

Scott T. Hutchison

Bridge Pumpkins

You fight to stifle nervous laughter as you speed across the dark lawn. Just this one last pumpkin, filched from the homey fall display from this particular doorstep, then you and the boys will be all set. The truck, with Ernie and Carl, idles impatiently at the curb.

On previous late-night journeys home, you and the boys have passed 2610 Skeet Street and you've occasionally seen the upstairs right-side light on; you've imagined Belinda up there, lying on some canopy bed with probably silk sheets, chewing on the end of her pencil like she always does in English class, marking up the Shakespearean play assigned by your teacher. You sit next to Belinda, and so you pay attention. Meanwhile Emily sits in front of you, and you like the way she flips her long honey-brown hair back across her shoulders, sometimes even catching you in the face with a thousand small stings, but you're okay with that because she always turns and mouths the word "sorry" and you try to hold on to the smell of VO5 or whatever expensive shampoo she uses, try to breathe deep and hold that breath in.

Ernie hisses loudly from the truck, and you realize you're standing there at the stoop but you aren't taking care of business. You hesitate, not knowing why, but then some yippy dog somewhere in the house starts up its little rat-squeaks, and you snatch what must be a fifty-pounder and trundle it back to where Ernie and Carl have parked away from the exposure of the street light. You ignore Carl's hurry-up gesturing, dump the pumpkin in the truck bed, hoist yourself after it into the mountainous jumble you've already collected, all the while looking back almost disappointedly noting that no lights come on. Ernie shifts gears—then there's nothing but night and cool wind, Carl's laughter and the orange smell of fields all around you.

"What the hell were you doing back there?" Ernie hollers through the open back-windshield window, "Trying to get us busted on the last house? Jeez, dude!" Ernie isn't really mad. It's just that he's the only one with a license, and so he thinks he gets more boss-say in where you go and what the three of you do since he's in charge of transportation. His parents gave him a rusted dark blue Toyota pickup when he passed the Driver's test, and though the truck is 200,000 miles-and-counting crap, they did put new tires on it for him. Ernie loves his truck, and ever since he got it he's had his radio on country stations. His parents give him the keys one morning, and by afternoon Ernie's wearing a John Deer hat and sporting an open checked-flannel shirt over his t-shirt—this has been going on for three weeks. He tried

chewing some Red Man, but he's decided that keeping a chaw of jerky pouched in his cheek is better than tobacco, since turning green seemed to clash with his bright red hair and the peach fuzz he's now trying to cultivate on his chin. According to Ernie's way of thinking, if you're going to be a man—a man with a truck—then you got to keep up appearances in some form or another.

Getting yourself settled in the truck bed is tough with so many pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns. The three of you sparked out the fall and Halloween decorations of different houses in the neighborhoods ahead of time over the course of the last week, and so your haul is an impressive thirty count: ten each is the way you've figured it. Carl's got himself a good corner up against the truck cab, and he's bobbing his head like always to whatever's cranking through his headphones. Carl's got his school football jersey on; if it wasn't that, it would be an NFL or NBA jersey of some sort. Metal music and sports percolate through Carl's veins, and though he's just about the strongest kid at school he pretty much does whatever a coach or you and Ernie tell him to do. He's stupid-strong, not the kind of kid anybody wants mad at 'em—you and Ernie are glad he's on your own little rough-boy team.

Carl pulls the headphones down and grins at you. "Heard your momma calling *Be good, be safe, be smart* when we picked you up and you was coming out the door tonight. And you calling out *I will!* Momma's words putting lead in your shoes or something? Then *love you!* What a girl." Carl has a habit of sticking his tongue out and vigorously nodding when he laughs at his own jokes.

You give Carl the finger and the truck continues jouncing out to your appointed destination: the overpass bridge. People in your town years ago apparently placed some value on keeping the streets quiet, low impact, free of too much commotion. Not that there was much to bypass, but instead of funneling traffic through town and the center green the bypass doglegs out into countryside before winding back to connect with the main thoroughfare that crosses the state running east to west. And spanning that bypass there's a sixty-foot bridge which allows an old country road to continue its meander over the newer one, which some of the ancestral farmers had insisted upon for both convenience and connection. Hardly any cars use it—mostly just farm trucks with hay or stock trailers or whatever—and it's practically deserted once night falls and the old farmers are nestled into their beds. You and Carl and Ernie had all agreed, the bypass bridge was perfect for a launch pad.

Standing behind the steel railing, you hoist an odd orange moon above your head before releasing her to the heavens and to gravity. Meanwhile the true ancient huntress of night and tides is

stalking across the skies through occasional gray clouds, and her chill autumnal light illuminates the carved jagged smiles you all toss to the wind. With barely a three count you watch the monster-squash eruptions burst across the roadway far below. Everything seems perfect.

Carl and Ernie crow, and your own raw voice joins their raspy ululation. Of course Carl can hurl a pumpkin out further than you and Ernie, and he gives it a lineman's grunt with each muscular exertion. You all admire such handiwork. Somehow the moment has transcended itself and all your boyish expectations. You've all broken and bashed things before—mailboxes belonging to knucklehead neighbors, windows on deserted houses—but this night has lifted you all into a different state of testosterone euphoria. Your own jack-o-lantern grins burst with laughter, and you are three male gods raining pilfered orange thunderbolts down upon a town and landscape's peace without explanation for your whims. Blood sings inside of you, theft and jaunting speed peaking in this release, and as the world you let go of explodes in a flesh-cracking splatter, a howl roars up and out of your chest, a brutal cave song spelunked from your own dark depths. There's a brutal joy in this wanton recklessness.

Then someone points at an oncoming light making its way through the remoteness of whatever hour after midnight it might be, and when the word "*Car*" is whispered—it isn't a statement, it's a suggestion. Carl and Ernie scramble to load up, each of them choosing whole county-fair quality pumpkins that will require extraordinary bicep-heft. There's a new teeth-grit and jaw-set in your face, and a tight, wild timpani beats inside your skull. The car speeds closer and closer.

You race to the truck to choose your own missile to lob—but there's a moment's hesitation skip in your heartbeat at what's approaching.

You try to shake off the hesitation, the wincing in your veins, you try to shut out voices that have whispered to you all your life even as the boys call for you to join them, but you are frozen as an old promise and warning rises behind your eyes in a vision: there will be, you're certain, a girl to love. Anytime now. She will hold your hand, kiss your ear, her hair will gently brush across your face. She will make the hair on the back of your neck bristle, she will confound your mind at random moments, whether she's present or not. She will take care of the orderly occupations of a day and she will make time for you as well. She will explain all of the things you are dumb to, and you will go forward dumbstruck in a new, lightened way. Her name will be Belinda, or Emily. Or Ashley. Tiffany. Her name will be music on your tongue.

You reach for the last pumpkin, trying to dismiss the old

Kestrel

whispers. The weight is heavy, damnably heavy, and you are filled with the questions of tomorrow and tomorrow—is she speeding toward you, light spearing the darkness, unaware that in your hands is the possible destruction of her own vision of the maybe-someone like you? You are too alone on the bridge with your friends to doubt it, you are sixteen and you dream of a lighter freedom in her arms, whoever she might be. The thought saddens you, though you don't know why.

Ernie and Carl are taking aim, abandon shaking in their hands as the moment nears. They are insistent, calling your name to hurry and join them. You cannot hear them. Suddenly you are at the railing. Forearms and backs arch, there is a frightful moment in which you must find the speed and when it comes you step outside yourself, stay their arms, snatch the moment away, toss the world at their feet—as the light below moves away, even as the moonshine shakes off all grayness and brightens the bridge to a near white-daylight. You watch as the car makes its escape.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Ernie sputters, turning to Carl. “What the hell did he do that for?” Ernie grabs you and spins you, demanding your attention. His arms wave, his ire spilling out in disbelief. He kicks out to dislodge the pumpkin mush gobbled on his boot. He kicks at loose gravel on the bridge for reasons even he doesn't understand.

Carl is astonished and ganderly inarticulate. Then he speaks the language he best understands, and punches you in the stomach. Hate burns in his eyes and he stands over you. Finally he finds his previous voice and violent words rip into the night. He curses you, curses your name. Carl has lost something, and he appears close to losing it on you. You try to breathe, but can't.

“You stole our chance,” Ernie says, pacing back and forth by the rail, taking off his cap and running fingers through his hair. “Stole our chance, dammit. What's with you? There's the three of us, we hang together, we hang tough. You suddenly got a problem with that?” He leans and breathes his disgust in your face. “Well guess what? You can just walk your ass home tonight, *buddy*.” He hisses the last word. “Come on, Carl,” and with a jerky hand wave to you he gets in his truck, and after a familiar finger is flashed in your face Carl joins him up front. Gravel spins from the departing tires and hits you, striking and stinging you in the neck.

Finally your stomach and chest convulse, and the air floods your lungs. It's sweet, precious. There are tears, but you quickly wipe them away. You're done with that.

You will go home without a care for their brave, bold, and stupid words, you will forget about their wounded muscular rants. You will sleep and dream—and because they are your friends you will

dream of beautiful women for them, too, women who will marry good men, who place cornstalks around the doorways of homes to decorate the season and their shared lives, women who guide small hands at carving, who bake pies and promise treats if you'll only remember what they've always told you when the time comes. Women who want their sons to grow up and know happiness.

You pick yourself up, and take it home.

