

## Summer's Blood

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*Richard Wirick*

*Though the visible realm was conceived in love, certainly the invisible realm was conceived in fright.*

Ishmael, *Moby Dick*

### I

To make one was to make a face, really, a human face--eyes, nose, mouth and teeth--and to carve it up out of earth, or something part of it, that grew up out of it, something like dust--like God made up Adam out of dead dirt and breath. It was to have your parents let you do something complicated, as complicated as the things they did, or God did every day, just this one day. They let you use a knife, they let you cut. They gave you the power to make something like a life. But when you pushed through the skin you knew it was death, too, that had been put in your hands.

At Christmas you didn't make anything, at Thanksgiving nothing. And nothing at Easter that was fun for a boy, the dyed eggs smooth and hot and amazing the way their whiteness took the color, but really a frilly thing, something for girls to do. Nothing at any other time, either. Only here, only now, could you take something up and carve out a head and put a candle in behind the eyes to make a soul, a mind, a *Geist* as Mrs. Bernsteiner would say (*Geist* was something a knife should usually go through, but here was a time when you made one with a knife, like a wand, waving hard shapes out of next to nothing). It wasn't a holiday like any of the others, but it was the one of making--building up something, this *thing*, out of fire and dirt and--what was it--fruit?

Pumpkins were easy enough to get, though some years only certain farmers would grow them. They were there in all their gardens though, and some grew wild along the road, the grooved sides poking out at you through their fern-like tops. Older kids found them wherever they could--rotten ones to throw, that you found split later in their girlfriends' yards. What you needed

for a jack-o'-lantern was the biggest, the roundest you could get. You needed one that gave when you pushed the knife. Its skin had to be as soft as meat.

The best place to get them wasn't a farm but just a house, Slayton's, sitting in the woods on old Hanley Road. The drive took you through four covered bridges, over the Clear and Black Fork Rivers, past the fruit farm which you floated by slowly (it was fall, and the Keenans who ran it served free cider, their eight whooping kids running down the lawn from E.B.'s mansion to grab the white cone cups from a stack, knocking the tap, the brown blood sputtering, going over the cup's lip, colder as its color cleared), and down from there, that highest of the county's tiny mountains, to a darkened glade of moss and rot still leopard-spotted with what the sun let down--like the deep water light you saw on TV lying on sunken boats, on chests of treasure. That was where you found Slayton's, just barely.

It needed, you thought, a farm stuck to it. A barn or a shed. At least some outbuildings. At first it looked square and serious as a farmhouse, with uncurtained windows like worried eyes. But it didn't have the whiteness, the feeling of warmth. You imagined lights inside a farmhouse. Their place was grey, cave-cold with hickory shade. Its siding was dark as a charcoal mare's.

Nobody could figure the Slaytons out. Some say it was the Old Mother who kept it that way. Others blamed her son; the lazier he got the darker it grew. His lupus wife couldn't do anything either, her steel crutches inching up at you when you drove in. "Walked like a spider," my father said. Nobody knew where Mother's husband had gone.

They themselves looked just like the place, like they could have come out of one of its walls. When you visited you wanted to get back to the patch. But they always took you through, as if *that* were the payment, before letting you pick for your dime or quarter. Blanche pointed with a crutch to where you should park. The half-off door swung back at your face.

You wanted to go in but then you didn't. But the swing of the door made you know you would. Mr. Carter, in Sunday School, talked about that feeling. "Dread," he called it. Drawn to it, drawn away. We wondered enough to go in but then stopped: at the sound of the clink, the lock falling behind us (Grandma Jana said Grandpa spoke in the bed as he died of a soft falling sound like that, almost sweet and musical, in the great space he entered. He didn't seem scared. Maybe inside were the same stamping cattle, the milk cans he held every morning of life).

Which all seemed right, this idea of a door. The spirits' doors opened on this one night. The dead came through them to dance unseen, to be with us living, who had not yet been called.

But that came later, thinking about that. What hit you when you first stood in the room was the heat, the warm block of it coming down around you

like a coat. October wasn't that cold, but they kept the furnace on. The coal pan was bad. Underneath you the chunks of it slipped in the fire, bleeding and deepening in the flames. Soot blew through the registers and blackened the dust. Rude people, my mother said, wrote their names in it on the tops of things.

A morning's worth was on their faces by the time you saw them there. Mr. wore it thickest, like a five o'clock shadow. He never ignored you. "Golf ball eyes," was what Bub called him. Bub said he wore a diaper Doctor Reed fixed him up with. I looked for pins under his Oshkosh, but his hands were always there, quick and busy with picking, bringing up seeds he pushed into his gums. He used a wheelchair a lot; my mother said polio. Bub had heard nothing was wrong with him: "The coot just likes to sit," he said. Dennis Anderkin's Mom told him the same. He'd given up on the world, May said--no point in walking through it anymore. "Malingerer," was my father's opinion, the longest word I ever heard him use.

My Grandmother Jana said he did every foul and unnatural thing a human could commit. He picked the scabs that grew from his hopeless fence mending and hedge trimming. The cracks of his skin were filled with dirt, his nails all black, purple, and soft-bone whiteness. Jana said this by itself could send you to the hospital. But Mr. even picked the hairs of his nose. This would instantly kill most people. She told us about a man in the Bible who'd been set up for hundreds of years of life, picked one hair and dropped dead like a bird.

The Old Mother would sit in a wheelchair too when she got tired of wandering and swatting the curtains. The swatting and cobbing drained her of blood. She slid down in the chair, her skin white as the curtains the window's breeze wrapped her in.

Mrs. minded the kitchen, the patches, the "business," running in from somewhere always out of sight. On this trip I came right up on her, leaving my father and the girls in front. Lila Slayton had been smart, maybe still was--a physics degree from Brown, a shelf of the Great Books. But her hair was wild as cabbage grass, her teeth stained brown like a man's who chewed. She jumped when I came up behind her at the sink, her hands holding dark globs of soaking rags.

"Jacky," she said. "Come for your pumpkin? How's your Grandmother Jana?"

"Ma'am," I said, "she's fine."

"Come for your pumpkin?" She came up to me, closer. I could smell the Southern Comfort on her breath. I once saw the two pint bottles she kept behind the orange juice jug on the icebox shelf. I wasn't snooping, just looking for water. Its label was the thing I loved: the etching of a paddle steamer like my other Grandma Ada and her sisters--all the Willcoxans--had ridden down

the Ohio on to Gallipolis. Smoke floated out of the boat stacks on the label, over high-hatted people waving from the banks.

"Yes," I said. "Like usual."

"Like usual," she said, looking down at my shoes, new bright sneakers like nothing she'd seen before, never going--I knew-- to stores where they'd be. She squinted at them, then gave a sad nod, the nod of a railroad bum or a full-on madman like Speedy Heiser. Then she looked away and into the sink, drying her hands to come out back.

The door the garden opened into made no sound. It was like a wall of dark air itself, hingeless and smooth with nothing to its touch but the slightest cool sense of a passage. It opened out. It told you the step was down, into something darker. This was the place where the patches started.

I followed her, walking as slow as I could in the dusk. She lifted the leaves with the end of her ashplant. Little clouds of dust came up. The first ones we saw still had a good color. The long months of sun had poured down their orange.

"Jacky." I turned around. My father stood in the doorway. Elly's pixie bangs were there under his hand.

"Why George," Mrs. said, straightening up. "Come down here and pick out something."

Both came down the steps, Elly uneasily, him shifting her over the last cracked one. She swung like a puppet on his long, bare arm.

"How's your mother, George?"

"Oh fine, fine," he said. His eyes were down under the leaves, and I could tell he wasn't listening. It was like walking with him when he hunted. Everything else disappeared to him. There were only his eyes and the thing he waited for—the thing which was everywhere and nowhere at once.

I went on ahead. A cat jumped up. They were everywhere at Slayton's, circling the furniture, nosing in cupboards, lying on the Old Mother's doll-lined shelves. This was a calico. Orange and black, it looked right for the pumpkins.

I kept going, kicking, watching for the perfect one. The sky was clear, and the space it became seemed far from us. Bright roads of stars waved up out of the buttonwoods. The breeze coming through them chilled my skin, and somehow made me think of cutting again—the cutting that sent things from world to world. The road between heaven and earth was a blade. It let you in and it let you out. It let you pass over like the dancing *Geists*. I thought of the movies of babies being born—the cord had to break before they were here. And it let you out. On the same TV the Jap soldiers died, their hands feeling down for the bayonet holes.

"There," she said behind me. This one was big, but not too big. It hadn't grown enough to sag and flatten. The cloud of its dust hung there in the

floodlight. She held the leaves when my foot pulled away.

"Right there."

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"Where'd you get your pumpkin?" Leo asked.

We were in the treehouse of the Grand Kazan. He headed the house and owned it and set the rules during his reign. They never changed much because nobody could ever think of anything new. Just the basics: no girls, no parents, no kids older than the GK. He watched over the footlocker that held the things we stood for: wampum belts and arrowheads, books about screwing (*Sexology*, was one Tim got from his mother's attic, by Dr. Albert Ellis), and a space for the still-beating Poe hearts we'd get someday from other kids, from other clubs, kids we'd kill and cut up and tear the skin off in strips like the Iroquois did in battle. We'd vowed to be like them, without pity, and vengeful for our fallen.

Rolf Bernsteiner was the GK now. We all had German names—Hartmann, Wolff—sounds tongue-rolling tough: Gevertz and Fasnacht and Werner (my own). The kids from clubs that called us Huns were German too, so that didn't make much sense. Besides, we were Indians, and whoever had to learn it would learn it at the stake.

"Slaytons," I said. I put my green apple branch—my offering, my talisman—in the center of the circle we made with our chairs.

"Weird bunch," said Roxy Falde. "Like a bunch of frigging trolls."

"Like the dwarfs," Tim said, "at Disneyland. But with no stocking caps." He liked knowing that we'd never seen Disneyland. His dad was rich, did something with satellites. They flew to California every summer.

"The dolls the old lady has give me the creep-o's," Bub said. He put the bottom of his palms against his lips and made a farting sound.

"Ditto," said Roxy, "wrapped up like that."

"She collects them," I said. "She's crippled." Bub's sound kept up, trailed off. "Gives her something to do."

"But when you go in, Gadzooks!" Bub said. "It's like something in hell. Dead people on shelves. It's like bleachers full of stiffs."

"In cellophane," said Tim.

"Saran wrap," said Rolf.

"Keeps off the dust," I said, and pictured the rows of them, twisted and frozen. This last time I hadn't paid them much attention. But there they were each visit, built and set there, it seemed, with no thought or feeling—just a

constant, silent, mindless attention. They were like the crowd that waited in front of you at Sunday School recital or scout camp when you had to make a speech and had nothing to say. Awful little hollow people waiting for something, something you'd promised to give them, *only you*, but found that you couldn't. They weren't like the pumpkins--raw and waiting for life. They'd already had a part of it and wanted more, all their eyes watching your little evasions.

"I saw Vick Schechter's baloobas," volunteered Leo.

"Oh futz you did," said Zimmerman.

"Did."

"Did not."

"Where at?"

"Right here," Leo said, pounding his chest with gorilla beats. "Two," he said. "They look alike."

"Where at?" asked Zimmerman again. His forehead was red. This was serious business.

"Up against the window of their bathroom."

I thought of how this might have been possible. The Rieffs lived next door to the Schechters, in those clapboard houses that lined Maple Street and that you'd see once in a while coming down West Main on a flatbed truck. Leo's bedroom window looked straight across to her bath, and I let the picture of it clear into something believable--the rising steam, pink flashes through the frosted panes.

All of it irked me, his thinking about it. My hunger for her had begun. She deserved my thoughts, only mine, to belong to. She had just turned sixteen, ripe and lovely. None of us, really, could stop thinking about her. She was my babysitter, Walt and Libby Schechter's daughter. She had the street whirling in the smell of new sex. She had my father's young eye, but my mother forgave it. Lib was her best friend, partly because of her being a nurse, that circle of women who had flown from the trap of husband and house and out into the secret night world of Marshfield General's sneakered halls--white doves of freedom, they must have seemed to her. She'd talk to Lib on the phone for hours, sighing after an episode of *Ben Casey*. Lib would go on about working the OR, in the soupy red sea of a real doctor's hooks and clamps and trays of bright knives.

"The closest anyone's gotten to them," I said, hating myself for it, but feeling the claim of her stronger than anything else I could say, "was me and Bub. Bug collecting."

It was true. We got them for her biology class: everything we could find from Ridey's field--Viceroy's and dragonflies and luna moths; blind, burrowing beetles with heads and eyes like clots of blood. We took turns standing

on the top stair of her porch while she kneeled to pin them, lifting them gently from each jar. Her breasts were golden and freckled, nested loosely in her soft sling bra. I wanted to press my face against her, nose their rubbery tips, touch paradise. I had some vague knowledge it would transfigure me, give some answer to any question my life could ever ask. She squealed when she drove the pins through, and watching her made small pains flick up my chest, as if matches were being lit there.

"I saw them. Her," said Leo again, pushing his glasses up on his nose. "I saw her from the front and side when she was drying. And from the back. She spread the towel across the rod." We saw it, all of us, the legs widening, the cleft of hair between from the back. I grew redder, and knew they could see the color coming to me.

"Did you see her pajoda?" asked Sowash.

Leo made dog sounds, nodding his head up and down to sniff.

"Was it fuzzy, like a beaver?" Sowash asked.

Leo caught it all in the same long nod.

I was furious now. I knew I would stutter if I tried to talk. A secret had been torn from me, a thing of my own imagining taken without permission. I wanted to choke Leo, to get him down and put a stick across his throat and push each end down with my knees. But like all the rest of them, Leo was bigger than me. He could have choked me without a stick.

"Did everybody go to Slaytons'?" I asked.

"Does the Pope shit in the woods?" said Sowash. I liked Sowash. There was something adventurous and military about his family. His father was a colonel who owned a truck and a printing press.

"Only place to get your pump," said Leo. "Now all we got to do is pump it." I felt better now, getting her out of their talk at least.

"We've got a big one," Jim Roper said. His last school picture had a fly sitting on top of his crewcut, and he'd told me once, in a soft voice full of shame, that his parents were planning to divorce--unheard of then except in the movie magazines.

We all were growing tired now. Some of us crawled out to the ironing boards we nailed between the forks of the larger branches. They were bowed by the rain and smoothed of chips and splinters enough to be easy on our backs and made a good, almost level, porch for the place, a good place to lie down and watch the stars.

I saw Cassiopeia, the Queen. The legs of her chair were like columns of diamonds. I thought of being in love with Vicky, of what the look of love from her would be like--smiling and flushed and thrilled to come close, seeing me when my parents left not as a parent would, but as a woman wanting me, wanting to give herself. And that feeling grew to the strongest and sweetest of feel-

ings, one that had visited me before—that something lay waiting for me to find it, set down in advance and pleasantly made, but ever-changing as I ever searched: something of the strongest and loveliest power.

## II

Then it was finally carving time, the night we all headed over to Reeds. Mr. Reed had the family living in the basement while he finished the house. Its floors were full of wood shavings and steel rods and lumber, so the parents voted their place the place. Bub called old man Reed "The Fly," and Roger Jessup called him "eccentric," a word I never got a good hold on. But there had to have been something to it, the way Ralph yelled out his words, as if you couldn't hear him even when you were close. He bought threshing machines at back country auctions, and ran them for no reason on weekend mornings. But then I thought how everyone could be eccentric to somebody else, how my father called Roger that because he held his gun funny. So maybe it was one of those words that meant everything, everything and nothing. One that you used in place of understanding.

Mr. Reed worked nights at Ideal Electric. He was a lead man who pulled parts down from one belt and made them into big-dialed radios on another—the ones whose grills and knobs looked like a face (My father kept one on the toolbench shelf, the dial's soft light spreading across the jars of screws and two-penny nails that stretched our reflections when we passed by the table saw). Mrs. Reed led the cub scout troop. My mother claimed she tried to turn them Pentecostal, speaking in tongues at their Weblos fire.

She spread us out Indian style in the unfinished upstairs. We put our pumpkins between our legs and walked up to the table to pick our instrument. It was scattered with things from Mr. Reed's toolbox--files and pliers, all glimmering with oil. It had a sliding lid, and when Mrs. wasn't watching, I opened it, closed and opened it again. It gave off a smell of iron and kerosene.

We never cut ourselves, and I think one of the reasons the mothers let Martha host us was that she had watched boys before, guarded them against their carelessness, one of "all God's dangers" she always talked about. This time I chose a buck knife like the one my uncle Yeager used to skin the deer my father shot. I walked back to the wall with it, feeling its weight, running my thumb up against the knobbed horn where the blade started.

I started my lid with square cuts, pulling till the juice came up through the crack. I wanted an octagon, a hexagon, whatever it would be. Most cut in circles and didn't get far. Everybody eventually all got going, the same sawing sound--like a thumbnail grating on coil wire. My stem was still on, long and curled and furry: like what's left of the cord once the baby is out.



My lid, I thought, was a piece of geometry. Brought up into something from paper and thought. Inside was mush and soft seed and plant blood. It was much, much brighter than the skin: the thick blood all brains floated in, surrounding and feeding it, pouring in life. I wondered what would happen if you cooked it. People ate the brains of cows. They made Liz Taylor faint in *Giant*, and a cow's brain, I thought, would make me faint too.

The mush closed fast and cold as water around my fingers. Its color mixed under the white of my nails. It was too light to stain though, a melon's soft color, one mostly water, with a water's clearness. I pulled it out with a coffee mug and scraped the meat from the walls. I turned it upside down and knocked. Even that wet, every seed fell out.

I made the mouth with lots of teeth, not most of them missing like most people did. I left a few of the bottoms out, and made a good square cut for the one missing top. The mouth would be more real that way, like Speedy Hiser's or the bums' that cooked at the depot fires and smiled up at your car when you slowed for the tracks. The eyes were the hardest. They could be anything--squares or circles or the triangles everybody made. But the knife seemed to fall into a shape of its own, nothing more than a normal eye. I leaned the whole thing up on my knees and pushed the carved parts in with the knifetip.

Now it was time to really get going, to give it its brain, its final light. Mrs. had come around earlier to watch. She hadn't said anything when she passed mine. I guessed it was all right with her, but it wouldn't have bothered me if it hadn't been. I liked her and Bob in a way and felt sorry for Mr.--his whole life a mess of sad, scattered trinkets--but I had enough of my father's contempt for them in me, enough to feel that where they were wasn't where you should end up. I knew that I couldn't, that I wouldn't end up there. And I also knew--far, far more importantly--that my father wasn't as sure of that as I was.

She was behind me now, holding a box of candles spiraled and tipped like a bullet, the color of dirty, mud-made ice. I trimmed the wick and lit it with one of the long, blue-tipped matches she laid in front of us. It leaned well going in. No wax went down the sides. I rested it on the lid edge while its bottom filled with the clear, hot drops, and stood its end in the center of that.

Mrs. came around a third time, smiling a little with her little mouse face. I put on the top, put it on the floor, pushed it toward the center with my stocking feet.

"Well," she said, smiling more, "There now. There."

I was really too old to trick or treat, so when that night came I talked my mother into letting me go out with the Legacy brothers. They promised to drive the Nova--silver, from their father's lot. I let Elly light the pumpkin before the first beggars came. My mother lit a small pink birthday candle and

put it in Elly's hand, and lifted her over it so she could touch the wicks. When the big candle flared, their faces blazed. My mother said, "Good," and Elly squealed. We put it on the milkbox and turned the welcome mat sideways. The flame threw its color down onto the rubber.

When Legacy took us out East Main in fourth and made the cross and upward kick to fifth we flew back in our seats, and finally felt free then, part of the night, like ghosts going out over the ground. The breeze in our hair made us feel like pure thought, or fire or air and no earthly thing.

One by one we saw signs of magic. Mrs. Wyrzynski had hung her Indian corn to ward off evil spirits. My uncle worked with her husband, Detlef. His coverall pockets were filled with amulets. She thought there were spirits in the place they worked--a roundhouse of darkness and crumbling brick, where hammers rang like bells in front of glowing forges and splashed fireballs of iron onto the ground. She'd given Detlef a thumb-sized stone, face-shaped and smoothed by a river in Lodz, where Germans--*like you*, she said to us once--shot three of her brothers in front of her eyes. She never had a jack-o'-lantern, only this corn. She'd told us of Poland, of Lithuania, where Halloween was called All Hallow's Eve. The dead came across the rivers and roads of heaven, the Himmelfahrstrassen, just to watch you all night, remembering life. Legacy said old Wodja was crazy.

"She's off her nut," he said, peeling rubber in front of her walk.

"A baskethead," said Leo.

But the rest of us wanted to take what she'd told us, throw it into the pot and keep it. Magic was magic and old people knew. They came from places where miracles happened. Fire crawled on the ponds at night. Hourglass sand ran from bottom to top. Streets filled with crocodiles in the middle of winter. "In goddamn Poland," Bub said, in a vote for belief. The old ones knew. They knew and had seen, or they knew who had seen. You couldn't laugh off voices with a ring like hers. It was the sound of what had happened.

And it rose, that magic, each street you went down, like the rising peeps of morning birds. The kids in costumes all held hands--bag-headed, draped with sheets or crepe; the girls in pointed witches hats like giant thorns or soft white good witch angel dresses, with wands that ended in sprinkled stars. Some wore plastic store-bought Dracula and Frankenstein masks, with PJ bottoms the kids burned up in, Bub said, like marshmallows for being dumbbo futzes. "The really sad thing is the candy melts."

We stopped at the corner of Frederick and Clever. It was the longest chain of hands we saw. A pretty girl led them, as pretty as Vick and probably a babysitter. When I looked closer, she seemed to have a uniform, something a beauty parlor lady or nurse would wear. Their masks floated strangely over

their bags, cocked in different directions, and they turned around each other like they were dizzy. When we got close enough, I saw they didn't have masks. Their eyes were wide apart and rolled to each side. Their faces looked squeezed. They all had bangs. They looked down at their shoes, like blind people walking.

"Tards," said Leo.

I knew they were from the Shriner's home. Their faces got wide in our lights and they smiled. They moved so slowly, just holding on, as if moving itself were some kind of pain.

None of us said anything for awhile. We passed the junior high, then Church Street and the square. The light was green--I saw it the same time Legacy did--and he punched it hard, knowing the only cops would be behind us now, out of hearing in the parking lot behind the gym.

Going down Plymouth felt like the first long, falling ride on the Blue Streak up at Cedar Point. He made it this way by tearing us through and coasting the hill so our stomachs flipped. We forgot what we'd seen, or added it to the long night's strangenesses. Some strangeness, some magic would always be sad. Some of it showed the mistakes of the world. The knife could slip. The candle could drop. Anything could do it, and it was best not to think about.

Legacy punched it. I was scared of a crash. I put my knees up under my chin. My hair flattened over my cold, tight ears. The air was wet and full of fog. The trees and lawns made their morning dew. The dark air seemed meant to hold more than itself--everything rising to a sign of something. We felt the night around us as restless, but with a restlessness we had spun ourselves. We felt our whole past lives flying by, like me on a ship watching land disappear. There was nothing behind us we felt like remembering. This moment would always be only this moment.

Down the long slide of Plymouth and Smith, and out past the mill shanties all of us saw them: the pumpkins and porches or big rocks they sat on, the stream of them melded together by something. We had made ours and someone made these. But someone or something had made *us* up, at least into whatever filled us then. All of it--candles and bushes, ourselves--was a long, rich thought that the night had grown.

The eyes and mouths and sometimes lidless points of flame went on and on and on like a river, one that the moon had shattered in pieces. The town was gone once we crossed the tracks. The country houses jumped out from their trees. Legacy gunned it. The faces flew faster--miles of whirling and grinning fire. ♦