

October Tale,

or the Secret Pumpkin

Now what most folks don't know is that there wasn't always such a thing as *October*. This is partially because no one had ever known the right word for the world as it turned and returned slow as smoke, laying its own beautiful body in the mossy earth like a grave, like a cradle: ochre and aubergine, ember and umber, saffron and vermillion. But this is mostly because what there was, was a Hole.

A real hole. (I wouldn't lie to you.)

You see, every year, around the time the trees bleed out, there was this Hole that would come to town. It would appear on the horizon and rise like a black star, until it was something like a black moon. And it would come closer. Or, more exactly, it would slouch—hunching forward, hanging back, then advancing, this Hole. And people didn't right know what to do. It was hungry, you see, the Hole, having come from somewhere and going another, and crossing the world in the meantime, claw over paw. Maybe it was lost, maybe it never had a home—but either way, the Hole made its way mouth-first anywhere it pleased. Which was everywhere. As in, the grapevines would wither, and the shorn limbs of old trees burned themselves to warm the world—and then the Hole would rise, blue-black and huge as noon the night it arrived each year, jaws wide, teeth out, cold breath weeping through the trees.

It was so.

And just so, most folks used to hide under the blankets of their beds, but would cut holes out for their eyes. They'd hide, then creep to the windows and peek. Through bedsheets holes, they'd watch the Hole passing through town (or the whole town passing through the mouth of the Hole, more like it). And they'd wait for it to be over, their eyes on the night, novenas on their lips. This is because there was always a chance that it might not end, the Hole. That the dark would have swallowed them whole. For good. That the Hole would take everything. And then take them.

Like I said, this was most places and most folks. But Ménerbes wasn't most places, nor were its people most folks. Not when it came to the Hole and its hunger. Not when it came to anything.

—Because, such a place was this old stone village where, just along the little road that leads down to the lavender fields, there came to grow: a secret pumpkin.

Smaller than a very small thing at first, in the little groove of the dirt of the ditch, the pumpkin (or *Kürbis*, for my German friends) was barely more than a viridian fist around the first of July, but getting bigger by the day as the days shrunk and the sky blistered.

“You know, you'll never make it, right?” said the jojoba tree, leaning her long limbs over the houses between them, her thousand green eyes flickering at the secret pumpkin. “You'll never be able to be what you aren't, which will be ripe for the reaping.” She fluffed her branches in the crisping air. “You'll be public as a duck and just as tasty when the Hole gets here.”

But the secret pumpkin sniffed, “I know what you are, but what am I?” Which is a saying she’d heard from the playground one street over. She wasn’t sure what it meant, but she meant it to say it. And it sounded right, so it was, since it got the jojoba tree to mind her own beeswax that day. And the next.

Which is how it went, the jojoba tree’s taunts, the secret pumpkin’s reply, and the old stone village’s vigilance: how the townsfolk used to look east at dusk over the golden-lichened walls by the old church to pray and watch for the Hole.

“It will take me,” the secret pumpkin knew about this hungry Hole. “And they will not be able to keep me,” she looked around the town, just a little bit in love with every body that passed, every color that touched her.

And though she was often alone, the secret pumpkin wasn’t lonely. There’s a difference.

You see, the Provence village of Ménerbes is a magical place after dark. Its winding medieval streets are lit by green metal lanterns filled with amber light. The houses glow in tones of ivory and isabelline. And no two doors are exactly the same, having stayed the way they were from the day they dropped in birth from the *prunus* tree, before walking out of the woods and curling themselves like hermit crabs into the mouths of caves and craters along the walls of the village, until they were its doors. (This is where doors come from.) (I wouldn’t lie to you.) (And if you don’t believe me, you can ask the *prunus-pandora* trees that still live in the woods surrounding Ménerbes.) Which, from the outside at night, you might think is a bit lonely.

But it's not.

See, for all the people you don't see on the empty streets after dark, there are plenty that you do— here and there as stars, and just as helpful. There was even a sonnet sung in those old *October* days known only to the blackbirds at night in the sycamores, and I think it went something like this:

*There's the cheese monger who closes his shop
and checks each door on his street to ensure it is locked.
There's the old woman and the scruffy stray mutt
who inspects all the ditches as she shuts the church up.
There's the chefs smoking cloves out the backdoor of their kitchen
playing American radio for the alley and dancing with dishes.
But each takes great care as they pass the secret pumpkin
to whisper 'Bonsoir' in secret and to gift her a something—*

*Some pour in a glass of red wine,
some give grapes still taut on the vine,
A few blow kisses, a few pray hope,
One night saw left cakes of lavender soap!
And the pumpkin is grateful and the pumpkin grows on,
And the pumpkin stays secret— but perhaps, not for long!*

So it was, the days of the secret pumpkin tucked in the ditch under squishy golden blossoms and squashy mossy greens. And so it went— even as the jojoba tree preened on.

“I have roots, you see,” she keened, the jojoba tree, “That means, even when the Hole comes and the town passes through its teeth, I'll

stay where I stand without a single change.” She blinked her green eyes. And if she was trying to make the pumpkin jealous (she was), it was working.

But the secret pumpkin held her ground (which is all you can do when you’re a squash on a vine.) (When you’re a squash on a vine, you’re a squash on a vine.) (And when all you can do is all you can do, you do it.) “I know what you are, but what am I?” replied the secret pumpkin, even as she grew, blooming even bigger in a matter of weeks, weeks that saw on the horizon the dark ears and smoke tail of the Hole.

It was the dying season, alright, and there in the distance, the Hole rose and began its slow lope forward across the world, hungry and heavy.

And heavy also was the secret pumpkin!

For, though the townsfolk didn’t speak of it, their secret pumpkin had grown by now out of the ditch and into the street, causing the whole road to tip and flipping the little cars to turn sideways on two wheels to pass (which is how people still drive in Ménerbes)—which made the pumpkin blush! Her whole face burned moon-orange in those days and just as bright. (Which is how pumpkins blush.) (And why most of them turn and stay orange.) (Especially when a pumpkin is especially magnificent and knows it.) (As did this pumpkin.)

—But the tilt of old road like the dip of an old bed was only the beginning: the Hole was coming closer, the world was burying itself in autumn, the jojoba tree was laughing, and the secret pumpkin was running out of room.

She'd overtaken the streets and most of the block where the people scurried past. And more of the town was worried than not—which worried the secret pumpkin. She was sure the Hole would eat her, and she was sure the town would watch through the holes in their bedsheets.

"Your days are numbered, little pumpkin," called the jojoba tree (even though she and the secret pumpkin were the same size). "Tomorrow comes the Hole," winked the thousand green eyes of her thousand green fruits, peeking through the flapping laundry on the line between the houses. "Tomorrow comes the dark."

And even if the secret pumpkin thought the jojoba tree (who was being a bully) was right, she didn't let on. (You must never let anything to bullies; what you let, they will rent from you, and what they rent, they burn.) And she would not be burned, the secret pumpkin, not from the jojoba tree's jeers. She held her ground, whispering, even if only to herself, "I know what you are, but what am I?"

—which the jojoba tree maybe heard, but maybe not, as it was about then that the Hole came to town.

"The Hole is early!" called the cheese monger, getting everyone on the street inside.

"To your blankets!" shooed the old woman covering the golden Madonna of the chapel in a bedsheets with holes.

"Not the wine!" hooted the chefs, fluttering for cover, a bottle under one arm, a box of spaghetti under the other (*desperate times, you know*), as the Hole opened wide at the mountain side of Ménerbes.

"The secret pumpkin!" barked the scruffy stray mutt alone in the streets. "Quickly!" he raced under every sealed shutter in town, calling

to all. “We must save our secret pumpkin!” —a cry which rang, even as the Hole appeared at the end of the road that leads to the lavender field. “Rescue!” called the scruffy little dog with a bork he barked bravely, alone in the road and scampering to stand in front of the secret pumpkin.

“This is it!” sang the jojoba tree in the wind.

“Stand aside,” snapped the Hole to the scruffy little dog.

“Let me go,” whispered the secret pumpkin, “Let me go alone, I am not a secret worth keeping.”

“Not so!” borked the little dog to the secret pumpkin. “We keep each other!”

“You are not alone!” shouted the cheese monger, scooping up the little dog and standing with him in front of the secret pumpkin.

“We are with you!” cried the chefs, running into the street.

“Take cover!” called the old woman who cares for the chapel, throwing the huge golden Madonna’s bedsheets with eye holes over the secret pumpkin.

“My hunger is great,” howled the approaching Hole, “And your town is no match.” It roiled and flapped, the Hole. It towered and glowered down at the people who had all come out to rescue their secret pumpkin—who held her ground.

“I don’t know what you are!” shouted the secret pumpkin at the Hole that lurched and lurked and swallowed the world each year when the earth dies, “But I am what I am!” —which isn’t what the secret pumpkin was trying to say, until she realized it’s what she meant.

“You don’t know what I am?” gnashed the Hole as it bit at the old battlements of the town, its darkness pitching, its voice twitching.

“This way! Within!” called a door that had made itself a home in a crack of the secret pumpkin, “Here! Inside!” rang the bell of the door’s voice, herding all of Ménerbes into the secret pumpkin where the townsfolk quickly cut holes in the squashy walls to see out and lit candles to see by.

“Am I not what I am?” glitched the Hole, smashing furiously at the dark.

“What you are,” called the secret pumpkin from under her covers, gazing up with her eyeholes, “Is a bully!” —which she meant, but didn’t come out as planned in all that wind. It came out as a wail.

“Booooooooooooooooooly!” glared the secret pumpkin of Ménerbes, the candles of the townsfolk within making her eyes flash and a crooked grin split open her cheeks, now glowing in the darkness. *“Now gooooooooooooo!”* roared the secret pumpkin with her mouth full of her townsfolk—a shout that scared the Hole so badly, it tripped! And fell into the jojoba tree, bruising her thousand green-eyed fruits to red-brown dates—and learning her a lesson (public as a duck) about being kind to all, which was not what the Hole was learning.

“Where should I go?” howled the Hole, backing away like a bad animal, ears folded, tail tucked.

“Anywhere, but here!” called the secret pumpkin who had ceased to hold her ground, snapping her vine and sliding forward with the curve that her magnificent body had created in the roads. “And that goes for everywhere! You can have any space, but this one! Any dark, but the one you see!” —at which the Hole climbed the old stone walls of Ménerbes like a tangled black cat and crawled into the sky where it curled and coiled.

“But I’m hungry!” moaned something like the new moon, if the new moon had teeth like stars.

“Here!” came a voice from the secret pumpkin. “Take that!” called the chefs who leaned from the pumpkin’s glowing eyes and threw their whole box of spaghetti right at the Hole! (*Desperate times, you know.*) And just like that, the Hole that once horrified everyone and everything in a season of passing away and back— that huge Hole with a box of spaghetti in its throat slipped into a crack in the sky and through a door in the Moon.

It hasn’t been seen since— but to this day, we still call “Black Holes” those places in deep space that seem to eat everything. And the phenomenon of something being stuck in the throat of a Black Hole is still called “spaghettification.” (I wouldn’t lie to you.)

Nor would I not tell you true that that is where they come from— our *Octobers*: that season in which the earth buries the earth, but not for always; that season in which we still carve pumpkins and fill them with lights to keep the hungry Hole in the sky away, but still cut eye holes into bedsheets and watch the darkness back for fun.

October— like a ripe crimson country filled with old stone villages where grow secret pumpkins in ditches and the soft, cool earth of the road shoulders below the only lantern that blushes orange, flustered and blustered into ochre, crimson, viridian, and umber ivy. See? *Just there*: is where still blooms squish blossoms and squash. Lean close with your cheeks flushed autumnal. You just might find a secret pumpkin, who will know exactly who she is, but will never not ask you if you can say the same.

—which is a secret history of *October* (and pumpkins) that has been passed down ever since, whispered around the squash in the farmer's market of Arles and the gourds of the roadside stands of Camargue, purred among the produce carts of Paris, and whirled between the whorled fruits and wild greens of the boulangerie with the baguette for a sign in Ménerbes, which is where I learned this tale from an old buddha's hand lemon.

It was so. All of it. I wouldn't lie to you.

The End.

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