

Pumpkins
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There is a terrible accident. A truck full of Halloween pumpkins is speeding around a curve and fails to see another car unwisely making a U-turn. In the car is a young woman, married, the mother of three, who, when the vehicles collide, is killed.

Actually, she is beheaded, her body thrown from the car and decapitated with such force that the head sails through the air and lands in a pile of pumpkins spilled out onto the road.

Her husband is spared this detail until the next day, when it appears in a front page story in the local paper.

This newspaper is bought by a woman about to leave home on a trip. The tragedy so unhinges her that she rushes off the train and calls her husband at work. When she mentions the pumpkin-truck accident, he says, Pumpkin-truck accident? Precisely like their five-year-old son saying, Bubble gum on the couch?

The woman begins to tremble, realizing now what she should have realized (and because she is in therapy, she thinks, she *did* realize, no wonder she was so upset!). The accident occurred more or less exactly in front of the house of a woman with whom her husband had a love affair but has promised he has stopped seeing.

She senses that her husband knows about this accident—and not from reading the newspaper. That is why he sounds guilty. Perhaps he was with his lover when it happened, perhaps this woman called him for comfort, just as she is calling him now. As she confronts him with this, her husband keeps interrupting to answer questions at his office.

The next morning the woman sees her therapist on an emergency basis. She tells him the whole story, from buying the paper and reading about the pumpkin-truck to calling her husband to her husband moving out again last night.

The therapist says he is sorry, he cannot talk about this. He tells her that, coincidentally, one of his patients is the husband of the woman killed by the pumpkin-truck. It is, after all, a small town. The therapist says he has been dealing with this tragedy for two days—on a *real* crisis basis, a *real* emergency basis—and frankly he cannot stand to hear it treated as another subplot in this woman's continuing romantic [drama].

The woman bursts into tears. The therapist apologizes for his unprofessional behavior; he says the whole thing has unnerved him in ways even he doesn't understand.

That night the therapist tells his wife about this. For ethical reasons he leaves out the names. Still, he repeats what the woman told him and what he said and what happened.

Except this time, instead of saying "pumpkins," he says "Christmas trees."

"Christmas trees?" says his wife.

"Did I say Christmas trees?" he says. "How funny. I meant pumpkins." Naturally he realizes that his slip of the tongue is a clue to why this incident so disturbs him.

Later, in bed, he considers his mistake. And before long it comes to him. Because for once the truth is not submerged, but bobs on the surface, like a buoy, tied to a time he often revisits in looking back on his life.

At five he suffered a case of mumps which turned into something more serious. He remembers running to his parents' room, his cheeks swinging like sacks of flesh from his face. He remembers falling. After that he was sick for months—from autumn through early winter. The symbolism is so obvious: pumpkin time when he became ill, Christmas time when he recovered.

Now his wife gets into bed, but he doesn't notice. For he is feeling, as never before, how much of his life has passed: all the years that separate him from that swollen-faced boy. He thinks how sweet that period was, the rhythm of those days, sleep, radio, chilled canned pears, the kingdom of the blanket, the kingdom of ice outside it.

For an instant he nearly recaptures that haze of safety, confusion and boredom, when he fell asleep looking at pumpkins and awoke seeing a Christmas tree, when nothing scared him, not even time, it was all being taken care of. Then it recedes like the plots of dreams he wakes up already forgetting.

It is like the experience of speeding along a highway, and some broken sign or ruined café will suddenly recall his past, but before he can tell his wife, they have already driven by. He knows that if he turns and goes back, what caught his eye will have vanished—though perhaps he may catch a glimpse of it, fleeing from him down the road.