

THE BLACK PUMPKIN By Dean R. Koontz 1 THE PUMPKINS WERE CREEPY, BUT THE MAN WHO CARVED THEM WAS far stranger than his creations. He appeared to have baked for ages in the California sun, until all the juices had been cooked out of his flesh. He was stringy, bony, and leather skinned. His head resembled a squash, not pleasingly round like a pumpkin, yet not shaped like an ordinary head, either: slightly narrower at the top and wider at the chin than was natural. His amber eyes glowed with a sullen, smoky, weak - but dangerous - light. Tommy Sutzmann was uneasy the moment that he saw the old pumpkin carver. He told himself that he was foolish, overreacting again. He had a tendency to be alarmed by the mildest signs of anger in others, to panic at the first vague perception of a threat. Some families taught their twelve-year-old boys honesty, integrity, decency, and faith in God. By their actions, however, Tommy's parents and his brother, Frank, had taught him to be cautious, suspicious, and even paranoid. In the best of times, his mother and father treated him as an outsider; in the worst of times, they enjoyed punishing him as a means of releasing their anger and frustration at the rest of the world. To Frank, Tommy was simply - and always - a target. Consequently, deep and abiding uneasiness was Tommy Sutzmann's natural condition. Every December this vacant lot was full of Christmas trees, and during the summer, itinerant merchants used the space to exhibit DayGlo stuffed animals or paintings on velvet. As Halloween approached, the half-acre property, tucked between a supermarket and a bank on the outskirts of Santa Ana, was an orange montage of pumpkins: all sizes and shapes, lined in rows and stacked in neat low pyramids and tumbled in piles, maybe two thousand of them, three thousand, the raw material of pies and jack-o'-lanterns. The carver was in a back corner of the lot, sitting on a tube-metal chair. The vinyl-upholstered pads on the back and seat of the chair were darkly mottled, webbed with cracks - not unlike the carver's face. He sat with a pumpkin on his lap, whittling with a sharp knife and other tools that lay on the dusty ground beside him. Tommy Sutzmann did not remember crossing the field of pumpkins. He recalled getting out of the car as soon as his father had parked at the curb - and the next thing he knew, he was in the back of the lot just a few feet from the strange sculptor. A score of finished jack-o'-lanterns were propped atop mounds of other pumpkins. This artist did not merely hack crude eye holes and mouths. He carefully cut the skin and the rind of the squash in layers, producing features with great definition and surprising subtlety. He also used paint to give each creation its own demonic personality: Four cans, each containing a brush, stood on the ground beside his chair - red, white, green, and black. The jack-o'-lanterns grinned and frowned and scowled and leered. They seemed to be staring at Tommy. Every one of them. Their mouths were agape, little pointy teeth bared. None had the blunt, goofy dental work of ordinary jack-o'-lanterns. Some were equipped with long fangs. Staring, staring. And Tommy had the peculiar feeling that they could see him. When he looked up from the pumpkins, he discovered that the old man was also watching him intently. Those amber eyes, full of smoky light, seemed to brighten as they held Tommy's own gaze. "Would you like one of my pumpkins?" the carver asked. In his cold, dry voice, each word was as crisp as October leaves wind-blown along a stone walk. Tommy could not speak. He tried to say, No, sir, thank you, no, but the words stuck in his throat as if he were trying to swallow the cloying pulp of a pumpkin. "Pick a favorite," the carver said, gesturing with one withered hand toward his gallery of grotesques - but never taking his eyes off Tommy. "No, uh ... no, thank you." Tommy was dismayed to hear that his voice had a tremor and a slightly shrill edge. What's wrong with me? he wondered. Why am I hyping myself into a fit like this? He's just an old guy who carves pumpkins. "Is it the price you're worried about?" the carver asked. "No." "Because you pay the man out front for the pumpkin, same price as any other on the lot, and you just give me whatever you feel my work is worth." When he smiled, every aspect of his squash-shaped head changed. Not for the better. The day was mild.

Sunshine found its way through holes in the overcast, brightly illuminating some orange mounds of pumpkins while leaving others deep in cloud shadows. In spite of the warm weather, a chill gripped Tommy and would not release him. Leaning forward with the half-sculpted pumpkin in his lap, the carver said, "You just give me whatever amount you wish ... although I'm duty-bound to say that you get what you give." Another smile. Worse than the first one. Tommy said, "Uh ...". "You get what you give," the carver repeated. "No shit?" brother Frank said, stepping up to the row of leering jack-o'-lanterns. Evidently he had overheard everything. He was two years older than Tommy, muscular where Tommy was slight, with a self-confidence that Tommy had never known. Frank hefted the most macabre of all the old guy's creations. "So how much is this one?" The carver was reluctant to shift his gaze from Tommy to Frank, and Tommy was unable to break the contact first. In the man's eyes Tommy saw something he could not define or understand, something that filled his mind's eye with images of disfigured children, deformed creatures that he could not name, and dead things. "How much is this one, gramps?" Frank repeated. At last, the carver looked at Frank - and smiled. He lifted the half-carved pumpkin off his lap, put it on the ground, but did not get up. "As I said, you pay me what you wish, and you get what you give." Frank had chosen the most disturbing jack-o'-lantern in the eerie collection. It was big, not pleasingly round but lumpy and misshapen, narrower at the top than at the bottom, with ugly crusted nodules like ligneous fungus on a diseased oak tree. The old man had compounded the unsettling effect of the pumpkin's natural deformities by giving it an immense mouth with three upper and three lower fangs. Its nose was an irregular hole that made Tommy think of campfire tales about lepers. The slanted eyes were as large as lemons but were not cut all the way through the rind except for a pupil - an evil elliptical slit - in the center of each. The stem in the head was dark and knotted as Tommy imagined a cancerous growth might be. The maker of jack-o'-lanterns had painted this one black, letting the natural orange color blaze through in only a few places to create character lines around the eyes and mouth as well as to add emphasis to the tumorous growths. Frank was bound to like that pumpkin. His favorite movies were *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and all the Friday the 13th sagas of the mad, murderous Jason. When Tommy and Frank watched a movie of that kind on the VCR, Tommy always pulled for the victims, while Frank cheered the killer. Watching *Poltergeist*, Frank was disappointed that the whole family survived: He kept hoping that the little boy would be eaten by some creepazoid in the closet and that his stripped bones would be spit out like watermelon seeds. "Hell," Frank had said, "they could've at least ripped the guts out of the stupid dog." Now, Frank held the black pumpkin, grinning as he studied its malevolent features. He squinted into the thing's slitted pupils as if the jack-o'-lantern's eyes were real, as if there were thoughts to be read in those depths - and for a moment he seemed to be mesmerized by the pumpkin's gaze. Put it down, Tommy thought urgently. For God's sake, Frank, put it down and let's get out of here. The carver watched Frank intently. The old man was still, like a predator preparing to pounce. Clouds moved, blocking the sun. Tommy shivered. Finally breaking the staring contest with the jack-o'-lantern, Frank said to the carver, "I give you whatever I like?" "You get what you give." "But no matter what I give, I get the jack-o'-lantern?" "Yes, but you get what you give," the old man said cryptically. Frank put the black pumpkin aside and pulled some change from his pocket. Grinning, he approached the old man, holding a nickel. The carver reached for the coin. "No!" Tommy protested too explosively. Both Frank and the carver regarded him with surprise. Tommy said, "No, Frank, it's a bad thing. Don't buy it. Don't bring it home, Frank." For a moment Frank stared at him in astonishment, then laughed. "You've always been a wimp, but are you telling me now you're scared of a pumpkin?" "It's a bad thing," Tommy insisted. "Scared of the dark, scared of high places, scared of what's in your bedroom closet at night, scared of half the other kids you meet - and now scared of a stupid damn

pumpkin," Frank said. He laughed again, and his laugh was rich with scorn and disgust as well as with amusement. The carver took his cue from Frank, but the old man's dry laugh contained no amusement at all. Tommy was pierced by an icy needle of fear that he could not explain, and he wondered if he might be a wimp after all, afraid of his shadow, maybe even unbalanced. The counselor at school said he was "too sensitive." His mother said he was "too imaginative," and his father said he was "impractical, a dreamer, self-involved." Maybe he was all those things, and perhaps he would wind up in a sanitarium someday, in a boobyhatch with rubber walls, talking to imaginary people, eating flies. But, damn it, he knew the black pumpkin was a bad thing. "Here, gramps," Frank said, "here's a nickel. Will you really sell it for that?" "I'll take a nickel for my carving, but you still have to pay the usual price of the pumpkin to the fella who operates the lot." "Deal," Frank said. The carver plucked the nickel out of Frank's hand. Tommy shuddered. Frank turned from the old man and picked up the pumpkin again. Just then, the sun broke through the clouds. A shaft of light fell on their corner of the lot. Only Tommy saw what happened in that radiant moment. The sun brightened the orange of the pumpkins, imparted a gold sheen to the dusty ground, gleamed on the metal frame of the chair - but did not touch the carver himself. The light parted around him as if it were a curtain, leaving him in the shade. It was an incredible sight, as though the sunshine shunned the carver, as though he were composed of an unearthly substance that repelled light. Tommy gasped. The old man fixed Tommy with a wild look, as though he were not a man at all but a storm spirit passing as a man, as though he would at any second erupt into tornadoes of wind, furies of rain, crashes of thunder, lightning. His amber eyes were aglow with promises of pain and terror. Abruptly the clouds covered the sun again. The old man winked. We're dead, Tommy thought miserably. Having lifted the pumpkin again, Frank looked craftily at the old man as if expecting to be told that the nickel sale was a joke. "I can really just take it away?" "I keep telling you," the carver said. "How long did you work on this?" Frank asked. "About an hour." "And you're willing to settle for a nickel an hour?" "I work for the love of it. For the sheer love of it." The carver winked at Tommy again. "What are you, senile?" Frank asked in his usual charming manner. "Maybe. Maybe." Frank stared at the old man, perhaps sensing some of what Tommy felt, but he finally shrugged and turned away, carrying the jack-o'-lantern toward the front of the lot where their father was buying a score of uncarved pumpkins for the big party the following night. Tommy wanted to run after his brother, beg Frank to return the black pumpkin and get his nickel back. "Listen here," the carver said fiercely, leaning forward once more. The old man was so thin and angular that Tommy was convinced he'd heard ancient bones scraping together within the inadequate padding of the desiccated body. "Listen to me, boy" No, Tommy thought. No, I won't listen, I'll run, I'll run. The old man's power was like solder, however, fusing Tommy to that piece of ground, rendering him incapable of movement. "In the night," the carver said, his amber eyes darkening, "your brother's jack-o'-lantern will grow into something other than what it is now. Its jaws will work. Its teeth will sharpen. When everyone is asleep, it'll creep through your house ... and give what's deserved. It'll come for you last of all. What do you think you deserve, Tommy? You see, I know your name, though your brother never used it. What do you think the black pumpkin will do to you, Tommy? Hmmm? What do you deserve?" "What are you?" Tommy asked. The carver smiled. "Dangerous." Suddenly Tommy's feet tore loose of the earth to which they had been stuck, and he ran. When he caught up with Frank, he tried to persuade his brother to return the black pumpkin, but his explanation of the danger came out as nothing more than hysterical babbling, and Frank laughed at him. Tommy tried to knock the hateful thing out of Frank's hands. Frank held on to the jack-o'-lantern and gave Tommy a hard shove that sent him sprawling backward over a pile of pumpkins. Frank laughed again, purposefully tramped hard on Tommy's right foot as the younger boy struggled to get up, and moved

away. Through the involuntary tears wrung from him by the pain in his foot, Tommy looked toward the back of the lot and saw that the carver was watching.

The old man waved. Heart beating double time, Tommy limped out to the front of the lot, searching for a way to convince Frank of the danger. But Frank was already putting his purchase on the backseat of the Cadillac. Their father was paying for the jack-o'-lantern and for a score of uncarved pumpkins. Tommy was too late. 2 AT HOME, FRANK TOOK THE BLACK PUMPKIN INTO HIS BEDROOM AND stood it on the desk in the corner, under the poster of Michael Berryman as the demented killer in *The Hills Have Eyes*. From the open doorway, Tommy watched. Frank had found a fat, scented decorative candle in the kitchen pantry; now he put it inside the pumpkin. It was big enough to burn steadily for at least two days. Dreading the appearance of light in the jack-o'-lantern's eyes, Tommy watched as Frank lit the candle and put the pumpkin's stem-centered lid in place. The slitted pupils glowed-flickered-shimmered with a convincing imitation of demonic life and malevolent intellect. The serrated grin blazed bright, and the fluttering light was like a tongue ceaselessly licking the cold-rind lips. The most disgusting part of the illusion of life was the leprous pit of a nose, which appeared to fill with moist, yellowish mucus. "Incredible!" Frank said. "That old fart is a real genius at this stuff." The scented candle emitted the fragrance of roses. Although he could not remember where he had read of such a thing, Tommy recalled that the sudden, unexplained scent of roses supposedly indicated the presence of spirits of the dead. Of course, the source of this odor was no mystery. "What the hell?" Frank said, wrinkling his nose. He lifted the lid of the jack-o'-lantern and peered inside. The inconstant orange light played across his face, queerly distorting his features. "This is supposed to be a lemon-scented candle. Not roses, not girlie crap."

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In the big airy kitchen, Lois and Kyle Sutzmann, Tommy's mother and father, were standing at the table with the caterer, Mr. Howser. They were studying the menu for the flashy Halloween party that they were throwing the following night - and loudly reminding Mr. Howser that the food was to be prepared with the finest ingredients. Tommy circled behind them, hoping to remain invisible. He took a can of Coke from the refrigerator. Now his mother and father were hammering the caterer about the need for everything to be "impressive." Hors d'oeuvres, flowers, the bar, the waiters' uniforms, and the buffet dinner must be so elegant and exquisite and drop-dead perfect that every guest would feel himself to be in the home of true California aristocracy. This was not a party for kids. In fact, Tommy and Frank would be required to remain in their rooms tomorrow evening, permitted to engage only in the quietest activities: no television, no stereo, no slightest peep to draw attention to themselves. This party was strictly for the movers and shakers on whom Kyle Sutzmann's political career depended. He was now a California State Senator, but in next week's election he was running for the United States Congress. This was a thank-you party for his most generous financial backers and for the power brokers who had pulled strings to ensure his nomination the previous spring. Kids verboten. Tommy's parents seemed to want him around only at major campaign rallies, media photography sessions, and for a few minutes at the start of election-night victory parties. That was okay with Tommy. He preferred to remain invisible. On those rare occasions when his folks took notice of him, they invariably disapproved of everything he said and did, every movement he made, every innocent expression that crossed his face. Lois said, "Mr. Howser, I hope we understand that large shrimp do not qualify as finger lobster." As the nervous caterer reassured Lois of the quality of his operation, Tommy sidled silently away from the refrigerator and quietly extracted two Milanos from the cookie jar. "These are important people," Kyle informed the caterer for the tenth time, "substantial and sophisticated people, and they are accustomed to the very best." In school, Tommy had been taught that politics was the means by which many enlightened people chose to serve their fellow men. He knew that was baloney. His parents spent long

evenings plotting his father's political career, and Tommy never once overheard either of them talk about serving the people or improving society. Oh, sure, in public, on campaign platforms, that was what they talked about "the rights of the masses, the hungry, the homeless" - but never in private. Beyond the public eye, they endlessly discussed "forming power bases" and "crushing the opposition" and "shoving this new law down their throats." To them and to all the people with whom they associated, politics was a way to gain respect, make some money, and - most important - acquire power. Tommy understood why people liked to be respected, because he received no respect at all. He could see why having a lot of money was desirable. But he did not understand this power thing. He could not figure why anyone would waste a lot of time and energy trying to acquire power over other people. What fun could be gotten from ordering people around, telling them what to do? What if you told them to do the wrong thing, and then what if, because of your orders, people were hurt or wound up broke or something worse? And how could you expect people to like you if you had power over them? After all, Frank had power over Tommy - complete power, total control - and Tommy loathed him. Sometimes he thought he was the only sane person in the family. At other times, he wondered if they were all sane and if he was mad. Whatever the case, crazy or sane, Tommy always felt that he did not belong in the same house with his own family. As he slipped stealthily out of the kitchen with his can of Coke and two Milanos wrapped in a paper napkin, his parents were querying Mr. Howser about the champagne. In the back hallway, Frank's door was open, and Tommy paused for a glimpse of the pumpkin. It was still there, fire in every aperture. "What you got there?" Frank asked, stepping into the doorway. He grabbed Tommy by the shirt, yanked him into the room, slammed the door, and confiscated the cookies and Coke. "Thanks, snotface. I was just thinking I could use a snack." He went to the desk and put the booty beside the glowing jack-o'-lantern. Taking a deep breath, steeling himself for what resistance would mean, Tommy said, "Those are mine." Frank pretended shock. "Is my little brother a greedy glutton who doesn't know how to share?" "Give me back my Coke and cookies." Frank's grin seemed filled with shark's teeth. "Good heavens, dear brother, I think you need to be taught a lesson. Greedy little gluttons have to be shown the path of enlightenment." Tommy would have preferred to walk away, to let Frank win, to go back to the kitchen and fetch another Coke and more cookies. But he knew that his life, already intolerable, would get far worse if he didn't make an effort, no matter how futile, to stand up to this stranger who was supposedly his brother. Total, willing capitulation would inflame Frank and encourage him to be even more of a bully than he already was. "I want my cookies and my Coke," Tommy insisted, wondering if any cookies, even Milanos, were worth dying for. Frank rushed him. They fell to the floor, pummeling each other, rolling, kicking, but producing little noise. They didn't want to draw their folks' attention. Tommy was reluctant to let his parents know what was happening because they would invariably blame the ruckus on him. Athletic, well-tanned Frank was their dream child, their favorite son, and he could do no wrong. Frank probably wanted to keep the battle secret because their father would put a stop to it, thereby spoiling the fun. Throughout the tussle, Tommy had brief glimpses of the glowing jack-o'-lantern, which gazed down on them, and he was sure that its grin grew steadily wider, wider. At last Tommy was driven into a corner, beaten and exhausted. Straddling him, Frank slapped him once, hard, rattling his senses, then tore at Tommy's clothes, pulling them off. "No!" Tommy whispered when he realized that in addition to being beaten, he was to be humiliated. "No, no." He struggled with what little strength he still possessed, but his shirt was stripped off; his jeans and underwear were yanked down. With his pants tangled around his sneakers, he was pulled to his feet and half carried across the room. Frank threw open the door, pitched Tommy into the hallway, and called out, "Oh, Maria! Maria, can you come here a moment, please?" Maria was the twice-a-week maid who came in to clean and do the ironing. This was one of her days. "Maria!"

Naked, terrified of being humiliated in front of the maid, Tommy scrambled to his feet, grabbed his pants, tried to run and pull up his jeans at the same time, stumbled, fell, and sprang up again. "Maria, can you come here, please?" Frank asked, barely able to get the words out between gales of laughter. Gasping, whimpering, Tommy somehow reached his room and got out of sight before Maria appeared. For a while he leaned against the closed door, holding up his jeans with both hands, shivering.

3 WITH THEIR PARENTS OFF AT A CAMPAIGN APPEARANCE, TOMMY AND Frank ate dinner together, after heating up a casserole that Maria had left in the refrigerator. Ordinarily, dinner with Frank was an ordeal, but this time it proved to be uneventful. As he ate, Frank was engrossed in a magazine that reported on the latest horror movies, with heavy emphasis on slice-and-dice films and with lots of color photographs of mutilated and blood-soaked bodies; he seemed oblivious of Tommy. Later, when Frank was in the bathroom preparing for bed, Tommy sneaked into his older brother's room and stood at the desk, studying the jack-o'-lantern. The wicked mouth glowed. The narrow pupils were alive with fire. The scent of roses filled the room, but underlying that odor was another more subtle and less appealing fragrance that he could not quite identify. Tommy was aware of a malevolent presence - something even worse than the malevolence that he could always sense in Frank's room. A cold current raced through his blood. Suddenly he was certain that the potential murderous power of the black pumpkin was enhanced by the candle within it. Somehow, the presence of light inside its shell was dangerous, a triggering factor. Tommy did not know how he knew this, but he was convinced that if he was to have the slightest chance of surviving the coming night, he must extinguish the flame. He grasped the gnarled stem and removed the lid from the top of the jack-o'-lantern's skull. Light did not merely rise from inside the pumpkin but seemed to be flung at him, hot on his face, stinging his eyes. He blew out the flame. The jack-o'-lantern went dark. Immediately, Tommy felt better. He put the lid in place. As he let go of the stem, the candle refit spontaneously. Stunned, he jumped back. Light shone from the carved eyes, the nose, the mouth. "No," he said softly. He removed the lid and blew out the candle once more. A moment of darkness within the pumpkin. Then, before his eyes, the flame reappeared. Reluctantly, issuing a thin involuntary sound of distress, Tommy reached into the jack-o'-lantern to snuff the stubborn candle with his thumb and finger. He was convinced that the pumpkin shell would suddenly snap shut around his wrist, severing his hand, leaving him with a bloody stump. Or perhaps it would hold him fast while swiftly dissolving the flesh from his fingers and then release him with an arm that terminated in a skeletal hand. Driven toward the brink of hysteria by these fears, he pinched the wick, extinguished the flame, and snatched his hand back with a sob of relief, grateful to have escaped mutilation. He jammed the lid in place and, hearing the toilet flush in the adjacent bath, hurried out of the room. He dared not let Frank catch him there. As he stepped into the hallway, he glanced back at the jack-o'-lantern, and, of course, it was full of candlelight again. He went straight to the kitchen and got a butcher's knife, which he took back to his own room and hid beneath his pillow. He was sure that he would need it sooner or later in the dead hours before dawn.

4 HIS PARENTS CAME HOME SHORTLY BEFORE MIDNIGHT. Tommy was sitting in bed, his room illuminated only by the pale bulb of the low-wattage night-light. The butcher's knife was at his side, under the covers, and his hand was resting on the haft. For twenty minutes, Tommy could hear his folks talking, running water, flushing toilets, closing doors. Their bedroom and bath were at the opposite end of the house from his and Frank's rooms, so the noises they made were muffled but nonetheless reassuring. These were the ordinary noises of daily life, and as long as the house was filled with them, no weird lantern-eyed predator could be stalking anyone. Soon, however, quiet returned. In the postmidnight stillness, Tommy waited for the first scream. He was determined not to fall asleep. But he was only twelve years old, and he was exhausted after a long day and drained by the sustained terror

that had gripped him ever since he had seen the mummy-faced pumpkin carver. Propped against a pile of pillows, he dozed off long before one o'clock - and something thumped, waking him. He was instantly alert. He sat straight up in bed, clutching the butcher's knife. For a moment he was certain that the sound had originated within his own room. Then he heard it again, a solid thump, and he knew that it had come from Frank's room across the hall. He threw aside the covers and sat on the edge of the bed, tense. Waiting. Listening. Once, he thought he heard Frank calling his name - "Tooommmmyy" - a desperate and frightened and barely audible cry that seemed to come from the far rim of a vast canyon. Perhaps he imagined it. Silence. His hands were slick with sweat. He put the big knife aside and blotted his palms on his pajamas. Silence. He picked up the knife again. He reached under his bed and found the flashlight that he kept there, but he did not switch it on. He eased cautiously to the door and listened for movement in the hallway beyond. Nothing. An inner voice urged him to return to bed, pull the covers over his head, and forget what he had heard. Better yet, he could crawl under the bed and hope that he would not be found. But he knew this was the voice of the wimp within, and he dared not hope for salvation in cowardice. If the black pumpkin had grown into something else, and if it was now loose in the house, it would respond to timidity with no less savage glee than Frank would have shown. God, he thought fervently, there's a boy down here who believes in you, and he'd be very disappointed if you happened to be looking the other way right now when he really, really, really needs you. Tommy quietly turned the knob and opened the door. The hallway, illuminated only by the moonlight that streamed through the window at the end, was deserted. Directly across the hall, the door to Frank's room stood open. Still not switching on the flashlight, desperately hoping that his presence would go undetected if he was mantled in darkness, he stepped to Frank's doorway and listened. Frank usually snored, but no snoring could be heard tonight. If the jack-o'-lantern was in there, the candle had been extinguished at last, for no flickering paraffin light was visible. Tommy crossed the threshold. Moonlight silvered the window, and the palm-frond shadows of a wind-stirred tree danced on the glass. In the room, no object was clearly outlined. Mysterious shapes loomed in shades of dark gray and black. He took one step. Two. Three. His heart pounded so hard that it shattered his resolve to cloak himself in darkness. He snapped on the Eveready and was startled by the way the butcher's knife in his right hand reflected the light. He swept the beam around the room and, to his relief, saw no crouching monstrosity. The sheets and blankets were tumbled in a pile on the mattress, and he had to take another step toward the bed before he was able to ascertain that Frank was not there. The severed hand was on the floor by the nightstand. Tommy saw it in the penumbra of the flashlight, and he brought the beam to bear directly on it. He stared in shock. Frank's hand. No doubt about its identity, because Frank's treasured silver skull-and-crossbones ring gleamed brightly on one slug-white finger. It was curled into a tight fist. Perhaps powered by a postmortem nerve spasm, perhaps energized by darker forces, the fisted hand suddenly opened, fingers unfolding like the spreading petals of a flower. In the palm was a single, shiny nickel. Tommy stifled a wild shriek but could not repress a series of violent shudders. As he frantically tried to decide which escape route might be safest, he heard his mother scream from the far end of the house. Her shrill cry was abruptly cut off. Something crashed. Tommy turned toward the doorway of Frank's room. He knew that he should run before it was too late, but he was as welded to this spot as he had been to that bit of dusty ground in the pumpkin lot when the carver had insisted on telling him what the jack-o'-lantern would become during the lonely hours of the night. He heard his father shout. A gunshot. His father screamed. This scream also was cut short. Silence again. Tommy tried to lift one foot, just one, just an inch off the floor, but it would not be lifted. He sensed that more than fear was holding him down, that some malevolent spell prevented him from escaping the black pumpkin. A door slammed at the other end of the house.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Heavy, scraping footsteps. Tears slipped out of Tommy's eyes and down his cheeks. In the hall, the floorboards creaked and groaned as if under a great weight. Staring at the open door with no less terror than if he had been gazing into the entrance of Hell, Tommy saw flickering orange light in the corridor. The glow grew brighter as the source - no doubt a candle - drew nearer from the left, from the direction of his parents' bedroom. Amorphous shadows and eerie snakes of light crawled on the hall carpet. The heavy footsteps slowed. Stopped. Judging by the light, the thing was only a foot or two from the doorway. Tommy swallowed hard and worked up enough spit to say, "Who's there?" but was surprised to hear himself say instead, "Okay, damn you, let's get it over with." Perhaps his years in the Sutzmann house had toughened him more thoroughly and had made him more fatalistic than he had previously realized. The creature lurched into view, filling the doorway. Its head was formed by the jack-o'-lantern, which had undergone hideous mutations. That peculiar pate had retained its black and orange coloring and its gourdlike shape, narrower at the top than at the bottom, and all the tumorous nodules were as crusted and disgusting as ever. However, though it had been as large as any pumpkin that Tommy had ever seen, it was now only about the size of a basketball, shriveled. The eyes had sagged, although the slitted pupils were still narrow and mean. The nose was bubbling with some vile mucus. The immense mouth stretched from ear to ear, for it had remained large while the rest of the face had shrunk around it. In the orange light that streamed out between them, the hooked fangs appeared to have been transformed from points of pumpkin rind into hard, sharp protuberances of bone. The body under the head was vaguely humanoid, although it seemed to be composed of thick gnarled roots and tangled vines. The beast appeared to be immensely strong, a colossus, a fierce juggernaut if it wished to be. Even in his terror, Tommy was filled with awe. He wondered if the creature's body had grown from the substance in its previously enormous pumpkin head and, more pointedly, from the flesh of Frank, Lois, and Kyle Sutzmann. Worst of all was the orange light within the skull. The candle still burned in there. Its leaping flames emphasized the impossible emptiness of the head - How could the thing move and think without a brain? - and invested a savage and demonic awareness in its eyes. The nightmarish vision raised one thick, twisted, powerful, vinelike arm and thrust a rootlike finger at Tommy. "You," it said in a deep whispery voice that called to mind the sound of wet slush pouring down a drain. Tommy was now less surprised by his inability to move than by his ability to stand erect. His legs felt like rags. He was sure that he was going to collapse in a helpless heap while the thing descended upon him, but somehow he remained on his feet with the flashlight in one hand and the butcher's knife in the other. The knife. Useless. The sharpest blade in the world could never harm this adversary, so Tommy let the knife slip out of his sweaty fingers. It clattered to the floor. "You," the black pumpkin repeated, and its voice reverberated moistly throughout the room. "Your vicious brother got what he gave. Your mother got what she gave. Your father got what he gave. I fed on them, sucked the brains out of their heads, chewed up their flesh, dissolved their bones. Now what do you deserve?" Tommy could not speak. He was shaking and weeping silently and dragging each breath into his lungs only with tremendous effort. The black pumpkin lurched out of the doorway and into the room, looming over him, eyes blazing. It stood nearly seven feet tall and had to tilt its lantern head to peer down at him. Curls of sooty black smoke from the candle wick escaped between its fangs and from its leprous nose. Speaking in a rough whisper, yet with such force that its words vibrated the windowpanes, the thing said, "Unfortunately, you are a good boy, and I've no right or license to feed on you. So ... What you deserve is what you've got from now on - freedom." Tommy stared up into the Halloween face, striving hard to grasp what he had been told. "Freedom," the demonic beast repeated. "Freedom from Frank and Lois and Kyle. Freedom to grow up without their heels pressing down on you. Freedom to be the best that you can be - which means I'll most likely

never get a chance to feed on you." For a long time they stood face to face, boy and beast, and gradually Tommy achieved complete understanding. In the morning, his parents and his brother would be missing. Never to be found. A great and enduring mystery. Tommy would have to live with his grandparents. You get what you give. "But maybe," the black pumpkin said, putting one cold hand upon Tommy's shoulder, "maybe there's some rottenness in you too, and maybe someday you'll surrender to it, and maybe in time I'll still have my chance with you. Dessert." Its wide grin grew even wider. "Now get back to your bed and sleep. Sleep." Simultaneously horrified and filled with strange delight, Tommy crossed the room to the doorway, moving as if in a dream. He looked back and saw that the black pumpkin was still watching him with interest. Tommy said, "You missed a bit," and pointed to the floor beside his brother's nightstand. The beast looked at Frank's severed hand. "Ahhhh," said the black pumpkin, snatching up the hand and stuffing that grisly morsel into its mouth. The flame within the squashy skull suddenly burned very bright, a hundred times brighter than before, then was extinguished.

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