it occupied. Mikey slowly placed his fingers in his pocket and pulled out his custom made gold lighter. He flicked it open, reached back and set afire the former Mr. Rey. Quickly, the room became engulfed in flames. Tommy jabbed the creature in the face then picked up his cousin by waist and dragged him from the burning monster. Mikey staggered, but was able to make it up the stairs with his cousin's assistance then slammed the door shut. Tommy placed him by the back entrance then retrieved the gasoline can.

"The gas Tommy, turn on the gas," spoke Mikey in a whisper.

"What?" asked Tommy, frantic.

"Turn on the gas stove and blow out the flames," said The Torch.

Tommy shook his head, understanding his cousin, then poured gasoline along the floor.

"And just for good measure . . ."

Tommy took the rest of the gasoline can and headed for the basement door. "We can't have any of those seeds around."

Tommy opened the door only to be greeted by the creature, still in flames. It reached out with its sinewy arms and grabbed Tommy's sweater, searing the fabric.

"This was a present from my wife you fuck!"

"She still has a horrible voice!" the creature shrieked, before being doused by more gasoline. Tommy kicked the creature down the stairs where it broke apart, the limbs burning like dry branches.

"Alright Mikey, let's get out of here!"

Tommy flicked the rest of the matches on the kitchen floor and the two staggered back to his Mercedes. The house exploded like a bomb, throwing both Tommy and Mikey to the ground. Tommy picked his cousin up and headed to the car, helping him into the back seat. Tommy finally got in, but crouched down as a fire engine came barreling down the road. After it passed, he started the car, lights off, and headed in the other direction. Mikey was coughing in the back seat, but still alive.

Nearly a year later, the two couples decided a coastal New England weekend getaway would be a nice idea.

"Hope you don't mind ladies, but I want to stop off somewhere real quick," said Tommy, driving his black Mercedes down a familiar country side road. He pulled up a deserted uphill driveway, weeds poking through the gravel now, and parked the car.

"Hey, isn't this the place that had all those gorgeous red pumpkins?" asked Tommy's wife Maria, sitting in the back

seat with Mikey's wife, Ginger. Tommy looked back at Mikey, fully recovered, but now speaking with a stereotypical Mafioso voice.

"Yeah."

All four got out of the car. The house, barn, and most of the rusted farming equipment were all gone. The back yard was vacant except for a few scorched trees leaning over in defeat.

"There used to be a house and barn here, right Tommy?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, but I guess something happened," her husband answered, looking back at Mikey again. His wife gave him a cool stare. "Whadda say we stop off and pick up some fresh made apple cider?"

A few miles down the road, Tommy spotted a large pumpkin patch, complete with hayrides and apple cider for sale. There were lots of people milling around, enjoying the festivities.

"Hold on," said Tommy, his little gray cells thinking away. He paused, then remembered. "Oh for the . . . !" cried Tommy, noticing a large, rectangular orange sign, the letters painted in Kelly green.

"That's cute, Rey's Pumpkin Patchorama," said Maria.

"Rey?" Tommy muttered in horror. He turned to his cousin. The four got out of the car, Tommy raced ahead, Mikey following.

"Our boys sure love their pumpkin patches," exclaimed Maria. Ginger, fixing her ponytail, nodded in agreement.

"What's up?" Mikey called out, trying to keep up with his cousin.

"Rey!" blurted Tommy, turning back to his cousin. "Rey!" Mikey finally got it.

The two men frantically paced the grounds. "There, standing by the tractor," pointed Tommy. They greeted the man wearing an orange sweatshirt with the words Rey's Pumpkins printed in bold green letters.

"Are you Mr. Rey?" asked Tommy, who had erased most of his protruding gut by cutting out beer and his mom's homemade cannolis.

Mikey stepped closer and pulled down his turtleneck, revealing a nickel-

sized round scar. “Does this ring any bells old man?” The elderly gentleman, short and slender with a graying beard and wearing a matching orange cap, shook his head.

“I’m sorry, do I know you two?” he asked, intimidated.

“Maybe,” answered Tommy. “How long you been doing business here?”

“All my life, sir,” he replied. A woman of the same age with graying hair walked over, her two grandchildren by her side.

“Is everything okay honey?” she asked.

“It’s all fine, ma’am,” replied Mikey. The two started walking away when Tommy noticed something amongst the huge field of pumpkins.

“I see red, Tommy!” Both men picked up their pace, stalking into the sea of orange and began rummaging through the piles of pumpkins.

“There!” cried Tommy. He reached for his pocket knife, snapped it open and to everyone’s horror, began stabbing it. Mikey spotted another one and did the same.

“Where’s the blood?” Mikey asked. A large circle of people walked over, observing the odd behavior. The owner and his wife meandered their way through the stirring crowd. Mr. Rey stood between to the two men, tapping his duck boot. One little boy, baseball cap backwards, videotaped the whole episode.

“And how will you be paying for those,” the man said without smiling.

Tommy and Mikey looked at each other, puzzled then a wave of stupidity hit them square in their collective noggins. Both wives came over to what the excitement was about only to find their husbands sitting together with butchered red pumpkins.

“Sorry, we thought they were something else,” said Tommy.

“Like what?” asked Maria, dressed in a skin-tight cheetah print dress. Both men were pink-faced with embarrassment “Oh, this is so humiliating Tommy.” Her voice, dismayed.

The drive home was surprisingly quiet. Maria and Ginger, usually a pair of gold medal yapazoids, were fast asleep; Mikey nodding off too in the front passenger seat. After the pumpkin patch fiasco and late fast food lunch, Tommy drove about forty-five minutes when he was hit with a wave of trepidation.

“I gotta make sure,” Tommy uttered before turning the car around. He headed down the familiar side road again, pulling into the empty lot. Dusk was settling in. Tommy reached over for his flashlight in the glove compartment, stepping out into the cool, drab air. Only dead grass and remnants of the torched house remained in the yard where the pumpkin patch once grew. Tommy looked around, then walked over to where the horrific body pit was, now completely filled in.

Days after the incident, Sheriff Schiff and the big city police recovered over a dozen singed bodies, all identified as outsiders of Wickford, Rhode Island. Detectives later searched the scorched basement, discovering strange, unidentifiable remains; the consensus was of some strange animal.

It turned out the real Mitchell Rey had in fact, died many, many years ago. He drowned as well trying to rescue his parents from the icy cold Atlantic Ocean. Someone or something had stolen the man’s identity.

Tommy walked the grounds back and forth for almost half an hour, finding nothing. Then, hidden behind a couple of old tires, he spotted something. The husky man bent down and saw the familiar red shape, small, about the size of a tomato. He touched the shape then stroked his hand along on the plant. He knew the fragrance, having worked in his dad’s pizza restaurant for years. Still, he wasn’t taking any chances. Tommy took out his handgun and fired into the plant a dozen times, splattering the fruit all over the place. Satisfied, Tommy returned to his car and headed home.

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