

The Pumpkins

Tongue in cheek, quirky.....But also quite bloody. Not for the squeamish !

A short story of about 8,470 words for Halloween 2023. Of course, the real problem was once again Hollywood movies, TV and even famous writers.....

Never buy a bookstore because it sounded a cool thing to do on a TV show, even if it was your childhood dream.

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Mary Harris (Née Garlin) was sat on the first floor of the bookshop, their bookshop. The dream Colin Harris admitted to having from the age of about six, maybe seven. Mary hadn't really had childhood dreams, unless you could count wanting to be a cheer leader for the Miami Dolphins. A strange ambition for a girl at a South London polytechnic, it was probably the colourful uniforms. Her desire to own a bookstore had come late; she'd been in her thirties. An American TV show about a mixed bag of people who were destined to save the world, yada-yada. Quite entertaining, but that show had just about changed her life. The female lead had parents who ran a mom and pop bookstore in a quiet little town. That store had seemed so nice, so cosy, so wonderful. Plus it really did feel as though some kind of bookstore muse was at work. Mary had read a Gaiman quote on Twitter, the one about a town not being a proper town, if it didn't have a bookstore. Add on Colin's dream since being a foetus and that was it.....They'd bought a bookstore in Baddow St Mary.

"Mary.....Mary." Yelled Colin. "The pumpkins are here.....There are a lot of them."

A relief to get away from the company books, which were really an accounting system on a laptop. They were doing alright, but only just alright. Hence the purchase of a van full of cheap pumpkins, to create a wonderful horror book display for Halloween, without spending a fortune. Down the stairs and a young man in blue jeans and a beige jumper, was placing a crate of pumpkins against the wall. "Wow, I really did order a lot of pumpkins." Said Mary.

Space was something that had made her fall in love with the bookstore. One of several shops in what had been a Victorian arcade. Baddow St Mary had been a destination town for Victorians with something that their doctor had said needed fresh air and rest. There was even still a spring in the town, though few now came to take the waters. They were two doors away from an opticians that like them, seemed to be just about doing alright.

"There's space.....They'll all fit against the wall." Said Colin.

"They're so red." Said Robert, Rob to just about everyone.

Robert, her four year old son who seemed to love the shop as much as her. Robert had seen Guinea Pigs at a friend's house, so Colin had bought him a large three level cage on wheels and two guinea pigs to go inside it. Greedy Guts and Muncher were their names, chosen by her son. There might be more, if the first two worked out. The Harris family menagerie was finished off by no less than four adult cats; Gerald, Primrose, Hector and Hermione. Officially her cats, but like all felines, they fussed around anyone who fed them or scratched their heads.

"They are red.....Never seen pumpkins quite that red, or that shiny." Said Colin.

"They're from somewhere foreign." Said the young delivery guy. "My boss knows someone you see.....Cut price, so I'm to collect the cash when I leave."

"Foreign pumpkins." Muttered Rob.

If they were really pumpkins, they were very shiny and very red. Cheap though and they'd look fantastic as a window display. If they didn't go bad, Mary was already thinking about leaving them in place until the Christmas decorations were put up.

"Oh, I think they look wonderful." Said Mary.

"Call me and I'll pick up the crates."

She paid the delivery guy and went into the kitchen for a roll of paper towel. Mary breathed on one of the pumpkins, nothing more than that. A good rub over and polish with paper towel and it looked so ripe, so shiny.....So wonderfully red.

"I'm going to make two displays, maybe three. The window, another by the stairs and yet another behind the modern romance section."

"I'll help." Said Rob.

Rob made her feel slightly guilty. Most of her friend's kids were attending some kind of schooling at four. Mary liked having him around though and anyway, what did four year olds learn ? How to tie their shoes ? Plus, Mary had stopped saying she was forty and now admitted to being forty-ish. Rob had arrived late and he might be her only opportunity to do mum stuff.

"We'll need to take apart the existing window display." Said Mary.

"This is normally a quiet part of the day." Said Colin. "Rob can polish our pumpkins, while we shift things around."

The cats would help by getting in the way of course, it was what they did. Cats seemed to have terms and conditions no human ever saw. Getting in the way was written large, as was sitting on everything the humans needed to pick up. It was going to be chaos, but a nice chaos. And Colin was right; it was the perfect time of day for it.

"Alright, let's do this." Said Mary.

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Colin Harris normally liked a little TV time between dinner and bed. He was feeling restless though and there was something required to finish off the new window display. He'd fancied himself as a bit of an artist at college, so obviously he'd gone into sales and marketing. Why ? It had been easy to get a start and if you worked at it, the money could be good. When Mary had told him about sharing his dream of running a small town bookstore, leaving his sales job hadn't been hard. Probably even easier for Mary, she'd been in recruitment since leaving college. That was how they'd met, Mary Garlin, as she was then, had found him a decent job.

"You don't have to carve the Jack-o'-lanterns now." Said Mary. "There's that new real crime show on Netflix."

"Yes, but we bought the lights for inside them." Said Colin. "And I'll need a lot of sharp knives and maybe a saw. I don't want all that lying around when Rob is running about."

"Alright.....I'll bring you tea and biscuits later on." Said Mary.

They really did have a lot of pumpkins; there was still a full crate of them in the storeroom. After Halloween they'd be left as the base of general autumnal displays, from harvest festival, right through to thanksgiving. It might be an American holiday, but it was another excuse to try and sell people a few books. All that was needed to complete the Halloween window display, was half a dozen Jack-o'-lanterns on the top row of pumpkins. Nothing fancy, just eyes cut out, a nose and a slot for a mouth. A tiny electric light inside and hey presto.....A quick and inexpensive Halloween display.

"No Primrose, I'll stroke you after this is finished." He muttered at the large female cat.

Colin had already put the tools and a bowl on a work table. A saw to cut the top off and then a large metal spoon to dig out the pulp. A pity most of the edible parts were likely to be thrown out, but that seemed to be the fate of Halloween pumpkins.

"I'm not living on pumpkin pie until next June." He muttered.

There had been previous occasions when he'd carved faces into pumpkins, even a turnip one year when there was a pumpkin shortage. Those had all been family Halloween decorations, or for the college digs he'd lived in for a while. Colin would never claim to be the Michelangelo of pumpkin designs, though people had made appreciative noises in the past. The Jack-o'-lanterns had to look good.

"Stop being a pest Primrose, I'll play with you later." He muttered.

First the saw, which went through the skin and flesh of the pumpkin with ease. There was the familiar pumpkin smell and the pulp looked fresh. It seemed a waste to throw it away, but they did have close to a hundred pumpkins. Mary was sure to use at least a couple of them to make pumpkin pie. The cat didn't seem to like the smell. Primrose walked a few feet away, constantly glaring at the pumpkin. A large black and white cat, Primrose was a friendly animal, though even Mary called her flaky. Colin scooped the innards out of the pumpkin and into an old metal bowl.

"Nose next, the nose defines the face." He muttered.

In his teens, Colin had bought a wicked looking sheath knife from a hardware store in his home town. He'd called it his fishing knife, his modelling knife, even his scout knife, though he'd never been in the scouts. In truth, he just liked the look of the blade and it was wonderfully sharp. A double edged blade, it easily cut into the skin and flesh of the pumpkin. The noses would vary, but this one was going to be a traditional triangle shape. A little cutting, followed by some trimming and.....

"Wow, what do you think cat ? Looks good, huh ?"

The eyes were going to be round on that Jack-o'-lantern and various other shapes on the others. It was important for them to look different, for that 'wow effect' as people looked in the window. Colin had just dug out rough holes for both eyes, when Primrose started howling. Dogs howled like animals, but a howling cat.....Primrose sounded like a baby, or a young child in distress.

"Hey Primy, It's just a pumpkin, a Jack-o'-lantern." Said Colin. "Calm down girl, a pumpkin never hurt anyone."

The lights were on at the front of the shop, though it wasn't as light there as it usually was. There was sap of some kind all over his fingers, or maybe their cheap pumpkins of dubious origin, had juice ? It looked black, until he stood up and his hands were underneath the window display lights. It was red and didn't even smell like plant sap.

"Jeeezzzz, it's blood.....I'm covered in blood." He yelled.

The work table looked to be covered in thick crimson blood. The bowl of pumpkin pulp, no longer looked to be full of pulp. There was viscera in it now, entrails of some kind and what looked like internal organs. Colin stumbled and the bowl went off the table. It hit the floor, scattering guts and blood over a wide area.

"Primy.....Stop howling !" He shouted. "This is all.....Impossible."

When Mary came to see what all the noise was about, it was as if the lights came fully on again. Primrose was still howling, sounding like a neglected baby. Everything else though.....The bowl of pulp was there on the floor, but there was no wide pool of blood. The pulp was red and messy, but it didn't look bloody, or like viscera. His hands were stained orange in places, but there was no blood.

If Primy hadn't been having a weird moment, everything would have looked perfectly normal. Colin looked at Mary.....

"I.....I can't explain it.....But there was blood, lots of blood." He said. "I can't account for it, but it was everywhere."

His half-finished Jack-o'-lantern was still on the work table and it looked good. No blood, no bleeding eye holes.....

"Quiet Primy.....Good girl, it's all over now." Said Mary.

"I'll finish this one and tidy up." Said Colin. "Maybe I just need an early night."

"Oh.....The knife." Said Mary. "Your foot.....It looks in a long way."

The sheath knife, the blade his mum had said was the kind of thing thugs carried. He'd dropped it and the really weird thing was that he hadn't felt it hit his foot. He was only wearing slippers and the blade had gone through them and a good inch or more into the top of his right foot. There it was, stood to attention like some kind of fake video on YouTube. Only it wasn't fake and now Mary had pointed it out it was hurting, a lot.

"Fuck." Said Colin.

He looked around; they were trying not to give Rob any unintended lessons on profanity. They were failing of course, running a not very successful bookstore was never going to be a bad language free occupation. Mary said she'd heard Rob yelling fuck at Muncher, his favourite Guinea Pig.

"Keep still, I'll pull it out." Said Mary.

There was a memory in Colin's head, of a kid in the sixth form dropping a scalpel. Were kids made to dissect rabbits these days? It was unlikely. The scalpel had gone into the kid's foot and someone had pulled it out. Colin seemed to vaguely remember that hadn't been a good idea.

"I think we should leave it in there." He said. "They'll take it out at the hospital."

"Don't be silly.....I can't drive you to A&E with that thing wobbling about."

He sat down on the chair, certain that his vague memory of a similar incident, was indicating a need to be sat down. Colin wasn't bad with blood, he could even watch them taking blood samples. It had already been a hell of a day though and was likely to get worse. Mary vanished for a minute or so, before returning with the shop's first aid kit. Mainly behind the counter for customers who might get minor cuts and grazes, Colin had never thought it might be used on him.

"Lift your foot.....Slowly." Said Mary. "Knife out.....Slipper off. I'll try to do it as quickly as I can. If it bleeds, I'll use a plaster."

If it bleeds indeed! Out came the knife and Mary whisked his slipper off and away. A fountain of blood began, reaching a height of just above his knee. Hector their neutered ginger tom chose that moment to arrive and he joined Primy in her howling. The fountain of blood came out at an angle, to land just past his toes. Once there it looked to be forming a small pool.

"Crap.....We're going to the hospital." Said Mary.

Somewhere in his head, Colin's mind must have decided he'd coped with enough that day. He slumped back in the chair and passed out.

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Mary Harris opened the shop door and went outside to get a shoppers eye view of the new Halloween display. The selection of horror books looked great; most had gory covers with plenty of blood and zombies, or vampires. A friend from college lived quite close to Pendle, where there was still a thriving business in making broomsticks for visiting tourists. Her friend had bought two and sent them to her as an overnight delivery. Add on several wax skulls and plastic skeletons, and it all looked like something out a large department store. The crowning glory had to be Colin's Jack-o'-

lanterns. Each one was different, with tiny LED lights to make it look as though their eyes were looking at you. Cheesy yes, but artistic and well-made cheesiness.

“Wow, if that doesn’t get them through the door, nothing will.” She muttered.

Colin had finished them all after they’d returned from the hospital, much like getting back on a horse that has thrown you. He’d worked at it for two hours before going to bed, with every intention of staying there until midday. Oddly, for such a traumatic event, Mary had a slightly unreal feel about the night before. There was something, which she would never tell a living soul. It wasn’t just that it might start Colin worrying; it had to remain a secret because she didn’t want to admit it to herself. When she’d entered the front of the store, to see why there was so much noise; there had been a pool of red blood near her husband. Not for long, almost a blink of an eye and it was gone. It had been there though, she was sure of it.

“I was hoping to see you, Mary.” Said Lynn. “Is Colin alright ? We all heard about the accident.”

“Yes he’s home and fine.....The hospital sorted him out.” Said Mary.

“Good.....Good.”

Lynn was the receptionist for the opticians two doors along. She also seemed to be the head of some kind of local intelligence network. Mary had no idea how it worked, but Lynn seemed to hear about everything that went on in Baddow St Mary. Almost midday and Mary had something to look for before waking Colin.

“I never chuck anything out, it’ll be there.” She muttered.

Up to the first floor and the desk where she worked on the paperwork. There had been a bit of paper with the amount on it, as paperwork for buying the pumpkins. Colin had been lucid at the hospital, though he had gone on about pumpkin sap and how it might have been toxic in some way. Mary hadn’t wanted to join in with his conspiracy ideas, but her husband was usually so focused. Not the sort to have hallucinations.

“Ahhh, found you.”

There it was, folded up and tucked under the edge of her laptop. A compliments slip with the amount she’d paid the delivery guy. There was also a company name, but no company number or a proper telephone number. Just a mobile number with John written under it. John who ? Her memory was normally good, but Mary had no recollection of who had recommended John to her, or how she’d contacted him. Maybe her husband was right, perhaps the pumpkins were mildly toxic ? She’d read once that deadly nightshade could have all sorts of mental effects, so why not cheap pumpkins ?

“Oh, you have to be fucking joking !” She muttered.

Again, the automatic look for Rob. She’d even begun to apologise to him for swearing. Luckily her son was in his bedroom, playing with his Guinea Pigs. Mary had seen the company name, of course she had. It was just unimportant though, like the name of a corner shop you go into when miles away from home.

‘Cthulhu Pumpkin Enterprises.’ Was the company name, with no given address.

Of course she rang the mobile number, who wouldn’t ? Not just unavailable, there was a loud technology style screech coming down the line at her.

“Looks like they won’t be collecting the crates.” She muttered.

It was time to wake Colin anyway; he wouldn’t thank her for letting him sleep all day. Make light of the Cthulhu name, or treat it seriously ? Mary decided to wake up her husband and see how things went. A quick look into Rob’s room, where he was watching Greedy Guts run around the super-sized

Guinea Pig cage. A tough metal cage, it had been expensive. With four cats in the building they'd needed a tough home for Rob's defenceless small pets, to stop them becoming cat treats.

"How's it going?" She asked. "Hungry?"

It was a pointless question really. For a skinny looking four year old, their son had never been known to refuse food. His choice of food could be a bit unhealthy, though she'd work on that as he got older.

"Hmmmmmm, milk and flapjacks please." Said Rob.

"Fine, but you're getting fruit tomorrow."

Rob deserved a few treats; she had taken him to the hospital with them. Impossible to arrange a babysitter and her tea towel bandage had begun to turn red. Tired, yawning and stretching, not to mention grumpy. Rob had gone into the back of their elderly Volvo. A sweet nurse, who looked no older than twenty, had made sure he had a drink.

Into their bedroom and Hermione was sleeping with her husband. Herm most of the time and Hermione in full when she'd done something bad. Herm was a large female Persian cat, who wasn't all Persian. She had all the paperwork of a pedigree cat, but something wasn't right. A local tomcat exercising harem rights maybe? Whatever the reason, Herm had a few areas of ginger fur amongst her pure blood grey and Mary had acquired her for a rock bottom price. Mary sat on the bed and stroked Hermione. Then she rubbed the ginger fur on her tummy.

"It's midday.....Wake up honey." Said Mary.

They weren't usually into pet names, never darling and definitely never, ever a dearest. Honey was fine though, they both used that. Colin opened his eyes, though he still looked tired. Her homemade bandage of tea towels held in place by duct taped, had worked pretty well. He'd still lost quite a bit of blood though and then the hospital had got to work. All in all, he'd had a fairly grim night. Topped off by a doctor with a bizarre bedside manner.

"A blood jet up to your knees.....That's nothing." He'd told them. "There's a lot of blood pressure down there and a surprising number of scalpels being dropped on feet. I heard of one girl student having a blood jet that reached up three and a half feet. Looks dreadful, but very rarely fatal." Probably intended to cheer them up, but it hadn't. Herm wandered off, while Mary held Colin's hand.

"I must get up, or I'll be awake all night." Said Colin.

"How's the foot?"

"Hurts when I roll over."

"I found the paperwork on the pumpkins." Said Mary. "A bit weird, but they know we're a bookshop. Bound to appreciate a Lovecraft based joke.....Of course we are."

She was getting the plausible explanation in early, even though she only half believed it. Colin looked at the compliments slip, which showed a really good price for close to a hundred pumpkins. Why had she ordered ninety seven and not a hundred? Like so much to do with buying the damn things, her memory failed her. Colin had obviously seen the company name.

"Cthulhu bloody pumpkins, are these people fu.....Are they nuts?"

"No limited or a company number.....The name will be made up." Said Mary. "I'm getting flapjacks and milk for Rob. Are you hungry? We could go all decadent and order in from the fried chicken place."

Food cheered everyone up, especially fried beige food, for some reason. Colin smiled and said he could manage half a bucket of chicken. Fries too of course and maybe an apple pie.

".....and who recommended these Cthulhu.....Bloody clowns?" Asked Colin.

“Look, I know this is going to sound strange.....I can’t remember how I heard about them.”

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Colin’s foot was throbbing and when it wasn’t throbbing, it hurt. A deep hurt that seemed to go right down to the bone. Having a dagger wound in your foot was good for business in a small coastal town like Baddow St Mary. It gave you notoriety for a while, though answering the same questions over and over again, was tedious. He’d had over a dozen potential customers browsing the shelves at one point and quite a few had bought something. Not always books, they’d branched out into mugs, notebook and bookmarks for famous people and locations. A woman he recognised from a queue in the post office, had bought four vampire books.

Between customers he made phone calls, using the internet to find local small businesses. Mary had gone knocking on doors to ask about who else might have bought cheap imported pumpkins.

Because of his throbbing foot, Colin was using his fingers to do the walking. It was important, especially as the pumpkin juice might cause some kind of neurological problems. Colin was already finding it hard to describe the young guy who’d delivered their pumpkins. Throwing them out was still and had to remain, a last resort. Cheap didn’t mean that cheap, they were now on the books as promotional materials. Plus.....It had to be admitted. The various pumpkin based displays looked bloody marvellous.

“Hello is that the White Hart ? I’m Colin Harris from the Book Well in the old arcade.”

It seemed Mary had been into the local pub and asked them to call if they heard of anyone buying cheap pumpkins. Colin was transferred to Rory, whose family had run the place since Moses was a lad.

“We’ve heard nothing, Colin. If we do, I’ll definitely give you a call.”

Of course Colin searched the internet for Cthulhu pumpkins, with exactly the result he should have been expecting. No one selling pumpkins under any variation of the name, but pictures, millions of pictures, mixed in with some videos. A guy called Chester from Maryland had created some truly evil looking Cthulhu carvings, using just pumpkins, bubble wrap and coat hangers. By the time his wife returned, he’d lost the good vibe from selling a few books.

“Any luck ?” He asked, as she came through the door. “Been a good day here, sold some vampire books and three mugs.... Oh, and one of the brass bookmarks.”

“I’ve walked around parts of the town I never knew existed.” Said Mary. “Much further than I intended to walk, I even found the second pub we thought was just a legend. The Malt Shovel and.....It looks a bit of a shit hole. Anyway.....No one in any shop, nail bar, pharmacist or corner shop; has bought cheap pumpkins, or knows of anyone buying any. How did you do ? Good job with the vampire books by the way.”

“Basically the same as you, though I was in the warm with tea and sometimes, toast.” Said Colin. “No one seems to have heard of cheap Cthulhu pumpkins, or any other cut price imports. I vote that we throw them out, just to be safe.”

“Oh, it’s not even Halloween yet.” Said Mary. “You have to admit, they do look good.”

“They do, I agree. So, are we keeping them ?” Asked Colin.

“After Halloween is over.....let’s decide then. We can hire a skip and dump them after Halloween, if there are any more incidents.”

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Robert Harris loved his Guinea Pigs with the kind of unconditional love only granted to animals and young children. Normally they made noises all the time, even at night. Their night noise was often like a low level chuntering, with the occasional squeak. He could sleep through that and rarely

wheeled their cage out of his room. Anyway, it was heavy and he didn't feel safe moving it without his mum there to help. Greedy Guts and Muncher were upset and making their alarm sound, nearly all the time. It was their startled sound, the loud shrieking that meant they were really scared. There was no sleeping through that. Rob was surprised his parents were managing to sleep through it. He got out of bed and put on his slippers. Dressed only in his Batman pyjamas, he knelt down next to the large and palatial Guinea Pig cage.

"Stop it.....Be quiet, or.....I'll push you into the spare room." He said.

They knew his voice, just talking to them usually calmed them down. Not now though, they were beyond being merely startled. There was a flap to get his hand in there, picking them up never failed to quieten them. Actually, a few times they'd started being noisy again, so mum had wheeled them into the spare room for the night. Rob picked up one of his pets, though there wasn't enough light to know which.

"Ahhh, you bit me.....You bit me." Shouted Rob.

He knew they could bite; Muncher had once given his dad a nip. Rob could see blood on his finger and he was too tired to spend any more time on his ungrateful pets. He used a word his mum sometimes used and seemed to enjoy using.

"Into the spare room with you.....Out you go fuckers.....Out you go."

Rob pushed and the cage wobbled a little, as it moved forward on its wheels. His bedroom door was usually ajar, but he'd closed it to stop the noise of startled Guinea Pigs from annoying his parents.

Rob stopped pushing and opened his bedroom door, to get the cage out onto the upstairs hallway.

Rob didn't tend to wander around at night, though he often looked through the gap in his door.

Something downstairs wasn't right, even Hector was whimpering. Rob stroked the head of Hector, the male Bengal cat who seemed to spend most of his day in the garden next door. There had been complaints about Hector, mainly for crapping on next door's vegetable patch.

"Are you alright, Hector?"

All the Harris cats could come and go as they pleased; there was a cat flap in the kitchen door.

Currently all four of them were looking through the stair rails at what was happening in the shop below. Primrose was making a hissing sound, while Hector carried on whimpering. Rob didn't like the dark much, but there were nightlights in some of the downstairs power sockets. Officially there to make it easier for his parents to check the shop over at night, but really.....Rob knew the lights were there for the cats. They'd been a little weird at first, until they'd become used to their new home. There was a glow on the stairs that had nothing to do with nightlights.

"Stop hissing Primy, you're scaring me." Said Rob.

Rob stroked her and felt the cat relax, just a little. His mum would have expected him to go and get her, but.....Where was the fun in that? It wasn't as if he was somewhere strange, he was in his own home. He was surrounded by the family cats, which for some reason, made him feel safe. Hector was huge, bigger than the terrier across the road. It was all open plan; three steps down the stairs and Rob could see right through the shop, right up to the front window. Something was moving down there, maybe more than one something.

"What is that, Primy?"

Things had been moved down there, the crates against the wall looked to have been shifted around.

Rob might have gone running into his parent's bedroom, if his curiosity hadn't kicked in. The thing moving down there was being obscured by two piles of books, but.....It looked like a pumpkin. Rob walked right to the bottom of the stairs, before he realised the family felines were no longer with him. All four of them were still at the top of the stairs.

“Oh, you cowards.” Rob mumbled.

That was cats though and as his mum had once said, you never heard of guard cats, or saw police patrolling with cats.

“First sign of trouble they’re off, every feline for him or her, self.”

His dad had said the day when Gerald had run out of the garden in their old house, when the neighbour’s cat had decided it was a good fighting day. Gerald had returned that night with several scratches on his nose and an expression that simply said, ‘don’t ask.’ Rob was still far more curious than scared. He was in his home, one loud shout away from having mum and dad as backup.

“Hello, who’s there ?” He asked, quietly.

Still some way from the window, there was the modern romance section to walk around. Not that Rob could read, but his mum seemed very pleased with the display of romance books. Mainly paperbacks, with a few large hardbacks with colourful covers. Rob had already decided that he wanted to run a bookstore, when he was old enough. Nearer to the window and at least two things were moving around. If the town wasn’t so quiet and deserted at night, someone passing might well have seen them.

“Hello, what are you doing ?” Asked Rob, a little louder.

Pumpkins, there was no doubt of it. There was a street light outside the opticians and its light filled about a third of the shop window. Pumpkins, though not the ones his dad had carved into Jack-o'-lanterns. Undamaged pumpkins, lots of them and they had arms. No, not arms, they were touching one another with what looked like tentacles. Running tentacles over each other, though making no sound at all. They’d moved things, which made Rob a little angry.

“You shouldn’t be in here.” He said.

Mouths in those wonderful, shiny red pumpkins, mouths with sharp little teeth. Walking on tentacles and each had many tentacles as arms. Still no sound, no threats, but Rob could see they were heading in his direction. As the first one bit his arm, Rob yelled for his parents.

“Help.....Help.....They’re hurting me !”

Hector was with him; good old Hector who his dad said was large because he was too fond of stealing the other cats’ food. Hector was hissing and running at the pumpkins. Two of the pumpkins did the impossible, merging in some way to form a larger pumpkin. Then a third pumpkin merged into those two and the creature with tentacles was now bigger than his dad.

“Leave my cat alone !.....Help !.....Help !” Rob yelled.

Hector was big, but he didn’t stand a chance against the huge three into one pumpkin. It bit the cat and there was a lot of blood. Rob hit the creature, but it took no notice. When sharp teeth began to rip Hector apart, Rob began to scream. He screamed and screamed and.....

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~ **Halloween – 31st October** ~

“The hospital thinks we did it, that we hurt our own child.” Said Mary. “All those cuts and bruises that we blamed on poor dead Hector. I saw the look on the doctor’s face; he thinks we’re abusing Rob.”

“No, I’m sure he doesn’t.” Said Colin. “Kids must get scratched all the time. I can remember having scabby knees all the time.”

“Don’t do that !” Snapped Mary.

“Do what ?”

“Trivialise everything, treat every crisis as though it was nothing, especially the serious ones. Gas lighting really and to be honest, I’m fed up with it. You were at the hospital and we both know, it’s likely someone will make a call to the local child welfare people.”

Colin looked angry; their arguments were rarely that dramatic. Mary had been really keen on a guy in her teens. Georgie, Georgie Broad, she could still picture his face. He’d owned an old motorbike and they went to the coast on it at weekends. Gorgeous guy who treated her like a princess. His one flaw had been treating every minor drama as a crisis. Every argument became like a scene from Eastenders. Over dramatic arguments weren’t her thing, never had been. She’d done it with a lot of regrets, he was a gorgeous guy. Georgie had been dumped and even that had caused a two hour blazing row.

“So you just want to walk out of the door ?” Asked Colin. “Just pack a case each and walk off to god knows where, is that the plan ? You talked about that last night, while we cleaned the place up. Everything we have is here; every penny went into the Book Well. Leave here and we’ll be banging on the door of the local council and praying they find us one room in a cockroach infested bed and breakfast.”

“There is my mum, she has space.” Said Mary.

“Your mum !” Yelled Colin. “I’d rather live in temporary accommodation for years and hope Rob doesn’t catch anything too nasty.”

Mary looked down and there it was, jammed under the counter. A large chunk of poor Hector’s fur. If they were going to have the wine and cheese reception that night and it was a big if. The place needed several goes at deep cleaning. The worst had been tidied up, but they still had a lot of work to do. Luckily Colin had that look in his eyes, the one that said he hated arguments as much as she did. Mary rubbed her cheek against his.

“I’m sorry, really sorry.” Said Colin. “Are we going to do this.....Tonight I mean ?”

“You know what I’m like.” Said Mary. “There has to be a plan, one we try our best to stick to.”

“Fine....What are we going to do ?”

She kissed him, just a quick touch of their lips. Colin was alright looking and he was clever. Not a patch on poor old Georgie Broad, who’d ended up crying because she’d dumped him. Colin understood her; he even put up with her control issues, up to a point. Colin had his foibles though, his quirks that she had to put up with. For a start he was whimsical sometimes, to the point of driving her crazy.

Whimsical went hand in glove with wanting to run a bookstore, since he was about Rob’s age. There were times when Mary loved turning their lives upside down and moving to a coastal town that had seen better days. There were times though, when the bookstore felt like another Colin whimsy she had to put up with.

“First we clean everything again, until there’s none of our kid’s blood on the carpet.” She said.

They’d found no trace of any damaged pumpkins, though there were far fewer than there had been. Most of the mess was blood from their son and bits of Hector. The other cats had vanished for a while, which was what cats did. They’d all come back fairly quickly, looking for food.

“We carry on with the Halloween special opening tonight.” She continued. “Lots of wine and nibbles for our invited guests and no mention of Rob being hurt. Definitely no mention of Hector being killed.”

Hector was already the first pet to be interred in the back garden. Probably the first of many, some small mammals seemed to have the life expectancy of a Mayfly and Rob was guaranteed to keep lots of them as he grew older. If they remained in the shop of course.

“Fine, agreed.....I’ll even put on a suit.” Said Colin. “How about long term....Are we keeping the Book Well ?”

She’d found something, totally by accident. It probably wouldn’t sway Colin one way or the other, but he had a right to see it.

“I connected my laptop to the baby monitor in Rob’s room.” She said. “Clever device, it went through our home network without being asked and hooked onto the internal CCTV I didn’t think worked. It was an anti-shoplifting camera....As if you’d need one of those in Baddow St Mary. Anyway I only spotted it today.....The clever gadget has been keeping video files. You need to see them.”

Mary had already edited the files, linking small moments together to make longer pieces of video files. It was almost as if the pumpkins were marching across the screen of her laptop.

“Been like this every night, while we slept upstairs.” She said. “They look busy, though I’m damned if I can see what the little bastards are up to.”

“Look, two of them just sort of.....Joined up to become one.” Said Colin. “What do they do then ?”

“Look.” She said, pointing. “That old dusty camera with no warning light, is the source of these video files. It’s out of the ark, the ultimate in low definition. What you see is all I’ve seen. The larger creatures must have gone somewhere, though I have no idea where.”

Colin looked scared, which had kind of been her intention. If the idea came from him, he couldn’t accuse her of control freakery. Not that he did, or at least not that often.

“Oh crap, the pumpkins have to go.” Said Colin. “I’ll call the skip hire people we used when we moved in.”

“I’m glad you said that.” Said Mary. “But.....No ditching our wonderful display until tomorrow. Fiona, my best friend from college is coming tonight. You must remember Fiona ?”

“Wasn’t Fiona the woman in the tight blue dress at our opening party ?” Asked Colin.

“That’s her; even I thought that dress was memorable. She knows a woman, who knows a.....You get the idea. There are times when the sisterhood of downtrodden female students, can be useful.

Anyway, Fiona can get the Book Well a mention in a well-known women’s magazine. Plus there are a lot of locals coming tonight, including our bank manager.”

“Crap, we can’t annoy Hollington.” Said Colin. “Wasn’t he one of the few or something ? Spitfires taking off at dawn and all that.”

“I think that was his father.....So, we’re both agreed then. The Halloween reception carries on and we dump the pumpkins in the morning.”

“Yes, I’ll call the skip people today.” Said Colin.

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As Colin Harris looked at his son’s terrified face, he still couldn’t quite believe what was happening. Colin was armed with a hammer out of his toolbox and Mary was holding a heavy frying pan. Almost a comical weapon, though she’d managed to kill several of the creatures with her repurposed skillet. Rob was holding on to his mum and.....His son looked well beyond terrified. All three of them were covered in bites, with their clothing turning red from the blood. The pumpkin creatures with tentacles weren’t that large, at least most of them weren’t. Tiny slit mouths with really sharp teeth, the damn things could bite hard. There was a body wedged into the modern romance section.

“Don’t look Rob, just look at me.” Said Mary.

The bastards were eating Hollington, their local bank manager. Lots of tiny bites, but his body was being nibbled away, mouthful by mouthful. It seemed an undignified ending for the son of a Spitfire pilot, one of the few. Fiona had stayed for a while after the reception, promising wonderful articles

in several magazines, or at least on their websites. The trouble had begun at midnight, after even Fiona had run out of things to gush about and driven away. Hollington was only still there to talk about their long term financial requirements. Not a telling off, he seemed quite impressed with what he'd been seeing go through their account.

"Acorns and mighty oaks.....Mighty oaks from tiny acorns." He'd said more than once.

He'd seemed a nice man, too nice to end up as food for Cthulhu pumpkins. Mary found another creature with tentacles to hit, though they now knew it took a few hits to kill them. Maybe there was no central brain inside the things ? Even Mary's heavy skillet, took several blows to kill the damned things.

"We should leave.....Now." Said Colin. "No valuables, no clothes, just as we are....We need to go."

"What about our cats ?" Asked Rob.

"Cats are good at sensing trouble." Said Mary. "They'll be out of the house by now."

"Probably crapping in next door's garden." Added Colin.

Rob was determined to help the escape of at least some members of the Harris family menagerie.

"We can't leave Greedy Guts and Muncher here, to be eaten." Said his son.

Tempting to grab the kid, his wife's hand and run. Their car was in the alley behind the bookshop, they could be heading out of the area within minutes. Colin had to ask the question though, even if it might mean getting a lot more bites. Poor Rob, he was covered in small bites and a few of them might need stitches.

"Where are they ? Where is their cage ?" Asked Colin.

"Still in my room." Said Rob.

Maybe it was just luck, good for him and bad for the Guinea Pigs. Or maybe the other way round.

Mary wasn't a screamer, or at least he'd never heard her scream. She screamed once and pointed towards the patio doors, which led out into the back garden. Something massive was thumping against the doors, something as big as a car, with large grey coloured tentacles.

"Fuck." Said Colin, without feeling even slightly guilty.

Colin had wondered if what he'd done, might have precipitated the midnight attack. It seemed even skip hire companies were only doing just about alright in Baddow St Mary. No extra charge for an emergency skip, it had been delivered about fifteen minutes after he'd called. Colin hadn't intended to put anything in it until the next day, but having it there, made it irresistible. First the crates went in and then the unused pumpkins. After that he reduced every display to use the minimum number of the red and shiny pumpkins. Not the Halloween display, Mary might have killed him for fiddling with that. As it was, a surprising number of the cheap pumpkins went into the skip. That might have pissed them off, but there was no way to be certain. As the creature in the garden broke the glass and pushed a tentacle through into their family room, Colin had seen enough. Fuck the Book Well; he needed to save his family.

"We're going.....Out of the front door and round the end of the arcade." Said Colin.

"But my....." Began Rob.

"We're leaving !" Shouted Colin.

Fear really, driving Colin's actions. The brute coming through the patio doors, was huge. Lots of tentacles and unlike the pumpkins it had eyes. Two of them and those two yellow eyes looked angry. Colin grabbed Rob, holding him to his chest. Mary was with him, as they went out of the front door and turned right. Everything looked so normal, just another quiet, but chilly, night in a coastal town that had known better days.

"We can't leave them.....Poor Muncher." Screeched Rob.

"Shut up." Yelled Colin.

Bloody Guinea Pigs, they only lived a few years and had the personality of a throw pillow. Plus all that noise in the early hours. At least their cats had the decency to sleep about nineteen hours a day.

"Car keys.....Do you have them ?" Asked Mary.

"Yes, in my pocket.....And the wallet with all the bank cards."

When had he grabbed those ? Colin had no idea; he'd been on autopilot after seeing the death of their bank manager. He just knew he had them in a pocket, along with his driving licence. By the time they were at the car, Rob was going into a full on breakdown of some kind. Their normally placid four year old, had grabbed the inside of a car door, stopping it from closing.

"No ! No !" Rob yelled. "They'll eat Greedy Guts and Muncher. They're my pets, you told me that when you gave them to me. I was to take very good care of them. No.....I won't leave without them."

Shit.....Colin remembered saying all that and more. At four there was little in the world you controlled and even less that was truly yours. Those stupid animals were like family to his son.

"Alright.....Stay here, I'll go back for them." Said Colin.

"No, I'll go." Said Mary. "You stay and look after Rob. After all, I'm the one with the frying pan."

It made sense in a weird and terrible way; she had killed far more of the tentacled pumpkins than he had. Thanks to several million years of evolved masculinity, he had to offer an alternative.

"I can't let you do that." Said Colin. "You stay with the boy....I'll get fucking Greedy Guts and sodding Muncher."

They were supposed to argue for a bit before he went, at least it was done that way in every creature feature movie he'd seen. Mary was up on her toes and away, waving her skillet as she went.

"Look after Rob." She shouted. "I'll be back before you realise I've gone."

Which actually made no sense at all, but he knew what she meant. Colin began to really notice his wife had gone after about fifteen minutes. Rob was asleep on the back seat, covered in a car blanket. As his watch showed she'd been gone for half an hour, Colin locked all the car doors and then checked they were locked by pulling at every door. Rob might panic if he woke up, though he'd be safe in there. Colin briefly touched the car window and looked at his sleeping child.

"Be safe." Colin muttered.

Round to the front of the arcade again, the creature might well still be at the patio doors. Colin had his hammer, though it wouldn't be much use against a creature larger than a family hatchback. The shop door was ajar, though he was certain he'd closed it. Mary must have entered the bookstore from the front and forgotten to close the door.

"Primy, really glad you're alright."

The cat purred as he rubbed her ears, though she showed no inclination to enter the Book Well.

Primrose turned away from him and walked across the street. Colin didn't like the implication, cats weren't stupid and they sensed things. He entered the shop and one of the pumpkins was right in front of him. Colin was more brutal now, more focused now his son was somewhere safe. It only took him three hefty whacks with his hammer, to kill the creature.

"Mary !.....Where are you honey ?" He shouted.

There was nothing left of Hollington their bank manager, just a few bits of bone and some blood on the floor. Movement somewhere in the arts and crafts section, but nothing came towards him. Mary was at the bottom of the stairs. She was dead and something had been chewing at her face. Not a surprise to find her dead, though Colin started to shiver. His fingers tingled and he felt a need to

constantly rub his forehead. Shock of course, coupled with staggering amounts of anxiety. He'd had a few panic attacks at college, enough to recognise some of the symptoms. He'd have happily remained in the shop for days, until every creature had fallen victim to his hammer. There was Rob though, his son needed to be looked after. Colin never saw the huge grey monster, until he turned to leave. Maybe even bigger than a family hatchback, it was between him and the front door. Colin turned..... No good, there was another of them stood in the ruins of the patio doors. "Alright you bastards.....Who first ?" Shouted Colin.

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~ The End ~

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Baddow St Mary is a fictional English coastal town, the same one I used in 'Short Sighted,' another of my short stories. The opticians in the arcade might sound familiar. I may well revisit the town in other stories. Everything is fictional and any similarity to the names of real people or companies is entirely unintentional.