

# PUMPKIN HEAD

AL SARRANTONIO

An orange and black afternoon.

Outside, under baring but still-robust trees, leaves tapped across sidewalks, a thousand fingernails drawn down a thousand dry blackboards.

Inside, a party beginning.

Ghouls loped up and down aisles between desks, shout-ing “Boo!” at one another. Crepe paper, crinkly and the col-ors of Halloween, crisscrossed over blackboards covered with mad and frightful doodlings in red and green chalk: snakes, rats, witches on broomsticks. Windowpanes were filled with cut-out black cats and ghosts with no eyes and giant *O*’s for mouths.

A fat jack-o’-lantern, flickering orange behind its mouth and eyes and giving off spicy fumes, glared down from Ms. Grinby’s desk.

Ms. Grinby, young, bright, and filled with enthusiasm, left the room to chase an errant goblin-child, and one blackboard witch was hastily labeled “Teacher.” Ms. Grinby, bearing her captive, returned, saw her caricature, and smiled. “All right, who did this?” she asked, not expecting an answer and not getting one. She tried to look rueful. “Never mind; but I think you know I don’t *really* look like that. Except maybe today.” She produced a witch’s peaked hat from her drawer and put it on with a flourish.

Laughter.

“Ah!” said Ms. Grinby, happy.

The party began.

Little bags were handed out, orange and white with freshly twisted tops and filled with orange and white candy corn.

Candy corn disappeared into pink little mouths.

There was much yelling, and the singing of Halloween songs with Ms. Grinby at the piano, and a game of pin the tail on the black cat. And then a ghost story, passed from child to child, one sentence each:

“It was a dark and rainy night—”

“—and . . . Peter had to come out of the storm—”

“—and he stopped at the only house on the road—”

“—and no one seemed to be home—”

“—because the house was empty and haunted—”

The story stopped dead at the last seat of the first row.

All eyes focused back on that corner.

The new child.

“Raylee,” asked Ms. Grinby gently, “aren’t you going to continue the story with us?”

Raylee, new in class that day; the quiet one, the shy one with black bangs and big eyes always looking down, sat with her small, grayish hands folded, her dark brown eyes straight ahead like a rabbit caught in a headlight beam.

“Raylee?”

Raylee’s thin pale hands shook.

Ms. Grinby got up quickly and went down the aisle, set-ting her hand lightly on the girl’s shoulder.

“Raylee is just shy,” she said, smiling down at the unmoving top of the girl’s head. She knelt down to face level, noticing two round fat beads of water at the corner of the girl’s eyes. Her hands were clenched hard.

“Don’t you want to join in with the rest of us?” Ms. Grinby whispered, a kindly look washing over her face. Empathy welled up in her. “Wouldn’t you like to make friends with everyone here?”

Nothing. She stared straight ahead, the bag of candy, still neatly wrapped and twisted, resting on the varnished and dented desktop before her.

“She’s a faggot!”

This from Judy Linthrop, one of the four Linthrop girls, aged six through eleven, and sometimes trouble.

“Now, Judy—” began Ms. Grinby.

“Faggot!” from Roger Mapleton.

“*Afaggot!*”

Peter Pakinski, Randy Feffer, Jane Campbell.

All eyes on Raylee for reaction.

“A pale little faggot!”

“That’s enough!” said Ms. Grinby, angry, and there was instant silence; the game had gone too far.

“Raylee,” she said, softly. Her young heart went out to this girl; she longed to scream at her, “Don’t be shy! There’s no reason, the hurt isn’t real, I know, I know!” Images of Ms. Grinby’s own childhood, her awful loneliness, came back to her and with them a lump to her throat.

*I know, I know!*

“Raylee,” she said, her voice a whisper in the party room, “don’t you want to join in?”

Silence.

“Raylee—”

“I know a story of my own.”

Ms. Grinby nearly gasped with the sound of the girl’s voice, it came so suddenly. Her upturned, sad little face abruptly came to life, took on color, became real. There was an earnestness in those eyes, which

looked out from the girl's haunted, shy darkness to her and carried her voice with them.

"I'll tell a story of my own if you'll let me."

Ms. Grinby almost clapped her hands. "Of course!" she said. "Class," looking about her at the other child-faces: some interested, some smirking, some holding back with comments and jeers, seeking an opening, a place to be heard, "Raylee is going to tell us a story. A Halloween story?" she asked, bending back down toward the girl, and when Raylee nodded yes she straightened and smiled and preceded her to the front of the room.

Ms. Grinby sat down on her stool behind her desk.

Raylee stood silent for a moment, before all the eyes and the almost jeers and the smirks, under the crepe paper and cardboard monsters and goblins.

Her eyes were on the floor, and then she suddenly realized that she had taken her bag of candy with her, and stood alone clutching it before them all. Ms. Grinby saw it too, and, before Raylee began to shuffle her feet and stand with embarrassment or run from the room, the teacher stood and said, "Here, why don't you let me hold that for you until you're finished?"

She took it from the girl's sweaty hand and sat down again.

Raylee stood silent, eyes downcast.

Ms. Grinby prepared to get up, to save her again.

"This story," Raylee began suddenly, startling the teacher into settling back into her chair, "is a scary one. It's about a little boy named Pumpkin Head."

Ms. Grinby sucked in her breath; there were some whis-perings from the class which she quieted with a stare.

"Pumpkin Head," Raylee went on, her voice small and low but clear and steady, "was very lonely. He had no friends. He was not a bad boy, and he liked to play, but no one would play with him because of the way he looked.

"He was called Pumpkin Head because his head was too big for his body. It had grown too fast for the rest of him, and was soft and large. He only had a little patch of hair, on the top of his head, and the skin on all of his head was soft and fat. You could almost pull it out into folds. His eyes, nose, and mouth were practically lost in all the fat on his face.

"Someone said Pumpkin Head looked that way because his father had worked at an atomic plant and had been in an accident before Pumpkin Head was born. But this wasn't his fault, and even his parents, though they loved him, were afraid of him because of the way he looked. When he stared into a mirror he was almost afraid of himself. At times he wanted to rip at his face with his fingers, or cut it with a knife, or hide it by wearing a bag over it with writing on it that said, 'I am me, I am normal just like you under here.' At times he felt so bad he wanted to bash his head against a wall, or go to the train tracks and let a train run over it."

Raylee paused, and Ms. Grinby almost stopped her, but noting the utter silence of the class, and Raylee's absorption with her story, she held her tongue.

"Finally, Pumpkin Head became so lonely that he decided to do anything he could to get a friend. He talked to everyone in his class, one by one, as nicely as he could, but no one would go near him. He tried

again, but still no one would go near him. Then he finally stopped trying.

“One day he began to cry in class, right in the middle of a history lesson. No one, not even the teacher, could make him stop. The tears ran down Pumpkin Head’s face, in furrows like on the hard furrows of a pumpkin. The teacher had to call his mother and father to come and get him, and even they had trouble taking him away because he sat in his chair with his hands tight around his seat and cried and cried. There didn’t seem to be enough tears in Pumpkin Head’s head for all his crying, and some of his classmates wondered if his pumpkin head was filled with water. But finally his parents brought him home and put him in his room, and there he stayed for three days, crying.

“After those three days passed, Pumpkin Head came out of his room. His tears had dried. He smiled through the ugly folds of skin on his face, and said that he wouldn’t cry any more and that he would like to go back to school. His mother and father wondered if he was really all right, but secretly, Pumpkin Head knew, they sighed with relief because having him around all the time made them nervous. Some of their friends would not come to see them when Pumpkin Head was in the house.

“Pumpkin Head went back to school that morning, smil-ing. He swung his lunch pail in his hand, his head held high. His teacher and his classmates were very surprised to see him back, and everyone left him alone for a while.

“But then, in the middle of the second period, one of the boys in the class threw a piece of paper at Pumpkin Head, and then another. Someone hissed that his head was like a pumpkin, and that he had better plant it before Halloween. ‘And on Halloween we’ll break open his pumpkin head!’ someone else yelled out.

“Pumpkin Head sat in his seat and carefully brought his lunch box up to his desk. He opened it quietly. Inside was his sandwich, made in a hurry by his mother, and an apple, and a bag of cookies. He took these out, and also the Ther-mos filled with milk, and set them on the desk. He closed the lunch pail and snapped shut the lid.

“Pumpkin Head stood and walked to the front of the room, carrying his lunch pail in his hand. He walked to the door and closed it, and then walked calmly to the teacher’s desk, turning toward the class. He opened his lunch box.

“ ‘My lunch and dinner,’ he said, ‘my dinner and breakfast.’

“He took out a sharp kitchen knife from his lunch pail.

“Everyone in the classroom began to scream.

“They took Pumpkin Head away after that, and they put him in a place—”

Ms. Grinby abruptly stepped from behind her desk.

“That’s all we have time for, Raylee,” she interrupted gently, trying to smile. Inside she wanted to scream over the loneliness of this child. “That was a *very* scary story. Where did you get it from?”

There was silence in the classroom.

Raylee’s eyes were back on the floor. “I made it up,” she said in a whisper.

To make up something like that, Ms. Grinby thought. *I know, I know!*

She patted the little girl on her back. “Here’s your candy; you can sit down now.” The girl returned to her

seat quickly, eyes averted.

All eyes were on her.

And then something that made Ms. Grinby's heart leap:

"Neat story!" said Randy Feffer.

"Neat!"

"Wow!"

Roger Mapleton, Jane Campbell.

As she sat down Raylee was trembling but smiling shyly.

"Neat story!"

A bell rang somewhere.

"Can it be that time already?" Ms. Grinby looked at the full moon-faced wall clock. "Why it is! Time to go home. I hope everyone had a nice party—and remember! Don't eat too much candy!"

A small hand waved anxiously at her from the center of the room.

"Yes, Cleo!"

Cleo, red-freckled face and blue eyes, stood up. "Can I please tell the class, Ms. Grinby, that I'm having a party tonight, and that I can invite everyone in the class?"

Ms. Grinby smiled. "You may, Cleo, but there doesn't seem to be much left to tell, does there?"

"Well," said Cleo, smiling at Raylee, "only that everyone's invited."

Raylee smiled back and looked quickly away.

Books and candy bags were crumpled together, and all ran out under crepe paper, cats, and ghouls, under the watchful eyes of the jack-o'-lantern, into darkening afternoon.

A black and orange night.

Here came a black cat walking on two legs; there two percale sheet ghosts trailing paper bags with handles; here again a miniature man from outer space. The wind was up: leaves whipped along the serpentine sidewalk like racing cars. There was an apple-crisp smell in the air, an icicle down your spine, here-comes-winter chill. Pumpkins everywhere, and a half-harvest moon playing coyly with wisps of high shadowy clouds. A thousand dull yellow night-lights winked through breezy trees on a thousand festooned porches. A constant ringing of doorbells, the wash of goblin traffic: they traveled in twos, threes, or fours, these mon-sters, held together by Halloween gravity. Groups passed other groups, just coming up, or coming down, stairs, made faces, and said "Boo!" There were a million "Boo!" greetings this night.

On one particular porch in all that thousand, goblins went up the steps but did not come down again. The door opened a crack, then wider, and groups of ghosts, wizards, and spooks, instead of waiting patiently for a toss in a bag and then turning away, slipped through into the house and disappeared from the night. Disappeared into another night.

Through the hallway and kitchen and down another set of stairs to the cellar. A cellar transformed. A cellar of hell, this cellar—charcoal-pit black with eerie dim red lanterns glowing out of odd corners and cracks. An Edgar Allan Poe cellar—and there hung his portrait over the apple-bobbing tub, raven-bedecked and with a cracked grin under those dark-pool eyes and that ponderous brow. This was his cellar, to be sure, a Masque of the Red Death cellar.

And here were the Poe-people; miniature versions of his evil creatures: enough hideous beasts to fill page after page and all shrunk down to child size. Devils galore, with papier-mâché masks, and hooves and tails of red rope, each with a crimson fork on the end; a gaggle of poke-hole ghosts; a mechanical cardboard man; two wolfmen; four vampires with wax teeth; one mummy; one ten-tentacled sea beast; three Frankenstein monsters; one Bride of same; and one monster of indefinite shape and design, something like a jellyfish made of plastic bags.

And Raylee.

Raylee came last; was last to slip silently and trembling through the portal of the yellow front door, was last to slip even more silently down the creaking cellar steps to the Poe-cellar below. She came cat silent and cautious, holding her breath—was indeed dressed cat-like, in whiskered mask, black tights, and black rope tail, all black to mix silently with the black basement.

No one saw her come in; only the black-beetle eyes of Poe over the apple tub noted her arrival.

The apple tub was well in use by now, a host of devils, ghosts, and Frankensteins clamoring around it and eagerly awaiting a turn at its game under Poe's watchful eyes.

"I got one!" shouted one red devil, triumphantly pulling a glossy apple from his mouth; no devil mask here, but a red-painted face, red and dripping from the tub's water. It was Peter, one of the taunting boys in Raylee's class.

Raylee hung back in the shadows.

"I got one!" shouted a Frankenstein monster.

"And me!" from his Bride. Two crisp red apples were held aloft for Poe's inspection.

"And me!" "And me!" shouted Draculas, hunchbacks, little green men.

Spooks and wolfmen shouted too.

One apple left.

"Who hasn't tried yet?" cried Cleo, resplendent in witch's garb. She was a miniature Ms. Grinby. She leaned her broom against the tub, called for attention.

"Who hasn't tried?"

Raylee tried to sink into the shadows' protection but could not. A deeper darkness was what she needed; she was spotted.

"Raylee! Raylee!" shouted Cleo. "Come get your apple!" It was a singsong, as Raylee held her hands out, apple-less, and stepped into the circle of ghouls.

She was terrified. She trembled so hard she could not hold her hands still on the side of the metal tub as she leaned over it. She wanted to bolt from the room, up the stairs and out through the yellow doorway

into the dark night.

“Dunk! Dunk!” the ghoulish circle began to chant, impatient.

Raylee stared down into the water, saw her dark-reflection and Poe’s mingled by the ripples of the bobbing apple.

“Dunk! Dunk!” the circle chanted.

Raylee pushed herself from the reflection, stared at the faces surrounding her. “I don’t want to!”

“Dunk! . . .” the chant faded.

Two dozen cool eyes surveyed her behind eye-holes, weighed her dispassionately in the sharp light of peer pressure. There were ghouls behind those ghoulish masks and eyes.

Someone hissed a laugh as the circle tightened around Raylee. Like a battered leaf with its stem caught under a rock in a high wind, she trembled.

Cleo, alone outside the circle, stepped quickly into it to protect her. She held out her hands. “Raylee—” she began soothingly.

The circle tightened still more, undaunted. Above them all, Poe’s eyes in the low crimson light seemed to brighten with anticipation.

Desperate, Cleo suddenly said, “Raylee, tell us a story.”

A moment of tension, and then a relaxed “Ah” from the circle.

Raylee shivered.

“Yes, tell us a story!”

This from someone in the suffocating circle, a wolfman, or perhaps a vampire.

“No, please,” Raylee begged. Her cat whiskers and cat tail shivered. “I don’t want to!”

“Story! Story!” the circle began to chant.

“No, please!”

“Tell us the rest of the other story!”

This from Peter in the back of the circle. A low voice, a command.

Another “Ah.”

“Yes, tell us!”

Raylee held her hands to her ears. “No!”

“Tell us!”

“No!”

“Tell us now!”

“I thought you were my friends!” Raylee threw her cat-paw hands out at them, her eyes begging.

*“Tell us.”*

A stifled cry escaped Raylee’s throat.

Instinctively, the circle widened. They knew she would tell now. They had commanded her. To be one of them, she would do what they told her to do.

Cleo stepped helplessly back into the circle, leaving Raylee under Poe’s twisted grin.

Raylee stood alone shivering for a moment. Then, her eyes on the floor, she ceased trembling, became very calm and still. There was a moment of silence. In the dark base-ment, all that could be heard was the snap of a candle in a far corner and the slapping of water against the lone apple in the tub behind her. When she looked up her eyes were dull, her voice quiet-calm.

She began to speak.

“They took Pumpkin Head away after that, and they put him in a place with crazy people in it. There was screaming all day and night. Someone was always screaming, or hit-ting his head against the wall, or crying all the time. Pumpkin Head was very lonely, and very scared.

“But Pumpkin Head’s parents loved him more than he ever knew. They decided they couldn’t let him stay in that place any longer. So they made a plan, a quiet plan.

“One day, when they went to visit him, they dressed him up in a disguise and carried him away. They carried him far away where no one would ever look for him, all the way across the country. They hid him, and kept him disguised while they tried to find some way to help him. And after a long search, they found a doctor.

“And the doctor did magical things. He worked for two years on Pumpkin Head, on his face and on his body. He cut into Pumpkin Head’s face, and changed it. With plastic, he made it into a real face. He changed the rest of Pumpkin Head’s head too, and gave him real hair. And he changed Pumpkin Head’s body.

“Pumpkin Head’s parents paid the doctor a lot of money, and the doctor did the work of a genius.

“He changed Pumpkin Head completely.”

Raylee paused, and a light came into her dull eyes. The circle, and Poe above them, waited with indrawn breath.

Waited to say “Ah.”

“He changed Pumpkin Head into a little girl.”

Breath was pulled back deeper, or let out in little gasps.

The light grew in Raylee’s eyes:

“There were things that Pumpkin Head, now not Pumpkin Head any more, had to do to be a girl. He had to be care-ful how he dressed, and how he acted. He had to be careful how he talked, and he always had to be calm. He was very frightened of what would happen if he didn’t stay calm. For his face was really just a wonderful plastic one. The real Pumpkin Head was still inside, locked in, waiting to come out.”



Raylee looked up at them, and her voice suddenly became something different. Hard and rasping.

Her eyes were stoked coals.

“All he ever wanted was friends.”

Her cat mask fell away. Her little girl face became soft and bloated and began to grow as if someone were blowing up a balloon inside her. Her hair began to pull into the scalp, forming a circle knot at the top. Creases appeared up and down her face.

With a sickening, rubber-inflated sound, the sound of a melon breaking, Raylee’s head burst open to its true shape. Her eyes, ears, and nose became soft orange triangles, her mouth a lazy, grinning crescent. She began to breathe with harsh effort, and her voice became a sharp, wheezing lisp.

“He only wanted friends.”

Slowly, with care, Raylee reached down into her cos-tume for what lay hidden there.

She drew it out.

In the black cellar, under Poe’s approving glare, there were screams.

“My lunch and dinner,” she said, “my dinner and breakfast.”