

The Pumpkin Man

By Kevin B.

This never would have happened had there been pizza in the fridge.

I could have sworn there was one slice remaining from two nights ago when I placed an order (along with pesto bread), but when I got home, the box was still in the fridge, and there was nothing in it. At some point in the last forty-eight hours, I must have eaten the last piece and not even remembered it. Maybe it was wishful thinking that kept me believing I had something to look forward to when I got home, since pizza would be the only thing that qualifies.

I pulled the empty box out of the fridge and threw it in the kitchen sink for no reason I can explain to you now. I'm not rational after a night out at the club (and several cocktails), and I find myself playing detective the next morning as I try to determine why all of my shoes have been organized by how much they hurt my feet and where I lost yet another chapstick. Some cases have remained cold for years now.

Had there been pizza in the fridge, or had it been early enough to order another pizza, I might not have succumbed to the darkest desires lurking within myself. The fact is, after 2 a.m., I become a winding path of need and isolation that will do just about anything to feel something other than the emotions my therapist has been



trying to get me to feel since I was in my mid-twenties.

Food will often do the trick, but only if it's greasy and will leave me feeling bloated for days afterwards. Cigarettes used to help, but I managed to kick that habit by going to see a hypnotist. She put me in a trance, and when I woke up, every cigarette looked like my high school math teacher's thumb. Once I saw that, I couldn't unsee it, and no matter how stressed out

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I got, there was no way Mr McGovern's thumb was going in my mouth.

The alcohol helps until it doesn't, and once it stops helping, if I'm not already asleep, it only intensifies the cravings tenfold. Before I know it, I'm going back-and-forth between Netflix and the Criterion Channel trying to find anything that will hold my attention long enough to calm me down and help me pass out.

When that doesn't work, I text the Pumpkin Man.

I was twenty-three when we met. We were both at a party for my friend Jorge's birthday. Somebody had just bought him a baby unicorn and he was showing it off to all the guests and asking us what we thought he should name it.

"Name it Hornball," I heard a voice say, causing me to scoff without warning.

The owner of the voice peered around Jorge to see who was mocking his inane suggestion, and there I was.

"What's wrong with Hornball?" he asked, as though it wasn't obvious.

I couldn't tell if he was genuinely irritated by my reaction to him, because he didn't have any facial expressions. His entire head was one giant pumpkin, and it sat on a body that seemed to be

made entirely out of leaves and twigs. I had heard of Pumpkin Men before, but I'd never seen one in the (lack of) flesh. He was about six foot eight though, and I felt my face go flush at receiving attention from someone so tall. Even someone with a gourd as a head.

"It's low-hanging fruit," I answered. "Something has a horn, so you give it a name that's a variation on the word 'horn.' It just seems banal."

This was back when I thought I was going to write essays for a living, and so every time I spoke, I acted as though a *New York* magazine editor was listening. Two years later, I would end up getting what was meant to be a part-time job at a wig-styling company that specializes in wigs worn by famous French pop stars, and I've been there ever since. The plus side is I can take one wig home a month at a deep discount, and the downside is I think about setting myself on fire at least twelve times a day.

Back then, I was still naive enough to believe that one day I'd be paid for being witty, and I practiced my future profession by acting like the Language Police any chance I got.

The Pumpkin Man came over to sit down next to me, and he asked me my name and where

I was from. I gave him the scant details of my history, relieved that he wasn't mad at my mockery. I didn't mind riling up a man when the opportunity presented itself, but I'd heard that Pumpkin Men have the ability to put a curse on you that lasts for eight to ten years, and I didn't need that kind of negative energy in my life.

He told me that he was only brought to life a few months prior to the party, and that he'd met Jorge at an Introduction to Philosophy class that semester. After he was awakened, the Pumpkin Man was eager to receive an education, and the university was thrilled to welcome him since they had always wanted a Pumpkin Person to matriculate there. The place was rife with centaurs, but most other supernatural creatures all wound up at one of the Ivy league schools.

We ended up leaving the party about an hour later, and I told him I couldn't have him over, because my roommate was just getting over a break-up and the sight of anyone else experiencing human connection would cause her to turn into a giant ladybug. The Pumpkin Man said we could go back to his place, as long as I didn't mind making love in a cornfield. I told him that sounded sort of romantic, and that's where we spent the next few hours—surrounded by crops waiting to be harvested, basking in the light of the autumn moon, and in the throes of passion.

When I left the next day to go beg my professor for an extension on a paper about the Canadian economy, the Pumpkin Man said it was

great having me over, and he hoped that we could see each other again. I smiled, and asked to see his phone. I couldn't detect what he made of my request, because, again, no face, but he handed it over, and I input my number into it along with my first name and a smiley face in place of my last name. Then, I texted myself from his phone so I'd have his number.

Once I was done, I handed him the phone, and said "I'll see you soon."

We haven't spoken since.

Technically I guess that would depend on your definition of "spoken." I've texted him—although I waited a day before sending anything. I thought maybe he was a modern Pumpkin Man who liked having the woman text first, and I was happy to oblige. Then a day went by. Then another day. I asked Jorge what was up with his friend, and he said that he didn't really know Pumpkin Man all that well, but that he'd heard rumors about him.

"What kind of rumors?" I asked, pretending not to care as much as I did.

"Oh, you know," said Jorge, cradling the baby unicorn in his lap over brunch, "Just that he's kind of a player."

I decided right then and there that I would never message him again.

That lasted for about a week.

Then, one night, I came home and there was nothing in the fridge. I'd been on a date with a guy who only spoke about his ex-girlfriend and what a banshee she was. At first, I thought he was

just deriding her out of bitterness, but then I actually dropped into the conversation and realized he was saying that he dated an *actual* banshee.

“She’d just scream and scream,” he said, “And I’d be like, ‘I get it, I get it, but I’m trying to watch this basketball game.’”

I excused myself to go to the ladies room, but ran for the coat check instead. I sent him a text saying I’d suddenly come down with something, and then I promptly blocked his number in my phone. Once I was home, I ran myself a warm bath and lit one of the candles from my emergency stash. I didn’t even realize it was Harvest Night until the scent invaded my neural pathways. Suddenly, I was right back under that October moon with the Pumpkin Man. Before I knew it, my phone was in my hand.

Thinking of you.

A few quick photos of my legs stretched out in the tub. I chose the best one, threw a Vivid Cool filter over it, and sent it to him.

Then I waited.

Around 4 a.m., I decided he probably wasn’t writing back, and I sent him a follow-up text.

You know, you may think just because you’re a Pumpkin Man that gives you the right to sleep with women out in a cornfield and then never call them again, but I just need to let you know as someone who’s been alive for longer than a few months that it is TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE to treat people that way. People are not disposable. They’re not corn husks. You may be the best lover I have ever had, but that does not entitle you

to act like I don’t matter, because I do. I MATTER. HOW DARE YOU. Do I miss you? Yes. Yes, I have to be honest, since you asked. I do miss you. I DO. We could have had something really special, but you threw that away, and you have to live with it. You have to live with the regret. I feel sorry for you. You’re pathetic. Don’t ever text me again. I’m done with you. You’re blocked. BLOCKED. Good luck with your philosophy exam. Because you need a LOT of philosophy. LIKE A LOT. Goodbye.

After sending several more texts, I passed out.

When I woke up in the morning, Pumpkin Man hadn’t responded. The shame slammed me down like a wrestler in a cage match. I promised myself I would never message him again.

That promise only seemed to make my desire grow stronger. From that point on, every man I went on a date with would remind me of Pumpkin Man. The one or two relationships I managed to form always ended whenever I confessed to them why it was so important to me that they wear a pumpkin while we were making love. I began carving jack-o’-lanterns all year long. My friends stopped talking to me. They were sick of hearing me go on and on about that night in the cornfield.

“Enough is enough,” Jorge said one day before he rode off on his now fully-grown unicorn, who he had, insultingly, named Hornball, “You need to move on.”

It didn’t matter how much logic was thrown at me. I dodged it all like bullets in a Keanu Reeves movie. The only thing I could do to

The only thing I could do to mitigate my behaviour involved creating other channels for my temptation. That's where food and cigarettes and gambling on troll fights came into play.

mitigate my behaviour involved creating other channels for my temptation. That's where food and cigarettes and gambling on troll fights came into play. They all helped, temporarily, but I could never go more than a month or two before I pulled up Pumpkin Man's name in my phone and sent up a flare.

Do you miss me? I don't care. Do I miss you? Do you care? I don't care if you care. I don't. I DON'T. CARE. How are you though? Are you okay?

If I look through my text messages, I have years of history with Pumpkin Man. The thread goes back further than any other message, except for my sister, who I stopped talking to a year ago, because of that thing that happened at her wedding that wasn't my fault.

Somewhere along the way, just texting him was enough to calm me down. It didn't make me happy, oh no, not even close. It just felt like giving into something that you always knew you'd give into. The tension releases, and you're able to breathe again. You've let yourself down, yes, but now the disappointment has overtaken the expectation. You are not better. You are not *getting* better. You eat pizza and don't even remember having eaten it. You tell yourself that if there's pizza or booze or other workarounds, you won't keep making the same mistakes when you know that's a lie. You're a liar. Go ahead and

text the Pumpkin Man. Why not? You might as well.

That night, laying in bed, I watched my phone drop down to 1% battery life. My charger was broken, and I needed to find the strength tomorrow to get up and go buy a new one despite my bank account being subterranean and my car making a noise that can only be described as "terminal." I didn't even have the initiative to get up out of bed and close the curtains.

That's why the light came in.

It wasn't the same blue as the one that blanketed me and Pumpkin Man that night so long ago. Now, it was an older blue. It wasn't going to stimulate me. It was going to help me rest. I just had to do something for it first.

"All right," I said, bringing up his name, "All right."

Before my phone could die, I deleted the text thread from my phone. Once that was done, I went to his contact, and, with a sharp intake of breath, deleted that as well.

"It's done."

The room began to fill with blue and then white and then a kind of silver. I thought I smelled smoke from a campfire, or maybe it was a field fire. There was the taste of popcorn in my mouth. And maybe a dash of cinnamon. Something with spice. A latte, perhaps.

I knew the moon was proud of me, and I was proud of me too.

As I drifted off to sleep, I began to count sheep in my mind, but the sheep were out of order.

“7 . . . 4 . . . 0 . . .”

Oh, I realized, it was his phone number.

Somewhere along the way, I forgot to keep track of how much pizza was in my fridge, but I had committed his number to memory.

“3 . . . 9 . . . 2 . . .”

Well, I thought, what the moon doesn't know won't hurt it.

Image: [“Pumpkins in the field”](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [SullivanGardner](#)