

# AUNTIE ELSPETH'S HALLOWEEN STORY OR THE GOURD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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Hello, children, what brings you here to see your kindly old Auntie Elspeth? Parents fed up with you again? Well, never you mind. Auntie Elspeth knows what it's like to be unwanted, especially by the very same people who claim to love and cherish you, but who'll shove you into a so-called senior citizens' community—spelled “hellhole”—so fast that your wheelchair leaves skidmarks on the linoleum.

Now, now, don't whimper, and for heaven's sake don't look at me with those great big sad puppydog eyes. You don't want to know what I did to the last real puppydog who tried that crap on me. Face the facts, kiddies: Mommy and Daddy want you the hell out of their hair for awhile, probably because they want to play Hide the Hamster—no, you do not need to know what that means—but they also want an ooey-gooley feelgood excuse for doing it. That's why they parked you here with me. Probably said something like, “Oh my, won't dear old Auntie Elspeth love hav-ing some quality time with the children?”

No, Tommy, the word you are looking for to describe what Mommy and Daddy said is not “fibbing.” The word you want is “bullshit.” See if you can remember to say that when Mommy and Daddy come to pick you up, you and the rest of this clutch of young harpies-in-training. You see, dearie? Being with Auntie Elspeth is *educational*. That's another word Mommy and Daddy use a whole lot, I'll bet, especially when they want to justify plunking you brats down for a four-hour stint in front of the television.

As long as we're stuck with each other for—When did your parents say they were coming back? What? *That* long?! Why, those stinking, lousy, rotten sons-of—! Just because I'm old, do they think I've got nothing better to do with my time than hang out with the spawn of their loins? Bah.

Oh, to hell with it. Open the top drawer of that night-stand over there, kids; it's full of candy. Help yourself to as much as you want. Maybe if I send you back to them tanked up on sugar they'll think twice before farming you out to me again.

Hm? What's that, Cindy? You don't want any candy? What the hell's the matter with you?

Ohhhh. Not hungry, just bored. And bor-*ing*too, for the record. You want a story? Well, here's one: Once upon a time there was a nice old woman who was minding her own business when her nephew and his bimbo wife dumped their three kids on her doorstep and as soon as the old lady got the chance she sold the little buggers to a traveling circus where they had to spend the rest of their days biting the heads off chickens. The. End.

Happy?

Damn it, shut your yap and quit your bawling before one of the guards sticks his thick head in here. I'm not supposed to have all that candy, you know. Lousy screws will confiscate it if they find it. Look, I tell you what: How about if kindly old Auntie Elspeth tells you a *different* story? Once upon a time there were three little trichinosis-infected pigs who—

What?

You don't want that story either? Picky little snot, ain'tcha. Well then, what kind of story *does* Her Royal

Heinieness desire?

A Halloween tale? Child there just might be some hope for you, after all. October is getting on. Halloween will be at our throats before you know it, and it just so happens to be your kindly old Auntie Elspeth's favorite holiday.

I heard that, Billy. If you're going to be malicious, at least have the stones to do it out loud so a person can hear you. Halloween is not my favorite holiday because I'm an old witch, I don't care what your Mommy said. Your Mommy also said she was a virgin when she married your Daddy, but between you and me and the Seventh Fleet—

Cindy, dear, it's not polite to interrupt. However, since you *did* ask, a virgin is a mythological creature, okay? Sort of like a dragon or a unicorn or a compassionate conserva-tive or—

Look, grow up, learn to read, look up the words you don't know in the dictionary, and shut the hell up for two seconds. I don't have time to answer a lot of stupid ques-tions.

Daddy told you there's no such thing as a stupid ques-tion? Daddy was wrong.

Do you want a Halloween story or not?

Now this is called "How the Vampire Prince Plunged His Fangs into the Heaving White Bosom of the Helpless Maiden and Devoured Her Still-Beating Heart." Once upon a time—

*Now what?*

Yes, Tommy, I know that Cindy is only four years old. Yes, I know that your Mommy and Daddy don't want any of you mini-weasels exposed to undue levels of violence. Speaking of which, where did a peewee pissant like you come up with such a mouthful of buzzwords?

Ah. Educational television. I should have known. All right, in that case I suppose I could tidy up the vampire story a bit and—

No vampires allowed? None at all? Not even a little one? He doesn't have to devour the maiden's still-beating heart, if you're going to be a big bunch of wussies about it. He can just devour it after he's sated his hellish thirst on the helpless maiden's blood and her heart *stops* beating, all right?

Okay, fine. Be that way. Sissies.

Ahem: The merciless sun of the Egyptian desert beat down upon the City of the Dead, but within the tomb of the Pharaoh's daughter it was cold; cold as the bellies of the deadly native vipers whose bite means a lingering, agoniz-ing death; cold as the blade of a fanatical assassin as it slits the throat of the foreign devil rash enough to defy the ancient curses sealing the princess' final resting place; cold as the steely nerves of Sir Henry Battabout-Montescue as he strode into the burial chamber and laid impious hands upon the lid of the princess' sarcophagus. But before he could defile the royal virgin's eternal sleep, an unholy roar came from behind him. He turned in time to see the figure of a mummy—a hideous, deformed, desiccated corpse, rank with the putridity of centuries, trailing the dusty wrappings of its entombment—come lurching toward him. Hands like the talons of the sacred vulture closed around his windpipe and his last breath was overwhelmed by the fetor of the crea-*ture's*—

Good Lord, *now* what's wrong, Cindy? Stop making noises like a dachshund with the hiccups and speak up! Billy, Tommy, try to make yourselves useful for a change and get that rabbity little sister of yours to stop crying.

What do you mean, I scared her? How could a simple little story about one insignificant, bloodthirsty, vengeance-obsessed mummy bother anyone? It's even got *amoral*, for pity's sake: If you touch stuff you're told not to touch, you die a hideous, unnatural death. That's an *excellent* moral, in my humble opinion. Eminently practical. And the story's full of all kinds of fascinating facts about ancient Egypt. It's *educational!*

Gawd.

You know, in my day when we asked for a Halloween story we wanted to be scared spitless. And we all dressed up like ghosts and ghouls and goblins because we wanted to scare all the other kids so bad they'd walk home with their shoes squishing. At least tell me *that* hasn't changed.

Oh. So Cindy's going to be a fairy princess and Billy's going to be a teddy bear. Pass me that plastic basin from under the nightstand, Tommy; Auntie Elspeth's feeling a mite poorly and I don't want to pitch my porridge all over my clean shoes.

And what are you going to be this Halloween? A tofu burger?

Ahhhh, *aghost* ! Good boy. At least that's a step in the right—

The ghost of Anton van Loewen *who* ?

Jesus, take me now. Do you little fluff-bunnies have blood in your veins or maple syrup?

Look, grab another fistful of taffy, stop your gobs, and Auntie Elspeth is going to tell you a Halloween story if it kills me. (Which it will, if there's a just and merciful God who doesn't want to see me suffer away the rest of this afternoon.) Don't worry, it won't be about vampires or mummies or zombies or anything nifty like that. It's going to be just the way your parents want *you* to be: Sweet and safe and sanitized for their protection. All that Auntie Elspeth's going to ask of you darling moppets is that you sit down, pay attention, and let your imaginations take you down the lovely garden path that leads to the Enchanted Pumpkin Patch, because *this*, children, is the story of Jo-Jo the Jolly Jack o' Lantern:

Once upon a time there was a little pumpkin named Jo-Jo. He grew up round and plump and happy with all of his little pumpkin friends in old Farmer Nosferatu's pumpkin patch. Oh, such jolly times they all had! The sun warmed them and the rain watered them and every time a traveling salesman came a-calling at the farmhouse, old Farmer Nosferatu would invite him inside, out of sight, and very soon afterwards he'd make a special trip down to the pumpkin patch to give the happy little pumpkins a great big dose of bonemeal fertilizer. *Dear* old Farmer Nosferatu!

It was a good life, but it wasn't enough for Jo-Jo. You see, Jo-Jo was a pumpkin with a dream. More than anything else, Jo-Jo wanted to grow up to be big enough and round enough and just the perfect shade of orange to be made into a jack o' lantern in time for Halloween.

Now Jo-Jo didn't really know all there was to know about being a jack o' lantern, because he had still been only a seed the last time October 31 rolled around. Everything he'd ever heard about Halloween came from wise old Mr. Hooty Owl who lived in the lightning-blasted tree over by the north fence near the graveyard. Night after night, wise old Mr. Hooty Owl would scare himself up a fine fuzzy field mouse dinner, then sit on the pumpkin patch fence while he gobbled down every juicy morsel. And in between munchy, crunchy bites he'd tell all of the little pumpkins stories about Halloween.

"It's just the most wonderful holiday that ever was," he'd say. "It's the time of year when magic happens—real, honest-to-goodness magic! But if it weren't for you pump-kins, Halloween wouldn't be half so grand nor magical, no indeedy. You see, when the air starts to snap like a bone-crushing bear trap

and the leaves on the tree bleed red and purple and gold, and the night starts to come in darker and sooner, crowded with lorn, lost souls, why that's when Hal-loween comes dancing down the lane. And that's when folks start looking for pumpkins to make into jack o' lanterns to light up the nights and keep away whatever's wandering in the dark."

What's that, Billy? What is wandering in the dark that the jack o' lanterns have to keep away? Gracious, I can't tell you that. Your parents wouldn't approve. So I guess you'll just have to sit up at night all by yourself, staring out into the darkness, and imagine what *might* be waiting out there. Waiting and watching and biding its time until it knows you're sound asleep and can't see it coming. Mercy sakes, whatever might it be? Will it have fangs or scales or claws or all three or something even worse than that? Will it be hungry? Will it know how to climb up walls and through windows, even when they're locked down tight, or will it just ring the doorbell, hm? I won't tell—that would spoil the surprise—but you go right ahead and imagine it.

Won't that be fun?

You know, none of the little pumpkins who lived in Jo-Jo's patch ever interrupted wise old Mr. Hooty Owl when *he* was telling a story. They knew that if they did, wise old Mr. Hooty Owl would ring for the nurse and pretend he wanted to take a nap and all the blabby little pumpkins would have to sit in the sun room where the only channel you can get on the television is CNN. And because they were smart little pumpkins and really didn't enjoy the smell of bleach and wee-wee they didn't butt in on wise old Mr. Hooty Owl's story any more.

"Oh, it's marvelous to be a jack o' lantern," wise old Mr. Hooty Owl would say. "One minute you're a pumpkin like a hundred others, the next you're all aglow with light, just like a star. Then people put you in their windows or out on their front steps or balanced on the porch railing so that all the world can see just how bright and beautiful you are. They're pleased as punch to have you—almost think of you like a member of the family, they do—and when the little children see you, their eyes get *that* wide, and their mouths become just as round as can be, and they can't help but cry out over what a fine jack o' lantern you are. Yes, sir—" And he bit off the dead mouse's head and chewed it contentedly while he finished his speech. "—Halloween's a magical time to be a pumpkin."

Of course that was when a big chunk of mouse skull went down the wrong way and choked the life out of wise old Mr. Hooty Owl because wise old Mr. Hooty Owl wasn't quite wise enough and didn't know any better than to talk with his mouth full.

Jo-Jo couldn't wait for Halloween to come. All through the summer he did his best to soak up the sun and the rain until his round little body swelled up like a tick and he went from a teensy-weensy green thing the size of a tennis ball to a great big orange thing the size of a full-grown pumpkin.

Okay, so I never said my name was Auntie Metaphor. Sue me.

Pretty soon it got on for being close to Halloween and old Farmer Nosferatu came out to harvest his pumpkin patch. He was very pleased with what he saw, but not half so pleased as Jo-Jo. That clever little pumpkin knew from the way Farmer Nosferatu smiled down at him that he was a fine, ripe pumpkin and would be chosen to become a for-real-and-for-true jack o' lantern. Jo-Jo was so proud and so happy that he didn't even mind the searing pain he endured when Farmer Nosferatu took out his ever-so-sharp sickle and slashed through the stem holding Jo-Jo to the pumpkin vine.

Actually I'm lying. *He* did mind it. In fact, *mind*ing it doesn't even begin to cover little Jo-Jo's feelings. He hated it. It *hurt* to be cut off the vine. It hurt so bad that I can't tell you. You just imagine how *you'd* feel if you were holding hands with your Mommy and someone came along who wanted to snatch you away,

only you were holding onto Mommy's hand so tight that they couldn't make you let go and so they had to take a great big ax and chopped right through your—

But I don't need to tell you everything, do I? You're such *bright* children. You can imagine that for yourselves.

Poor little Jo-Jo passed out entirely from the pain and when he woke up again, his stem throbbing, he discovered that he was sitting in a market. I'll spare you the tedious details and all the philosophical crap about what Jo-Jo learned from observing the interactions of human society. (See, Tommy? You're not the only show-off who watches educational television.) Jo-Jo wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to the people in the market anyhow. He was con-centrating on his future, and what a merry future it would be once he became a jack o' lantern. It helped to take his mind off the pain.

How happy Jo-Jo was on the day that a dear little boy name Jeremy Jinx came into the market with his Mommy and picked three pumpkins! There was no doubt what Jeremy Jinx and his Mommy were going to do with those pumpkins, no sirree, because Jo-Jo heard Jeremy Jinx ask his Mommy right out loud, "Can we have this pumpkin to make into a jack o' lantern for Halloween? And this one? And this one? Oh, and this one, too? And that one over there? And the big one? Can we, can we, can we, huh, please, please, please?" And he heard Jeremy Jinx's Mommy reply, "We shall pick out one pumpkin for you, and one for me, and one for your darling Daddy. And then you can put a sock in it because I've got a three-martini headache so have some mercy and shut up."

Jeremy Jinx looked at all the pumpkins on display. Jo-Jo watched him. If he'd had a heart it would have been in his mouth, if he'd had a mouth. *Pick me!* he thought fiercely. *I want to be a jack o' lantern more than anything else in the whole, wide world. I want to be your jack o' lantern! Oh, please, please, please pick me!*

Lo and behold, Jo-Jo's fervent wish was granted, for lit-tle Jeremy Jinx looked straight at him, and put his dear, chubby little arms around him, and lifted him right off the display and said, "I want *this* one, Mommy. He's my very special friend, and he told me that more than anything else in the whole, wide world, he wants to be *my* jack o' lantern, and I love him."

"Great, now the kid's talking to vegetables," his Mommy muttered. She picked out two other pumpkins and dumped them in her shopping cart. "As soon as we get home, I'm calling your therapist."

Pretty soon Jo-Jo was safe and warm in his new home. He sat on the kitchen table with the other two pumpkins that Jeremy Jinx and his Mommy had chosen. He looked around, but he really wasn't paying attention to his sur-roundings. He was still thinking about becoming a jack o' lantern. In fact, Jo-Jo never thought about anything much except becoming a jack o' lantern. Come to think of it, Jo-Jo had a very unhealthy psychological obsession with becom-ing a jack o' lantern, so it's no wonder that when he finally learned the truth about jack o' lanterns—

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

On second thought, no, I'm not. Because you see, the very next morning, just as soon as Jeremy Jinx got on the school bus, when the air was fresh with frost and the sun was peeking in through the frilly white curtains at the kitchen window, Jeremy Jinx's Mommy spread a double layer of old newspaper over the kitchen table, set the first pumpkin right in the middle of it, took the biggest, sharpest knife in the whole kitchen, and plunged it straight through the soft and yielding skin right near the stem, ker-CHUNK!!!

Poor Jo-Jo! He was so shocked by this apparent act of wanton cruelty that he couldn't bring himself to look away. So he was still watching while Jeremy Jinx's mother sawed her knife all the way around the stem and pulled out the plug of dripping orange meat and then jabbed a big metal spoon deep into the

helpless pumpkin's body. Jo-Jo saw how coolly the she-beast ladled out glob after sticky glob of seeds and dumped them into the garbage can, casually destroying generations of pumpkins yet unborn, but there was only so much a young vegetable could take. The horror was overwhelming and Jo-Jo fainted.

He awoke to a pain that made old Farmer Nosferatu's assault on his stem seem like a walk in the park. Mercifully, he passed out again before it completely registered on him that the source of his agony was because it was his turn under the knife and the spoon.

When Jo-Jo next became aware of the world around him, he felt strangely light-headed, or perhaps I ought to say light-shelled. Kids, can you say "dramatic irony"?

Well, I'll bet you *could* say it if you'd stop goggling at me like a bunch of strangled frogs. Oh, never mind.

Anyhow, Jo-Jo felt different, very, very different from the innocent little pumpkin he used to be.

"What has happened to me?" he asked. Then he did a double-take. Had those words actually come out of his *mouth* ?

But pumpkins don't have mouths.

Jack o' lanterns do.

Jo-Jo was still coming to grips with an altered reality when he glanced to his left. There was something shiny there, something that looked like a small silver box. Jo-Jo had no way of knowing that this was a toaster. All he knew was that when he turned, he could see himself in the brightly polished surface.

Oh, what a sight he was! For Jeremy Jinx's Mommy had taken all of the impotent rage she always kept bottled up inside her—a ferocious, long-smoldering rage which came from years of living under the regime of a repressive, patri-archal society—and had used it. And how had she used it? Why on carving the Halloween pumpkins, of course! She had given each of them the scowliest eyes and the pointiest noses and the biggest, widest, most sinister grins you can imagine.

And what is a big, wide, sinister grin unless it's full of big, sharp, nastily pointed teeth?

"Wow," said Jo-Jo, giving his reflection the once-over. "Cool."

"It won't be cool for long, squashboy," came an unfa-miliar voice. Jo-Jo turned—very slowly and in a wobbly manner—to confront the other two pumpkins that Jeremy Jinx's mother had also carved into jack o' lanterns. The one that had called out to Jo-Jo looked a lot like him, only not quite so scary, but the other one—

The other one was hollow and smashed and dead.

Jo-Jo gasped at the shattered, oozing shell. "What— what happened to *her* ?" he demanded.

If a pumpkin could shrug, that's exactly what the other jack o' lantern would have done. "Mulch happens. The knife slipped. So the seed-scooping monster lost her temper and knocked the poor kid smack off the table by . . . 'accident.' "

"How awful!" Jo-Jo cried. Fat, slimy tears dripped from his freshly gouged-out eyeholes.

"Save your tears for yourself," the other pumpkin told him. "As soon as the seed-scooper comes back with the can-dles, it's all over for us."

Jo-Jo didn't understand.

“Geez, sprout, didn’t anyone ever tell you?” the other pumpkin said. “Don’t you know what it means to be a jack o’ lantern?”

So Jo-Jo told the other pumpkin all about the pumpkin patch back home, and old Farmer Nosferatu, and wise old Mister Hooty Owl’s stories. And when he was done, the other pumpkin was laughing fit to burst himself into a pile of puréed pie filling.

“Funny, you don’t *look* green,” he said when he finally got control of himself. “And you *believed* those stories? Sprout, those are the sort of thing ’most everyone tells you when you’re young because being young means being dumb as a rock and it’s fun to see just how many lies you’ll swallow before you wise up!”

“Then it wasn’t true?” Jo-Jo said, and he sounded so sorrowful and pathetic it would’ve made a high school guidance counselor cry real tears. “Not a single word?”

“Bless your blossoms, there’s *some* truth to what you were told,” the other pumpkin said. “All the best lies come wrapped up in half-truths so they’re easier to believe. Hal-loween *is* a magical time of year for us poor pumpkins. How else do you think you got the power to move yourself around like that, even a little, and to talk like we’re doing right now? But the magic doesn’t last and neither do we. Oh, they’ll use us to light up their Halloween night, all right! But how do you think they make us glow? Not by magic, nuh-uh. By fire.”

Jo-Jo gasped. Fire was something he understood. It was something all vegetables understood without ever needing to be taught, a primal fear bred so deeply into every leaf and stem, fruit and flower, that it came to them as natural as soaking up sunlight and rain. Fire cooked. Fire killed.

“That’s right, sprout, I said fire,” the other pumpkin went on. “Something called a candle. They lift off the top of your shell, stick that thing upright inside you, and then they set it aflame. And as soon as the first little spark of it catches hold and the fire blazes up in your shell, the magic’s over. You’re dead. Beautiful and bright, but dead.”

“Nooooooo!” Jo-Jo wailed. And he rocked back and forth on the kitchen table, because the magic of Halloween had given him the power to move himself around like that, in a most un-vegetable-like manner. More tears streamed from his eye-holes and he wiped them away frantically.

Then he realized something. *What* was he using to wipe away his tears?

“Where in heck did *these* come from?” he asked, holding up a pair of prehensile leaves. They trembled before his eye-holes, having burgeoned from the ends of a pair of sturdy pumpkin vines that had somehow erupted from the sides of his shell.

The other pumpkin chuckled. “Beats me, sprout. More of that ‘magic of Halloween’ crap in action, I guess. They say that if you want something bad enough, tonight of all nights, you get it. Anything short of wanting to save your own life, that is. Candle or no candle, we’ve only got until dawn.”

“But I never wished for *these*,” Jo-Jo protested, waving his vines about wildly.

“Hey, some things you want without knowing you want them,” the other pumpkin said. “Some things, the magic knows you want them before you know it yourself.”

Jo-Jo grew thoughtful. He continued to study his miraculous leaves and vines, flexing them testing them, reaching out with them, using them to pluck at the corners of the sodden newspapers still covering the kitchen tabletop. The leaves were very dexterous, just like human hands, only somehow Jo-Jo knew that

the vines he'd grown instead of arms were much stronger than human arms.

"I guess the magic*does* know best," he said at last. "There*is* one thing I want to do before I go, and I won't so much mind dying after I've done it." As the other pumpkin watched, Jo-Jo began to shake and shiver, then all of sud-den he sprouted two more vines, right out from under himself. Using his leaves, he laid hold of the table and let himself drop over the side just as his rapidly growing leg-vines reached their full size.

"Hey, sprout, what do you think you're—?" the other pumpkin began to ask. Just then the kitchen door swung open and Jeremy Jinx's Mommy came in with a couple of fat, white candles in her hands.

The other pumpkin saw Jo-Jo's vines snake back up onto the table top, lay hold of the carving knife and the scooping spoon, and drop from sight again just before he heard Jeremy Jinx's Mommy begin to scream.

The end.

What's that, Tommy? What do you mean, it can't be the end? Sure it can! Who's telling this story, huh? I'm only doing what your Mommy and Daddy want, shielding you, sheltering you from all the icky-sticky details. Why should I have to tell you what happened next, what Jo-Jo did with that carving knife and that scooping spoon and those can-dles? Can't you guess what little Jeremy Jinx found sitting on the front porch steps, waiting for him when he came home from school that day? It was a surprise, I can at least tell you that. A gaping, grinning surprise with a candle burning oh, ever so brightly inside!

Surely you don't need*me* to tell you what it was, do you? I didn't think so. Or to tell you what it was that little Jeremy Jinx found smeared all over the sharp, pointed, nas-tily carved teeth of the jolly jack o' lantern that sat on the*other* side of the front porch steps? A child's imagination is*such* a precious gift, dearie me, yes. Use it, yard-apes.

But what's that tapping at the door? Could it possibly be Jo-Jo the Jolly Jack o' Lantern, come to call? No, it's just your Mommy and Daddy, here to take you home again, thank God. Give Auntie Elspeth a kiss and—Oh, fine, no kiss, just try to stop screaming, okay?

Bye-bye, darlings. Happy Halloween.