

PRETTY PUMPKINS

Splat!

The baseball bat smashed through the pumpkin with ease, sending orange and yellow chunks in every direction.

“That’s a homerun.” Steve smiled in satisfaction.

It was just before midnight on Halloween. The streets were silent, and the trick or treaters had long gone home. But not Steve and his friends. They still had a few tricks to play. Every year they would meet up and cause havoc around the neighborhood, destroying mailboxes, egging houses, and tossing toilet paper all through the trees. But their favorite activity by far was to smash pumpkins.

The more time someone spent carving their pumpkin, the more Steve and his friends enjoyed disposing of it. It was a thrill to them, the same as destroying an expensive piece of art. And this year, Steve had his eyes set on the biggest prize of them all: the pumpkins of Mrs. Black.

Mrs. Black’s husband had died about 8 years ago, and ever since then people rarely saw her in public. In fact, many had forgotten what she even looked like. This of course had led to a myriad of neighborhood rumors and urban legends. People said she was a witch, that she accidentally killed her husband with black magic, and that she would lure children into her house and eat them. But these were all just stories.

The way her house looked was enough to keep most people away. It sat behind a large black gate, and its white paint had turned to a weathered, dirty grey, and many of the windows were covered in dust and grime.



But every Halloween, Mrs. Black would carve the most elaborate pumpkins anyone had ever seen. There would be tons of them lining her porch. Some took the shape of flowers, others looked like a field of stars scattered across the October sky. It was an amazing sight, and every evening people would walk by her house just to marvel at her masterpieces.

Steve and his friends never had the courage to destroy one of Mrs. Black's pumpkins, and it was almost an unwritten rule that they left them alone. But this year was different.

Steve had his eye on one right in the middle. A skull had been carved into it, but not a scary type of skull. This one had intricate patterns and symbols etched all over. It was oddly beautiful and looked almost real. It was the perfect target.

Steve and his friends walked up to the tall black gate. It stood over them as a warning.

"I don't know about this, Steve." one of the boys whispered. "This place gives me the creeps."

"You're not the one doing it, Gary. Just keep a look out."

Steve quickly climbed to the top of the gate and then pulled himself up and over.

He dropped down onto Mrs. Black's property and instantly his heart started racing. There was no going back now. Steve took a few steps forward and looked in the windows. It was pitch black, almost as if there was nothing inside the house at all.

As Steve walked up to the porch, the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. There was no moonlight this Halloween, but the flicker of the candles inside the pumpkins cast a strange orange glow over the area.

Steve looked on in amazement. There had to be about 50 of them, and each one was a work of absolute perfection. His eyes then locked onto the one he came for.

He crept onto the porch and carefully lifted it. He gazed into its warm, luminous eyes. And with a quick breath he blew the candle out. The smoke drifted from the pumpkin's mouth, almost as if its spirit had been extinguished.

Steve smiled; his mission was almost complete. But as he walked back toward the gate, he paused. An odd sensation tingled on the back of his neck, his stomach knotted, and goosebumps erupted from his skin. Someone was watching him. He could *feel* it. But when he turned around, all he saw in the windows was darkness.

Steve climbed to the top of the fence and carefully handed the pumpkin down to the others.

"I've got something special for this one," he said with a grin.

Once Steve got over the fence the four boys ran back to the center of the neighborhood, where Steve pulled a glossy red object from his pocket.

"Is that an M-80?" Gary asked.

Steve smirked. "This is an M-1000. It's way more powerful, almost like dynamite. I took it from my dad's garage."

Steve sat the skull pumpkin on the ground. "Okay guys, you ready?"

The three other boys looked around apprehensively.

Steve pulled his lighter out and put the flame to the fuse. It started to burn and hiss. He quickly placed the M-1000 into the mouth of the pumpkin and sprinted away.

"RUN!"

The boys scattered as fast as they could. About 10 seconds later a thunderous CRACK echoed down the block. Chunks of orange and yellow rained down in every direction.

Knowing they probably woke up the entire neighborhood, the boys just kept running until they each got home. Halloween was officially over.

The next day Gary heard a knock at the door. He walked downstairs and peeked through the window. It was the Sheriff.

Gary's stomach dropped. Someone must have seen them last night. What were his parents going to say? How much trouble was he going to be in?

Gary slowly opened the door.

"Hey Gary, sorry to bother you, but were you hanging out with Steve last night? I know you two run around together."

He hesitated. "Uh...no. I haven't seen him. I stayed home last night. Not really into the whole trick or treat thing anymore."

The Sheriff surprisingly didn't question Gary's lie.

"Okay, well if you hear from him let me know. His parents are worried sick. He didn't come home last night."

"He didn't?"

"You kids are always running off somewhere, I'm sure he'll pop up."

The Sheriff started walking back to his car. "Tell your mom and dad I said hello."

"Okay, I will." Gary shut the door and immediately went to grab his jacket.

Gary ran out the back and hopped on his bike. First he rode to where the pumpkin exploded, then to the creek, and to every spot he and Steve normally hung out. But Steve was nowhere to be found.

Gary spent all day and into the evening riding through the neighborhood thinking about where his friend could be. But when he was just about to give up, he remembered there was one more place to look.

Gary slowly rode up to Mrs. Black's house. He could barely see anything; yet again the moon was absent from the night sky. He walked up to the gate and looked across the front yard to the line of pumpkins still sitting on the porch.

Only one of them was illuminated. The flame of the candle danced from behind its jagged, hollowed-out facial features. But this pumpkin looked... different.

Gary strained his eyes, trying to peer through the darkness, and that's when he realized it wasn't a pumpkin at all.

It was Steve's head, sitting in the same spot as the pumpkin they stole the night before.