

Punkin Head

by Verkaro

The old neighborhood, long paling in the shadow of greater Los Angeles, was reduced to two blocks in length and occupied only one side of Figueroa. It was the crumbling bastion of homes whose architecture remembered yet street-car bells clanging, watermelon farms and barefoot walks, ferris-wheel nights, and sunday matinees, in what must have once seemed the endless youth of summertime.

Now it was autumn. And instead of outdoor cookouts and raked and burning leaves, the air had the complicated bouquet of fast food restaurants and the exhaust of cars.

At the address of 622 Figueroa, near the intersection of Vine, was the oldest of old homes still in decent repair. It is early evening where our story begins.

Bundled stalks of tasseled corn aptly framed the door of Emma's house. Encircling the door-knocker a wreath of nut-bearing branches and twine artfully bid all would-be visitors a silent (yet not altogether quiet) greeting, "Welcome... well come... well come in... well..." And sitting on the bottom step, patiently waiting for night to fall, was the Master of Ceremonies himself -- a massive pumpkin carved ear to ear with a gap-toothed mischievous grin.

These were the kind of homespun decorations Emma took pride in. She trusted in old fashioned authenticity, that it might speak for her, recommending this house above all others in the neighborhood as *the* place to stop in and rest a while from one's haunted wandering.

"Lord save me from myself. Is everything done?" She worked her broom down the front steps and up the walk with explosive bursts of swishing and sweeping. "Why is a pig in the living room like a house on fire? -- Because the sooner it's put out, the better."

Repeating the joke she practiced her delivery and timing. She tried another. "What lives only to devour itself? -- A candle." She worried the walk's edge with the broom. "Emma, you silly old fool,

all the jokes you know are ancient as the hills. Children these days just won't understand. And then where will you be?"

Next door, the neighbor eased his car into the garage. He pulled shut the big overhead door with a rattling bang and turned to go inside.

Emma called, "Halloo over there! You all ready for haunts tonight?"

The man froze where he stood like some great feral creature, maybe Bigfoot with a briefcase, trying to get home after a long day at the office. He looked at her.

"I said, are you ready for halloween night?" said Emma.

For reply, Bigfoot entered his cave and shut the door. None of this surprised or put off Emma. She understood his kind well enough. He was a perpetually irritable man whose best contribution to Halloween night would be to turn off all the house lights and brood in the darkness pretending he was not at home.

She smiled at that, however. Tonight, his rudeness would work in favor of better plans laid -- namely her plans.

Emma was the old-timer of the neighborhood, and the last of her generation. All her friends had either moved away or passed on leaving behind gravestone inspired sobriquets, in a hundred different ways of saying... "Here lies ---, all bills paid."

An endless stream of cars jockeyed by. Since the close of World War II, things seemed to change so fast -- to think about it made Emma's head spin and her heart heavy. She turned back to the only stable structure left in life -- her house.

On the welcome mat was painted an arching black cat perched on the hook of a crescent moon. She lovingly swept it again, trusting in the magic of holiday decorations to draw a line between the world, grown strange outside, from the one within, warm and welcoming. She opened the door and stepped inside. And the magic proved true.

The festooned room greeted her with twisted black and yellow crepe ribbons hung like suspension cables from the ceiling. Grimacing Jack-O'-Lanterns shared the company of smaller similarly carved apple's, cucumbers, and squash. They were placed here and

there throughout the living room, on tables, upon the mantle, and nested in the corners with golden sheaves of straw. The smell of eugenol oil and dry corn shuck was like a warm conversation and a long walk back in time, even to childhood.

Construction paper figures dangled from above, fluttering as she passed. They were cutout pumpkins, silhouette witches hunched over brooms -- flying, and lots of black cats. She touched them here and there, like a museum guard after midnight unable to resist. They loved her attentions and in return whispered promises of laughter, fun, and mystery.

The table centerpiece was a giant pumpkin with the top cut off, filled with yellow chrysanthemums and licorice scented goldenrod. Spread around its base were bay leaves and figures of nibbling chocolate mice. In approval, she passed a hand across her forehead, over the sum of a week's preparation. Word would surely get around among kindred spirits. The candy bowl was full. Reserves bulged in plastic bags behind the door. *They must come, or her heart would break.*

She busied herself on her left, rearranging small crystalline candy skulls, and on her right, polishing a brass candlestick holder. She had not felt this way or worked this hard on the occasion for as long as she cared to remember. The spirit, once the idea took hold, mercilessly drove her old bones. She went along with the work, alternating between wild anticipation and unquiet worry. But she prevailed.

At dusk, she saw from the window the first fluttering ghost two houses down. Human parents watched from the sidewalk, as the little apparition went from door to door, taking sweet tribute for the dead.

When the first knock and cry of "Trick or treat!" came at Emma's door she was rapturous in the answering.

"What do we have here? A Witch! My you do bring a chill to my old bones. And you? Such big, big, teeth you have Mr. Wolf-man. Here you go some for you, and you, and especially you -- little ghost. Happy Halloween!"

More children hurried across the yard toward the light of her open door -- and all were satisfied. When they had gone, Emma patted her heart where she stood. *Such dear little ones.*

As evening turned dark, the visions presenting themselves at the door became progressively taller and more gruesomely outfitted. This age group interested her most. Emma left the door open and displayed the bowl of candy in plain sight just inside.

Splendid! A teenage scarecrow, with hay sticking out from the buttons and pockets of his stuffed shirt, glanced in at the door. He escorted Dorothy. She wore sparkling ruby shoes and carried a plush toy dog under one arm. *Marvelous!* There were more of the curious standing behind. Emma beckoned all to enter for a drink of cider and games. Lights were dimmed, emphasizing the glowing eyes and grins of Jack-O'-Lanterns.

Another group arrived and saw a party in the making. They filed in and helped themselves at the candy bowl. The living-room became a mix of various zombies, a lion tamer, comic book heroes, a villainous mustachio, arm in arm and in cahoots, with the likeness of an unpopular politician. Shining faces and ruddy cheeks revealed themselves as stifling masks were pushed back, empty eye sockets turned to the ceiling, worn like hats.

Emma organized a guessing game while serving up drinks and cookies. "Guess what in this room I am thinking of," she said.

After some hesitation, one answered "A candle."

Another answered "A cat!"

"The taste of young human flesh," said a wry boy in jeans, a tee-shirt and leather jacket. A fake cigarette dangled from his lip tragically.

"Good answer!" Emma pointed at him. "Only it was wrong, I was thinking of this bowl of confetti." With that she picked the bowl up from the table and launched its contents high over the guests. Coming down, it was soft rains upon Antietam, it was a ticker-tape parade on Mainstreet in the afterlife. It fell on the young astonished guests and blessed them one and all. It stuck in their hair and got in their costumes.

"I like you," said a young girl with cat ears and whiskers. "Can I take a turn?"

"Sure you may," said Emma patting the little cat between the ears.

"I spy with my little eye, something cozy and blue."

A couple of mildly entertaining rounds of the guessing game were played -- then interest fizzled.

Emma hooked and draped a white tablecloth to make a screen in the corner of the room. Behind it was a table lamp with its shade removed. She announced another kind of guessing game. Some of the guests got up, saying thanks and goodnight but she begged them to stay long enough for a few rounds. They glanced at one another and reluctantly agreed to sit down.

Except for the flickering Jack O'Lanterns, all lights were extinguished in the room. The effect was awesome as the palpable excitement in the room attested. Emma appeared with a flashlight under her chin lighting her face like from the days of black and white horror films. Children laughed, as she did too.

"Now I want you all to bring your chairs a little closer. This game is called Shadow-Buff. I know you'll love it."

She directed her guests to form groups of two's and three's, each devising a secret they would act out behind the screen. The rule was: the players must perform their roles in silence while the audience guessed the meaning behind their shadow dance.

Everyone understood the rules as audience members and players, and it was agreed to begin. As the first contestants stepped forward Emma dipped behind the sheet and turned on the light. She ushered them behind the impromptu screen and they let their shadows take over from there.

The first scenario was an aloof pedestrian, walking in place, and the shadow of a stalker creeping up from behind. In the end it was a murder by knife, horrifically prolonged, even after being called. With boos and hisses, the audience demanded the next players have their chance. The art of the medium was quickly absorbed. Ad-lib mimes swung freely between unbridled madness to moments of baffling

brilliance. Distorted shadows shedding inhibitions, danced and menaced while the audience shouted for more.

In another scene, a brave lion tamer turned cowardly and was shortly mauled. Following that, a one-man show illustrated the evolution of walking posture in five stages, from primate to man. He bent his back one final time for a sweeping bow.

The Scarecrow and Dorothy borrowed a broom from Emma. Behind the screen, the broom hoisted over a shoulder turned into a rifle. The boy marched in place. The shadow-girl dabbed a tear from her eye and waved goodbye with a handkerchief. The play was only a moment long..

Emma cried out, "No, stop. It's too sad!"

All her guests were astonished at her. One girl whispered to another. Together they got up and said it was getting late. More filed out behind them.

The crowd thinned rapidly as the guests said goodnight. Emma lingered at the door, watching the last child disappear up the street.

The moment after she closed the door, someone knocked. Emma answered. There were only moths hitting the street-lamp at the corner, and not a soul in sight. She closed the door and turned. The shadows of two children, straight and still, stood upon the glowing screen in her darkened living room.

She started. "Oh! You two about scared the daylights out of me."

Their forms were stillness personified.

"Still full of tricks tonight, are you?" said Emma. "Okay, one last game. My guess is you are two bookends -- no?" She crept closer. "The last bowling pins standing -- no? Of course not." She crept closer. "I know what it is -- you are two little rascals!"

Plunging her head behind the curtain Emma shouted "Boo! I got you."

She was shocked to find no one there. She stepped back. The two shadows remained on the white cloth. Around the room the glowing pumpkins seemed to mock, beaming toothy smiles at her.

She stepped back further and found the edge of a chair seat. She sat down slowly in awestruck wonder. "Jessie? Roger? Is that you?"

A measure of delight kept the suddenly cold room and her goose bumps at bay.

"It's not possible, I know -- but still. It's been thirty-eight years since the great war took you from me. I've missed you so." She laughed. "But, you boys always said your mama put on the best halloween party around. You couldn't resist, could you?"

She might have been talking to construction paper cutouts. They offered nothing but for her to gaze into the dark center of their once familiar shapes.

"I still remember how trim and handsome you two were in uniform, oh. Just like your Daddy -- and proud. Please don't just stand there and stare at me. Be good and let me see your faces once more? My boys, my good boys." Emma broke down and sobbed into her hands. "There's no word for it. That's how terrible it is. No mother was meant to outlive her children."

When she looked up the two boys were now wearing helmets, their shoulders squared and thrown back -- standing at attention.

Emma stood up, angered for tears without comfort, souring on life. She grasped the hem of the sheet, yanking it from its pinnings.

The street was empty and not a living soul saw the old house windows beam with a sudden bright light. It lasted only a moment and faded out, leaving the place looking dead.

The moths preoccupied with batting at the street lamp had a change of interest. They left the street corner and flew their shadows across the street and up the sidewalk. At the front door step they accumulated fluttering in a clamor to get into the wide grin and pyramid eyes of the Master of Ceremonies. With crackles and hissing and wisps of smoke they doused the candle light inside with their bodies.

So, at last the pumpkin on the front steps flickered a 'goodnight,' - - one full of stillness and deep deep sleep.

END

