

# Pumpkin Stealing

By Jerry Mikorenda

In my hometown, everyone knows I take all the shortcuts. So the day I left my parents' house it all looked routine. I made a right on Norwood and headed down Hazel Street toward The Farm. That's what everybody grew up calling it.

Sure there were others around, but to us this remained the Farm – a focal point for directions and conversations at the mailbox. People complained it made their cars dusty and stank up their backyards with cauliflower. Still, the Farm was always there, living and breathing like the guy next door. No matter how you felt about it, living by the Farm made your life a little different than anywhere else. Now it was the quickest outlet to Route 94 and the Interstate.

I was leaving for good; not returning to the education my father paid for, or coming home to the dinner that he, they, requested me to attend. We three Meacham's took on a guise of a family whenever serious discussions were planned. This one, I imagined, had to do with my future. Bone up, make something of yourself, plan ahead.

My parents had hopes and aspirations I left unfulfilled. My dreams, they told me, weren't rooted in reality. This wasn't something they said to my face, but rather a feeling

I had come to sense over the years – that no matter what I did, it wasn't good enough. Never quite what they had in mind for me. I left no letter of explanation or sloppy trail to follow. I wanted a clean break, another beginning.

At the end of Hazel, I ducked down an old power-line right-of-way past the Farm. Every spring, kids on motorbikes get bored riding up and down this worn path and cut figure eights on the freshly plowed furrows. The Farm, though, is quiet today. Equipment kept in the fields all summer has been stored in the barn for another year. Harvesting too was finished except for a few rows of stray pumpkins ahead of me. I always thought the pumpkin to be an absurd kind of fruit, even without a funny Halloween face carved on it. Each seems to appear as if placed, not grown, peppering the field with blank expressions.

But what struck me the most about this empty lot was how much smaller it seemed. I remember the walk to this patch being so much longer, full of so much more danger. You see, stealing pumpkins became sort of a ritual around here. That little bit of lawlessness allowed on occasion. No one asked any questions as long as you didn't bother the neighbors. It was something kids did and something I hadn't thought about for quite a while.

I climbed a short ridge above the patch. Yes, it was smaller. Things had changed more than I realized. Slowly, perhaps too slow to recognize on the way home from work or school everyday, but nevertheless, things did change. A community center stood where the stables once were and across from that a new elementary school with a glistening black parking lot. At one time, from here I could see my parent's rooftop angled higher than the rest. Now I couldn't even find it. Houses like weeds were everywhere.

In the distance I saw a rusted truck wobble out of the barn, take on three boys, and ride out toward the rows of pumpkins. The kids started running down the rows of vines, carefully selecting the right ones to be picked. A boy bigger than the others two grabbed pumpkins off the tailgate and stacked them. Occasionally, one bounced off the truck causing the farmer to stop and shout until they all looked up at him. Their small, round face blankly absorbed the waves of his frustration. While standing the farmer turned and stared at me the way deer sometimes look straight at a hunter when he fixes one of them in his gun sight. It was old man Hainus all right, Milton Hainus. I thought he might yell or wave for me to get off his land. Instead, he got back in the truck and moved on.

I stood motionless as the two younger boys continued stumbling about looking to their older friend for approval. He was the leader; the one they most wanted to be like. I watched them for a few minutes but it was getting late, too late to be standing around a pumpkin patch with a bunch of kids. I circled behind the truck squinting into the late afternoon sun. The boys went on yanking at the pumpkin stems without noticing me. They were trying hard to fit in and be part of the crowd.

The three of them made me think of all the different ways there are of growing up and the cruel and destructive things you sometimes do in the name of it. Things I wanted to get away from, not remember. The trouble with this town is you can't forget anything. It's always there reminding you it happened; you did it. It was a stupid thing really; a dumb turn of events. Me and two other guys from around the block went out one night to steal a pumpkin. It was early in the season when most of the crop was not yet picked. In past years, we were satisfied with taking just one for all of us. But not that year. It began after David dropped our pumpkin. Me and John threw the split pieces at one another and

then systematically the three of us began smashing row after row. We never stopped to look up at one another, or to question what we were doing.

The whole crop was ruined that night. Afterwards, others followed our lead. Bouts with brushfires, dirt bikes and pilferers made it all but impossible for Hainus' big operation to continue. He received little help from the neighborhood. After each succeeding incident, Hainus went from door-to-door looking for answers. My parents scoffed at him under their breath and made jokes about his mud-caked shoes and uneven pant legs. His truck, so tough and invincible in the fields, seemed comic and shabby next to our manicured lawns and rows of vinyl-sided houses.

The sables were the first to go, then the land between Hazel and Norwood. Each passing year more and more of the Farm disappeared. And so did my friends. I haven't talked to David or John in years although my mother told me John now works for his father's company. I thought I spotted him driving home from work with his old man a couple of weeks ago. The windows of their white Lexus were shut tightly against the heat and that farm smell. Even if I shouted out, I don't know what I could have said to them.

Just then old man Hainus got out of his truck and bent stiffly over the vines. His shadow, long and thin in the late afternoon sunlight, stretched across my path further down the field. Through a patch of trees ahead lay the open road, Route 94. I took a deep breath and moved forward.

"Excuse me," I said, swallowing hard. "Could you use a hand?" The old man straightened himself and turned back toward me. "What's that?" he said, pushing his hat back on his forehead. The collar on his plaid shirt was fastened making him look ironically formal. "You need a Hand" I repeated, moving closer so he could hear me.

“Well,” he added, trailing into a pleasant laugh. “Did the county send ya? They’re always doing that you know.”

“No,” I said, apologetically. “Just passing through.” He nodded, looked at the sun and back at the rows of pumpkins remaining to be picked. “It’d sure be something to finish this off today, but I can’t afford to give ya nothing. These kids get a few bucks and a free pumpkin. You look a little old for those wages. You from around here?” he asked, his voice breaking into a half laugh again.

“Name’s Meacham. Brian Meacham,” I said, holding up my gym bag so he could see the address. “Live with my parents over on Columbia. That’s right off Norwood. Norwood and Hazel,” I answered. “Been there about twenty years. I don’t mind giving a hand. I’m in no rush, no rush at all.”

The three boys were waiting with their legs spread apart and hands shading their eyes. “Talk with George there,” the old man said, lifting himself slowly onto the running board. “He’s been with me the longest, knows how it’s done.”

I threw my bag into the front seat of the cab and glanced down at the rows of pumpkins. Seventy-five, maybe one hundred, remained. “Want to be up here?” offered George reluctantly. “No, that’s all right,” I said, “you seem to be doing a pretty good job.”

And so we worked – husking the vines, feeling the round shape of the fruit, holding its firmness in our hands. The wooden slats on the truck rattled and waved with each slowly advancing step. The exhaust warmed the cool afternoon air. The boys, I learned, were from a new part of town away from the Farm, the neighborhood. They play video games and talked of school exams, downloading music, boredom. One

begrudgingly spoke of visiting his father on the weekend and attending a football game. Things would be different, much different, when they got older, each proclaimed. It made me smile.

The truck moved out toward a final row of abandoned pumpkins. Some of this forgotten clump lay brown and deflated like old tires. Others showed no outward signs of decay, but collapsed into puddles of rotting pulp when yanked from their stems. I thought of my old friends David and John and all those like them driving home from work. Suddenly, I was overcome with an inexplicable sadness and anger as if something precious had been taken from me.

I looked back at the barren field. Stopping here seemed a stupid and insignificant gesture. It didn't matter. None of it mattered now. I silently clenched my fist. All the old hatreds, the violent, insensitive urges and loneliness welled up inside me. I wanted to scream and shake the whole town to its feet. Make everyone else stop and look. See things.

We stacked the last pumpkin and leaned heavily on the truck. "I'll say you fellas done the work," said Hainus, shutting off the engine. He opened the door and pulled a Thermos from behind the seat. After handing three Styrofoam cups to the boys, Hainus passed the large plastic Thermos cup to me. We waited as he poured. It was fresh, pressed cider. The liquid looked afire as it dropped through the fading sunlight in thick amber ropes as the five of us raised our cups and drank the cool juice in long gulps. Its sweetness rushed through my body and in a moment it was gone. We looked into our empty cups and at each other.

The old man unbuttoned the collar of his flannel shirt and surveyed our work. His eyes looked tired and worn like river pebbles. “Hard to believe another year’s gone just like that,” he said. “After forty-four here, you’d think it gets so you can’t tell one year from the next. But something always happens that sticks out in your mind – helps you keep track. I guess after a while that’s all that really matters.” He was staring into the distance as he talked beyond the veil of trees and orange sky.

I put down my cup and thanked him. “Should be me thanking you,” he said. “Couldn’t have done it without ya, without any of ya. You’re all a fine group of men. Right, George?”

“Hell yeah!” replied the boy, grinning sheepishly. “Well, it’s getting late,” said Hainus, slapping his hands together. “Better get you boys back to your families before it gets much darker.”

I left my bag on the front seat of the truck and started backing away as they locked the tailgate into place. When I was far enough into the blue shadows, I ran, taking in big gulps of darkness with each quickly paced step. Unable to see the path ahead of me, I kept moving forward wanting desperately to look back, but knowing there was nothing, absolutely nothing, left for me to see.

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