

Massacre at the Pumpkin Parade

The fall breeze blew down the street, stirring up the myriad of orange and brown leaves. Clearly defined shadows playfully danced across the otherwise lonely playground, created from the light of the full moon overhead. With each breath that I drew, my throat tingled from the affects of the cool October air. Pumpkins sat on the porches of the houses on our right and the row of apartments behind us. A single jack-o-lantern adorned the second floor window of the old Myer High School Memorial to the left. The new high school building sat off in the not so distant background.

‘I hate walking past this creepy old building, especially on a windy, shadowy night like this. Why did they leave the old building here after they built the new school anyway Mark?’ Jim inquired.

‘They decided to leave it here as a memorial to all of the students and faculty that died in the fire after they built the new school.’ Mark quickly answered his little brother.

‘Actually, the new school was already completely built, and they would assuredly have torn down this one the next year, when they switched to the more modern facility.’ I added. ‘One of the sophomores in my dorms had an older sister that went to Fire High that last fatal year.’

The school was actually called Myer High, named after the mayor at the time of its inception, Joseph Myer. It is ominously called Fire High now because of the terrible incident that had occurred there some years back. The elder residents who live in town cringe when someone calls it Fire High. They remember well, the night the fire alarms rang so loud that they could have woken the dead. I was just a clueless fourth grader at the time I think, if not younger even. I don’t remember it at all, even though some other

kids my age were trick-or-treating in the area of the school and watched as the building burned. None of the other kids who watched the inferno really understood what happened that night, but that guy from college did.

‘Fire High.’ Jim whispered softly to himself. His voice was almost as cold as the crisp air around us. ‘I have heard a lot of stories over the years, but I don’t think that I really believe any of them.’

‘Yeah, they have been passing down stories from class to class in order to scare the kids into line for years now. If you ask me, it just goes to show how gullible high school kids really are. No one knows exactly what really happened that night.’ Mark said, patting his sibling on the shoulder.

Mark and I were best friends since the third grade. We grew up together, living in the shadow of Fire High. He lives on one side of the town and I live on the other, but at some point each day the shadow of the burnt remains that was once Myer High School touches each of our houses. We were now both freshman at the State University, but similarly, we live on opposite sides of the campus in different dorms. I am currently living in the under classmen dorms, while he stays in the Engineering school apartments. His brother Jim was a sophomore at the new Myer High this year.

We were all on our way to my house, for our annual pre-Halloween party. Every year on the thirtieth, we would get together at one or the other of our houses and have a small party. Usually we just watched horror movies and drank red punch from gargoyle goblets. Sometimes we would play through mystery or suspense games on one of our computers. As Mark and I got older, we replaced some of the water with vodka when mixing the blood-red concoction. This year, it was my turn to be the host of the party.

‘I know what happened, that guy told me all about his sister one night when he was drunk. He does not mention it at all while he is sober, because he is too scared. Seems his sister worked the late shift and was supposed to go to the dance at nine thirty. Since she had just arrived, she was hanging her jacket in the coatroom on the other side of the gymnasium when he came in and started the fire.’ I began the story in a methodically slow, deep voice.

‘Who came in?’ Jim begged with his words, and his eager stance.

‘Tommy Sauerbalm.’ Just saying his name brought chills to my spine.

‘Sour balm?’ Mark looked as if he had heard the name before. He too shivered, though he claimed it to be due to the cool night air.

‘Little Tommy crier bum, that is what the kids called him in elementary school.’ I stopped walking and continued telling the story. ‘He had been picked on of all his unenviable life. The kids in his grade made fun of him constantly, and picked on him for anything, and everything that they could. The younger kids picked on each other by calling one another Tommy crier bum. And the older kids used the fact that he would do whatever it was that they wanted him to in a failed effort to look cool. If any of the other kids actually liked him, he would have been the class clown. Since no one did, he was the biggest loser in the entire school district.’

‘Didn’t he get kicked out of the public pool, because the lifeguards got tired of saving him after everybody threw him in the deep end?’ Mark interrupted.

‘Yeah, I knew you would remember. Tommy had never had a friend, so to amuse himself while the other kids talked and played, he would read. He read lots of books, but his favorites were about magic. He started out reading magician’s books, and guides to

tricks, but soon he was into Black Magic and the occult.’ We had all stopped walking and were in the playground at this point. ‘He read so many magic books, that he knew a lot of tricks. The trouble was that he was so clumsy, he always messed them up. He would throw cards all over the place doing card tricks. Someone, usually Tommy, was injured doing any fire related stunts, and he pulled out dead animals from his hat, because he put them in wrong.’

‘Pulling dead animals from a hat? That is creepy.’ Jim said as he leaned against the useless water fountain beside the tables.

‘When he wasn’t reading, he would draw pictures of terrible things happening to people. He would sit at his desk in class and draw vile and disgusting pictures in a notebook that he carried with him at all times. Sometimes he would draw mutilated corpses, stacked and on fire. Other times, his artwork depicted someone being boiled alive in a pot of water. The most disturbing part of his pictures was the looks on the victim’s faces.’ I was just starting to get on a roll, telling them of his horrible artwork, when I was momentarily interrupted.

‘What could be more disturbing than flaming piles of bodies and limbs?’ Jim asked curiously, his eyes were nearly as wide open as his brother’s jaw.

‘The detail on the victim’s faces was always incredible. He would spend all day drawing just one pain distorted, frightened to death, or inexplicably surprised face. I was told that you could feel the pain that his victim’s would be feeling by staring long enough at a picture that he drew.’ It seemed that my explanation answered Jim’s question adequately. ‘You would figure that one of the jocks would have taken this notebook, if for no other reason than just to tease him. A few people saw what he was drawing and

when the word spread through the school, no one wanted to even touch his collection of evil drawings.’

‘He drew pictures of flaming body piles, boiling people, and emotional deaths. That is all very creepy, too.’ Jim made the face that I make when I accidentally take a drink from the soda can that had been sitting, half empty, next to my computer for a week.

‘Everything about Tommy Sauerbalm was creepy. Weren’t you paying attention when he said that Tommy read a lot of occult books? Now that my memory has been jarred, I remember hearing that he supposedly summoned demons to be his friends. It was even said that he learned how to summon heat and light candles with his mind.’ Mark commented on the things that he had heard about Tommy.

‘Well that may or may not be true, but what I do know for sure, is that Tommy was tired of being picked on. He had been the butt of every joke for over ten years, and it was time for it to stop.’ My words continued to be drawn out, but a bit more power had been added for affect. ‘Ever since he was in sixth grade, he had been designated as the one who dressed in the big pumpkin suit, and waved as the couples came in to the gymnasium for the Halloween dance. No one else wanted to be the pumpkin, because all of the cool kids actually had dates to the dance. Knowing that he wanted to fit in somewhere, a group of older jocks asked the young Tommy to do it for them, and he had been there every year since. At this point, he was a junior, and was scheduled to be there waving and being laughed at as the couples march past him in what is known as the Pumpkin Parade. That is when all of the couples would walk down the aisle and have

their pictures taken. After the Pumpkin Parade, the official Halloween Dance would start.'

'What are you talking about? There is no Pumpkin Parade before the Halloween dance.' Jim scoffed while shaking his head in disagreement with me.

'That is because they changed the procedure after the accident.' Mark rebutted. 'It is true, I remember the teachers talking about the old tradition of the Pumpkin Parade when I was on student council.'

The wind raced through the open court where we were at, blowing an old newspaper and some leaves by us. We moved a few steps ahead and sat under the roof at one of the tables. A spider web, hanging down between the roof and the gutter, rocked under the force of the wind. We took a moment to look around us, before I continued my account of the massacre at Fire High.

All three of us looked at the front of the ominous schoolhouse that stood in front of us. The windows had long been broken out, and the doors were boarded up. The thick, charred concrete walls held the memories of what happened there that terrible night. In our minds, the screams echoed throughout the once busy halls of the doomed building.

'Tommy had a plan, which would make people fear him and, more importantly, stop making fun of him. He thought that he would not have to fit in to a clique, as long as all of the sects of the high school feared and respected him.' I opened my hands as if inviting Mark and Jim to join me on a voyage back to a horrible time. We were going to relive the activities leading up to the massacre that created the legend of Fire High that Halloween night. 'The jocks teased Tommy because he was weak and uncoordinated.

The cheerleaders flat out told him that they thought he was so unattractive that none of them would ever go to any of the dances with him, even if he offered to pay them. The popular rich kids looked down on him for his appearance and the fact that he did not fit in. Even the geeks and nerds held their heads up high at the thought that it could be worse for them. They could have been Tommy.'

Jim nodded as he could see the plot unfolding in his now open imagination. Mark shivered again, as I pointed to the upper left room of the front of the school. There were three groups of four windows each in that room. With all of the glass missing, that room must have had a glorious view of the entire city.

'What he had so intricately planned to do was to steal a few bottles of chemicals from that lab up there.' I pointed to the room again to strengthen my words as I spoke. 'He was going to mix the chemicals from a recipe that he read about in one of his magician's guides. It should have made a compound that almost immediately after being created, would have caused a huge cloud of thick, black smoke to pour from the beaker for three or four minutes. He was going to conceal one of the largest beakers from the chemistry lab, as well as the flasks of the chemicals under the giant pumpkin that he would wear again this one last time.'

'A giant smoking pumpkin, that sounds kind of funny to me.' Jim laughed over the background whistling of the breeze, but you could hear the fear that he failed to hide in his voice.

'Trust me there was nothing funny about anything that happened next.' My voice knocked out any last remnants of bravado from Jim's appearance before I continued with Tommy's plan. 'During the ensuing confusion, and under the veil of the massive cloud

of smoke, he was going to climb out from under the pumpkin costume and pour acid on it, to completely dissolve it. He had already coated the entire pumpkin with a powerful catalyst that would make it break down entirely in less than a minute once the acid was introduced to it. Then he would jump up on the table behind his spot in front of the stage, where they kept the stacks of pumpkin corsages that the girls all wore at the Pumpkin Parade. The couples would approach the stage with the boys to Tommy's left and the girls on his right. Tommy would hand a corsage to each boy, who would normally giggle, chuckle, or smirk at him before pinning it to his date for the evening.'

'I think I understand what he was trying to do. He wanted to make certain that it would look like he appeared there magically, and with the pumpkin suit gone, people would think that he burst out with so much force that it disintegrated.' Jim said, seeing the plan himself in all of its glory. 'That was very clever.'

'Yes but as I said before and I am sure that you realize by now, Tommy was never known for his cleverness, and in his haste, he grabbed the wrong flasks from the lab.' I nodded my head slowly a few times, and then put my feet up on the empty bench that was across from me.

'So his trick would backfire just like all of his other attempts at magic. I would guess that this failure was sure to make him even more disliked and angry than ever before.' Mark quipped as he and his brother sat on opposing benches on each side of me.

'It would do more than just backfire.' I reassured the understatement that Mark had just made before I went on. 'He had planned on keeping the chemicals in his desk in the classroom, but some of the acid spilled and melted the lid off of the flasks which he had to turn on their sides, in order to fit them in the narrow desk. When those incorrect

chemicals that he had taken mixed, instead of producing smoke, they exploded in a massive ball of fire, which had only one way of leaving the desk. The fire came out the front, and blasted Tommy Sauerbalm out of his seat. The acid came with the fireball and covered his chest and left arm. He turned away from the desk, which caused most of his right side to be burned by the fire which raged out from inside his desk.'

Jim's eyes glassed over as he pictured the horrible accident in his mind. He thought of the suddenness of the explosion and how badly Tommy may have been injured. His face grimaced at the vision of how much pain poor Tommy must have been in. Mark also had an uneasy look about him. He raised his left hand slightly to indicate that he had something to add. I motioned for him to go ahead and halted the story briefly.

'I heard that the hospital records showed that, between the fire and the acid, over eighty-five percent of his body was burned.' Mark added slowly. He put his hand back on the table in front of him, as more leaves blew by with the cold hand of the autumn storm that was brewing. 'One of the girls in my Biology class works part-time at the clinic. She mentioned that a while ago, but at the time I had forgotten all about Tommy Sauerbalm.'

'The students in that afternoon classroom had just witnessed a terrible, gruesome thing. One of their fellow students had been thrown from his seat in a fireball that, as Mark said, burned over two-thirds of his body. Tommy had been badly burned and nearly died. But instead of rushing to his aid or showing concern, they did the unthinkable. Some of the boys in the room that day, seeing Tommy slam into the ground from the great force of the accidental reaction that had taken place in his desk, actually, began to smile. Then they started to chuckle and giggle while they looked on as Tommy

writhed on the floor. In a few seconds their amusement intensified until those insensitive boys were laughing their heads off.’ Even I shivered, and I was the one telling the story. ‘Could you imagine watching someone’s flesh bubble from an acid burn and laughing about it? Soon the other students, used to laughing at Tommy for his stupid answers or his tripping and lack of grace, joined in.’

The playground was empty, yet for some reason, in between my words, all three of us had the strong urge to look around us, like the paranoid delusional youths at the mental recovery center a few blocks away. We were not the sort to be spooked easily, so this reaction made all of us try to hide the fact that we might be scared. Jim and Mark remarked about how nice the playground is as they attempted to keep their embarrassment to themselves. I merely smiled and watched as they flinched at every sound that they heard.

‘Then what happened?’ Mark asked, trying to get me to talk so that I would not notice his fear.

‘Minutes later, the school nurse and her aids came in. They carried his body, scarred for life, out of the school on a stretcher.’ I snickered as Jim looked quickly over each of his shoulders, but did not skip a word in the story. ‘As he was carted down the stairs and out toward the parking lot, his classmates laughed loudly. Laughter followed him down those halls and into the ambulance.’

Thinking about the halls of the once proud school, provoked my shivering. The laughter would have sounded so loud to poor Tommy. It must have added even more salt to the emotional wounds that he had carried for his entire life. I could not imagine how he must have felt, burned and immobile, and being consoled with a chorus of laughter.

‘That is horrible. When was that?’ Mark said with a disgusted tone of voice.

‘That happened on October thirtieth, nine years ago to the day. The Pumpkin Parade and the subsequent Halloween Dance always took place on Halloween night. While the younger kids were out trick-or-treating, the high school boys and girls went to the dance.’ I answered. ‘Next to the Prom, the Pumpkin Parade and Halloween Dance was the biggest event of the year.’

‘They laughed?’ Jim asked, his voice cracking slightly. ‘How could they laugh?’

‘I don’t think there is anything funny about a boy screaming in pain, but they laughed.’ I exaggerated the movements of my hands as I talked. ‘That night while the rest of the school prepared their costumes for the next night’s dance, Tommy Sauerbalm laid in solitude. Miserable and in pain, he spent the night in the burn unit at the hospital.’

Jim and Mark both looked on in anticipation. They were hungry for more.

Speaking of being hungry, the smell of popcorn was in the air, as Mrs. Floyd was making her homemade popcorn balls in her house to our right. Our noses did not pick up the popcorn very well, because the stench of the evil that occurred here was overpowering.

‘The next morning, when the nurses went to check the dressing on the second and third degree burns over his body, they found Tommy’s room empty. He had somehow managed to muster the strength to get out of the bed, and he had left the hospital.’ I was interrupted by a dog, howling at the moon overhead. ‘The intravenous and oxygen tubes had been burned off. The ends of the tubes were melted together, when the nurse found them, still hanging from the machines. They also noticed that the heart monitor had been set on fire, as well. They figured that Tommy must have gone out the window, because it had been broken. Black soot stained the ceiling and the window sill, as if he was on fire

when he exited the building. In fact the whole room appeared to have been burned by a high intensity flame.'

'That would be so scary. Coming in the morning and finding your patient missing and the room burned out.' Mark showed the horror of the situation, with both the look on his face and the sound of his voice.

'Then on Halloween night, at around seven thirty, the doors to the gymnasium opened as the students and faculty began to pour in. The Pumpkin Parade was from eight to eight forty-five, with the dance following. Almost all of the staff and faculty came to this dance. The cafeteria workers prepared and gave out candy and punch. The janitorial staff was on hand to clean up. The office staff came to show enthusiasm. Everyone who attended the dance wore a costume of some sort.'

Jim shook, as a leaf, blowing in the wind, rubbed his arm. He looked around to be sure that nothing else was behind him. He was jumpy, as was his older brother. Both of them sat on the edge of their benches, waiting for me to continue. I paused dramatically, just to make them beg for more.

'As the gym filled up with the chaperons and guests, someone came in wearing the papier-mâché pumpkin that Tommy usually wore.' I opened my eyes wider and an evil smile came over my face. 'Knowing that he was found missing from the hospital, the assistant Principal asked the pumpkin greeter to take off the costume. It was quite a shock when the pumpkin was lifted off slowly over the head of a sophomore nerd who didn't have a date to the dance. All of the teachers sighed and let him continue to his place next to the table. Just before the parade of couples started, a second person under an orange pumpkin entered the gymnasium. Two Teachers closed in and raised the

disguise. Students and faculty alike stood in suspense and breathed a collective sigh of relief when they saw the little blonde girl emerge. Her date had to work and would miss the parade, so she decided to participate by herself.'

'Did you guys just hear that?' Jim excitedly asked while looked over his left shoulder. 'It sounded like a wolf.'

'It is just dogs. Dogs bark at the moon you know.' Mark reassured while he, too, looked back into the alley behind Jim.

'After they lined up backstage, the couples began to walk across the stage and down the steps to the gym floor. The aisle was comprised of faculty and camera toting parents.' I paused as another dog howled. 'The flashbulbs lit as the Pumpkin Parade was in full affect. A third pumpkin walked into the stage area. Knowing that the teachers were concerned, he ducked under to show his face. It was just one of the students who decided to dress as the pumpkin greeter for the dance, since Tommy would not be there. The pair of greeters stood on opposite sides of the table in the center of the stage. The boys came in on the right as you watch from the gym. They approached the table, took a corsage and pinned it on their date, who entered from the other side of the table. The two pumpkins stood on either side of the couple as the pictures were taken.

The moonlight danced overhead as we shivered in the October breeze. Mark and I seemed to notice that the effect was similar to the flash photography that I had just mentioned. Neither of us made any visible notion that we found that just a little odd, however we did make eye contact long enough to let each other in on the obvious.

'They do not have greeters for any of the dances now.' Jim said while the moon took pictures of the events in our minds.

‘After the couples marched through the Pumpkin Parade, the parents took pictures for ten minutes and were then escorted out of the building.’ I motioned toward the charred doors again to help them visualize the parents exiting. ‘The school was not completely open for dances. Only the rear hallway and the gym were unlocked. The gates were locked to block off the rest of the building. You entered the dances from the back doors.’

‘Yeah that is how they do it in the new school still. There are two sets of restrooms in the back hall, one just outside the gym and the other at the far end of the hall.’ Jim informed us, gleaming at the fact that he had something of value to add to the story.

‘We know dumb ass, we went there, too.’ Mark replied cynically, with his head shaking disrespectfully.

‘I know, I was just, well, just reminding you.’ His younger brother stammered.

‘I think that he is so scared, that he can’t remember.’ I poked Jim with my foot under the table.

He jumped to attention at his feet and let out an audible sound. Mark chuckled and smiled. Then we all stopped and became silent as an eerie calm came over the school grounds. Mark stood up, as well. They both looked to me with anticipation.

‘After the parents were out of the school, the teachers stood inside the only doors that would allow the stragglers into the dance.’ My voice slowed down, not to make the story scarier, but to emphasize what I was about to say next. ‘That guy’s sister, Stacy, left work a little early that night. She opened the rear doors at five after nine, and showed her ticket to the teacher inside. Having just entered, she took off her jacket, to show off

her cute little French maid costume underneath. The teacher inside the door stamped her hand and instructed her to hang her coat in the open room halfway down the hall, across from the gym doors. She went in and placed her jacket on a hanger. As she emerged from the coatroom, one of the pumpkins was in the center of the dance floor, running in a circle at full speed.'

The brothers across from me were wide-eyed and eager, as they swallowed every word that I said. Both of them were on edge and excited, as was I. We all had our heart rates up, and were taking shorter breaths. The moon overhead was bright and reflected from the metal railings between our tables and the broken swings at the old decrepit playground.

'At ten minutes after nine, she was just about to pass through the doors to the gym, when the pumpkin stopped running and screamed. She, like everyone else, diverted her attention to the wailing pumpkin. After everyone at the dance was looking to the center of the room, the pumpkin greeter took off the costume. A gasp came up from those closest to the pumpkin. The giant orange mask was lifted slowly, and the student who came to the dance as the Pumpkin greeter emerged. Then to the shock of everyone, he peeled off the flesh of his face.'

'The student peeled his face off? That is sick.' I was beginning to think that Mark was interrupting me because he was too afraid to hear the rest of the story.

'Yeah Mark, he peeled the flesh from his face off in clumps of bloody matter, that ran between his fingers and dripped onto the floor.' Jim smiled as he saw the reaction that he was expecting from his sibling.

‘Tommy had disguised himself as a fellow student, and slowly removed the fake skin, in one piece, to reveal his badly burned face.’ I glanced momentarily at Jim as I corrected his version of the events. ‘Several of the girls shrieked at the site of his grotesque face. He set the pumpkin on the floor behind him. In his hands he held two large flasks containing unknown chemicals. Tommy, having the undivided attention of the faculty and students alike, told them all how much he was going to enjoy this, the last Pumpkin Parade at Myer High. He said that his name was Tommy Sauerbalm, but for years people called him Tommy crier bum. The teachers at the doors ran into the gym, as did all of the adults present.’

We looked at the charred building and imagined their panic as they ran to the exit for safety. Old School buildings had been closed all over the district because they were fire hazards. The black stains on the concrete stood to remind us just how hazardous those buildings could be.

‘Stacy stood at the doors, watching in fear as Tommy continued to bark through his deformed mouth. He said that if you guys can’t say Tommy Sauerbalm, maybe they should remember him as Tommy Firebomb. He turned and poured some of the chemicals on the pumpkin behind him. The pumpkin began to smoke and soon a small flame could be seen at the top of it. Then he said welcome to Fire High, and with a sinister laugh he kicked the flaming pumpkin towards the screaming students.’ I put heavy emphasis on the fire high part. ‘It quickly burned through the outer coating, and exploded into a massive ball of fire, igniting several small fires on the tables and chairs, as well as the clothes of those that it touched. He poured the rest of the chemicals on the

floor. The fireball spread over the entire left side of the dance floor, engulfing many of the students and a few adults as well.'

'Oh my God!' Jim exclaimed loudly, his mouth gaping to show his surprise.

'Worse than that, the pumpkin was full of the acid that had burned Tommy the day before. The fireball caused this acid to be thrown all around the room. There was mass pandemonium, as screaming kids burned to death on the gymnasium floor. Tommy laughed at them the way that they had always laughed at him. In front of him, a bonfire had begun where he had mixed the chemicals.' I continued the story slowly and spoke a little softer.

The smell in the air was stale and burnt as if we could somehow smell the smoke that billowed from Fire High that night. None of us could quite place where the smell was coming from, which was a bit unnerving. Anytime one of us would get a whiff of the smell, we would look all around to search for it's source.

'Stacy said that Tommy's neck and face were badly burned and covered with scar tissue. His hands were so badly burned that it looked as if he was wearing a pair of black gloves. He stood there laughing as dozens of flaming people ran around and rolled on the ground, trying in vain to extinguish themselves. He pulled out a pair of short daggers, and began running to the other two large pumpkins. He cut through the blonde girl, spilling her blood onto the pumpkin costume and his own shirt. He took the huge pumpkin and put it on his bonfire. Stacy ran back to the doors that she had just entered a little over five minutes ago. A few other students followed her down the hall. The state of panic heightened as they tried to open the doors. They pulled open only an inch, as they had been chained shut from the outside. Twenty frantic students and at least that

many faculty and staff, fearing a fiery death, tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to open those doors for the next few minutes. Stacy then ran back down the hall. She said that by this point the other pumpkin had exploded and most of the gym was on fire. Tommy began screaming and laughing while he cut anyone near him. The Principal walked out of the gym, and headed toward Stacy.

‘I bet she was never so happy to see the Principal.’ Mark spoke softly, but we were so excited and caught up in the moment that we heard him clearly.

‘She ran toward him and was about to take his outstretched hand. She was starting to speak to him, but stopped when she noticed the blood began to spill from his mouth. She screamed as she saw the dagger sticking out of the back of his neck. The dying man, through his lacerated throat hollered out the word run.’ My eyes were intent as I sat before my standing friends and held their attention with my account of the massacre at the Pumpkin Parade. ‘Stacy did just that; she ran back into the coatroom and took a few thin jackets. She did not have time to be particular when it came to determining which coats to take. They did not have to match the red rose on her lapel, or the pink trim of her apron. She just grabbed a handful of mixed colored, varying weight jackets. Then, she ran into the bathroom, where she doused them all in several sinks.’

‘She was a very clever girl.’ Mark acknowledged. ‘I don’t think that I would have been sharp enough to do that.’

‘Back in the gymnasium, Tommy had slaughtered every single one of the teachers that stood between him and the person who wore that third and final pumpkin suit.

Covered in blood and surrounded by fire, he took it over to the raging flames in the center of the room. After holding it over his head and laughing at the carnage that was

occurring all around him, he slowly lowered it into the swirling inferno and ignited it.

With the burning orange sphere over his head, he cackled again and then walked out into the hall. Those who had gathered at the chained doors, shrieked as he approached them, burning pumpkin in hand. He set the pumpkin on the ground, and opened the janitor's closet behind him. When he emerged he had two large glass containers filled with liquid under his arms. He told them that he would forever be feared and from this day forward no one would say his name without cringing.' I shivered and paused a second.

'So he had hidden the chemicals in the closet. He was a sick man to actually plan to kill that many people in such a horrible way.' Mark said, wincing as he thought about what he was saying.

'Not only in the closet, but he had placed vats of acid and the chemicals that he had exploded on him in lockers and under desks throughout the west wing of the school.' My hands trembled as I went on. 'Tommy threw the glass bottles down the hall toward the group that had gathered at the doors. They screamed and writhed in pain as the acid hit them. Within seconds they began to ignite from the reactions that were taking place on their clothes and bodies. The smell of burning flesh filled the hall as Tommy took his last pumpkin bomb and went to the other side of the gym doors. He slid it along the floor behind him. After leaving the pumpkin in front of the restroom doors, he went back to the dance floor. Most of those inside the gym were already dead, or on fire. Those that were fortunate enough to still be alive, he attacked with his knife. He pulled out a few small tubes of acid from his backpack that was hidden under the corsage table. He tossed them at the few survivors and laughed. The Police showed up, but could not open the doors, because the flames that were seeping from the openings were lashing out and

burning them as they tried. Whatever Tommy had mixed to produce those fires, burned hot enough to melt the rubber seals from the doors, as well as the wooden trim of the halls.'

'I would imagine that it must have been pretty hot to have stained the concrete like that.' Mark pointed at the school to identify the scorched walls.

The dogs in the alley howled as we looked up at the blackened remains of Fire High. All three of us shuddered at the howls and then covered from a large moth that flew past us. The building was empty and desolate, yet somehow it called out to us. It was almost as if the victims were still calling out for help, screaming for anyone that could rescue them. They were screaming for the police officers, screaming for the fire department, and most disturbingly screaming for us.

'A few explosions could be heard from the hallway, as the hidden vats had been heated up enough to burst into flames.' We kept staring at the school while I talked. The mixture that he used burned furiously, but that isn't the most peculiar part. Whatever the compound was that he had created burned at those extreme temperatures for nearly an hour. Normally the hotter and more intense a chemical burns at, the shorter the fire lasts.' Mark seemed to be perplexed as well, while I continued to explain, and he is a chemical engineering student. 'Several two gallon vats, strategically placed throughout the school was enough to burn out and gut the entire building. The fire rolled through the halls, singing and marring everything that it touched. The paper in the lockers and rooms provided for more fuel to keep the fires burning late into that awful night. That night it was Tommy's turn to laugh, his turn to ridicule those less fortunate than him, and his turn

to say his name incorrectly. He kept yelling out 'I'm little Tommy Firebomb, how funny is that?' over and over again.'

'Tommy Firebomb, I remember hearing something like that when I was a lot younger.' Jim acknowledged. 'Tommy Firebomb is in the school. Tommy Firebomb's pumpkins rule.'

'Where did you hear that from? I have never heard anything like that.' His brother stood face to face with him and challenged him to answer. 'I think you are making that up to scare us. You are in for a world of hurt if I find out you are fooling around.'

'Tommy Firebomb is scarred and maimed. No escape the doors are chained. Myer's on fire, Tommy's flames are getting higher. Higher and higher, Tommy brought the fire and we're burning again.' The look on Jim's face showed that he did not know where he had first heard the words that he was reciting. 'I don't think I could tell you where I heard that, but I know the words like someone just said it a minute ago.'

'I am going to knock you out! You made that up and you know it.' Mark was furious at his brother, scared and furious.

'Maybe the Spirits of the victims are telling him the words. Every year, at around this time, they come out and haunt this area by singing evil nursery rhymes and scaring young gullible kids.' Halfway through my joking remark, I realized that what I was saying wasn't very funny.

'Shut up man. I think we should just go to your house.' By this time Mark was so afraid that he had become paranoid, looking back over his shoulders and jumping at the slightest sound around us.

‘If it is the spirits of the victims of the massacre at the Pumpkin Parade, there would be a lot of them to haunt us. Three hundred and sixty-nine students died that night. Also killed in the disaster were fifty-three teachers and staff. It took the fireman an hour and a half to control the fire. Several small fires burned in the classrooms and the auditorium for the next eight hours. Some of the remains that they found were similar to the gruesome pictures that Tommy had drawn.’ My words had regained their attention enough to make them forget about getting away from the doomed schoolhouse. ‘They found people whose bones had fused together from the heat. Others had all of their flesh burned off and were stuck in between the bars when they had attempted to get through the back gates. There were bodies all throughout the halls as the victims had attempted to flee the fiery death that awaited them in the hallway. The assistant Principal still had the knife in his neck. The Principal was found kneeling before the Throne of the Pumpkin Prince, at the front of the stage. His hands had been tied to the stage with the fire hose from the hallway. The hose looped through the anchors for the curtain and held him down as he bowed before the Prince’s chair. It could not be determined just how Tommy had tortured him because his body was too badly burned from the acid and fire. He did have two small daggers inserted into his shoulders, but there is no way to tell just what other wounds were inflicted before the fire finally consumed the man.’

‘This is crazy and almost unbelievable, but what happened to Stacy?’ Jim asked with fear in his voice.

We all turned to look back to the school yet again. Each time we looked at it, we saw more details of the horrors that happened. Black soot covered the stone outside all of the windows on the left side. Flames shot out twenty feet from those windows that night.

The entire side of the building was burned, leaving only the empty concrete shell remaining.

‘She covered herself with the wet coats, in order to protect her from the heat of the flames. In the middle of the girls’ room floor, she curled up under a mound of dripping jackets. With the sounds of fear and death all around, she remained silently shaking. Smoke poured in through the door once the seals had been melted away by the raging fire outside. As I started to say before, when the firemen finally broke the doors down, and entered the building, what they found was something that most of them never spoke of. Some of the men who walked over the corpses to fight the blaze quit their jobs and moved away from the city to get away from the horrors that they witnessed that night. There were people burned so badly beyond recognition, that it took months for them to identify them all. Some found acid burns that melded the victim’s arms to their sides. Bodies were stuck together from the heat of the flames.’ Jim winced and Mark stared at the building with his mouth open as I continued the details. ‘The entire school stunk of death and burnt hair and flesh. There were bodies leaned over the desks in a few classrooms that they were able to break into. The secretary had one of the janitors unlock the side gate so that she could get to the office. She was the one who called the police. When they found her, the phone had been melted to her skull by the intensity of the flames.’

‘If she made it to the office couldn’t she get out the main doors?’ Mark was so caught up, that I think he was picturing himself running through the halls that night. ‘Or was she just too scared to think of that?’

‘My guess is that she thought of that first, before she called the police from the office phone. Those doors had been chained shut, too, as were the doors from the cafeteria. The windows bars were chained as well, keeping those who made it into a classroom from escaping the evil plan of Tommy Firebomb.’ The moon over head was unusually bright, and shined into the shadowy school, highlighting the doors that I spoke of.

‘Does anyone else think that it is weird that when he talks about the lab upstairs, the moon seems to shine on the lab? He mentions the heat melting the seals on the doors, and those doors shine. Now while he talks about the main doors, we can see them all lit up through the courtyard.’ Jim sat back down and leaned in close to us, his feelings were quite obvious. ‘That is no coincidence.’

‘Even if it is a coincidence, it is freaking me out. But you still didn’t tell us what happened to that guy’s sister.’ Mark was definitely trapped in the story and was dying to hear the rest.

‘They found Stacy lying unconscious on the restroom floor, still under the moist jackets. They cleared the coats from on top of her and she coughed as the smoke from the room entered her lungs.’ I took a deep, cool breath of the October air, and went on. ‘After clearing her mouth and giving her some oxygen from his mask, one of the firefighters helped her to her feet and took her outside. She stumbled on her dainty shoes, lightheaded and weary, but at least she was alive. Her beautiful new maid costume was ripped and covered with the same black soot that still remains on the cement walls. The fireman, thinking of the young girl that he had rescued, asked her some simple questions as they plodded down the hall toward the doors. He was not interested in her answers, he

was merely distracting her from seeing the death and horror that stood between them and safety.'

'He was pretty smart to do that. She could have been messed up for life from seeing the sort of things that you are describing, first hand.' Jim said, keeping his back to the school.

'You don't think that being involved in such a horrible massacre would mess you up regardless if you saw the bodies on your way out with a fireman?' Mark's words brought the look of deep thought to all of us. 'She still knew that they were dead, all of them, nearly eighty percent of the students, faculty, and staff. They all died, and just knowing the way that it happened, coupled with the things that she saw before she went to the restroom, would be enough to keep me in counseling for as long I live.'

'When she stepped out through the smoldering doors, she took a long, deep breath of fresh air, and then collapsed over there by the railing.' I pointed to the railing and the moon once again shined down like a spotlight. 'Two paramedics were rushing over to help her. They talked to her and then sat her up on the second cement step. They gave her oxygen and tended to her for nearly ten minutes before she took to her feet again. The fireman, who had escorted her from the dungeon of death that was formally Myer High School, wrapped his jacket over her shoulders. The torn and battered, skimpy outfit that she had on was not providing much protection from the cold or for her modesty.'

Thunder rumbled in the distance. The October storms here are pretty fierce, but they are slow to develop. It would be an hour or so before the storm arrived. The wind had picked up slightly since I began my tale, but we did not notice. Never before had I

seen Mark and Jim so caught up in a story. I was certain that in their minds they were there with Stacy, trying to escape that night.

‘Her brother was in the small crowd of trick-or-treaters that had gathered outside the school. The kids and several of the neighbors were attracted to the fire like moths to a street lamp.’ The moon came through for me yet again, making the nearest street light glow momentarily. ‘Seeing him standing there in the mass of people, she called out to him. The police kept the rest of the crowd behind the lines, but they had allowed her brother to pass through. She hugged him tightly and began to cry. He did not understand why she was so upset. He did after she told him the gruesome details of the evening. Stacy stood there, holding her little brother against her, while she told him the story of the massacre at the Pumpkin Parade. He stared up at her when she told him about the look on Tommy’s face. He told me that the way she described the pain and anger mixed with joy and pleasure haunts him to this day. After a conversation that he will never forget, the paramedics took her into the back of the ambulance. A police officer entered with her for questioning, as she was taken to the hospital to be treated for smoke inhalation.’

‘I thought you said that she would have been the only survivor.’ Mark interjected. ‘What happened?’

‘When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, she was pronounced dead by the coroner on duty. It was written up officially as a heart attack, but a few know what really happened to her. She died of shock, from what she had heard and seen that night. The disturbing images in her mind and the echoing screams had taken their toll on her. She told her brother when they were outside that she could still hear the screams. Long after the fires went out, she could still hear them screaming.’ I took another long look at the

blackened concrete of the school in front of me. 'Every year since, that single jack-o-lantern mysteriously shows up in the window, burning all night long. No one knows who puts it there. Is it meant to be a memorial for the Pumpkin Parade massacre? No one knows. No one has the courage to go in and find out who puts it there. No one sees who lights it each night. No one can explain how the candle burns all night long.'

'So I am supposed to believe that Tommy Firebomb is still out there, lighting that jack-o-lantern every year and haunting the halls of Fire High?' Jim doubted. He seemed to be shaken and visibly disturbed, but yet still hesitated to accept that Tommy was still alive.

'No Jim, the firefighters recovered the body of the sick and evil Tommy Firebomb, burnt to a crisp, and sitting on the stage in the Pumpkin Prince's throne. He had a smile permanently burned onto his twisted, scarred face, and the Myer High plaque in his hands. The burned out wire frame of the Pumpkin Prince's crown was on his head. The tiara of the Pumpkin Princess was found on Mindy, the head cheerleader. She was sitting next to Tommy on the Princess' Pumpkin Throne. It was fitting that she was dressed as a princess for the dance. The tiara that she wore was wrapped tightly around her neck and was replaced with that of the Pumpkin Princess. Some of the lycra fiber of her costume had been melted onto her bones, where the flesh should have been. Her famous seductive smile that she had never flashed to Tommy was etched into her face with one of his knives. The cross that hung in her cleavage during the normal school day was found in Tommy's hand. Somehow, on his already blackened and leathery hand, the cross left a permanent and clear brand, as he held it tightly in his clenched fist. The

dangling Celtic cross earrings, that she had on, had been ripped from her ears, and stuck in her eyes.'

'That is sick. He must have been obsessed with her and tired of the way she, and the rest of her squad, treated him.' Mark was attempting to rationalize the irrational thoughts of a killer.

'What makes the story even more twisted is the journal that they found in Tommy's room when they searched his house.' I cringed at the thought of what I was about to tell them. 'The pages in that binder contained valuable information that showed just how wicked and vengeful he really was. He wrote complete details of the events that he had planned for the Pumpkin Parade that night. There were pages and pages of thoughts, chemical equations, maps, and, checklists that covered everything from which chemicals to use, to what to make the pumpkins out of, to the strategic locations to place the bottles in the school. There was a diagram of a wedding ceremony, taking place on the stage in the gymnasium. The priest was kneeling before the Prince and Princess of the dance as he completed the service. Flames encircled the stage and all three of them were on fire. There was a blood-dripping heart between the happily married, mangled and mutilated couple. Every detail had been covered in that journal. His plans even included some of the chemicals that he needed were stored at and how to subsequently escape from the city hospital.'

'You mean?' Mark started to ask, but stopped, unable to form the words in his choked-up throat.

'That's right, it seems that Tommy had caused the accident that burned and disfigured him on purpose as part of his elaborate, but twisted plan.' I finished his

thought. 'He knew the outcome that the chain of events was going to have weeks before he mixed those chemicals in his desk.'

'You are a pretty insane individual to blow yourself up as part of a plan to get back at your peers.' Jim saw part of the disturbing truth, yet failed to see the whole picture.

'The end of that plan involves burning down a school and killing 422 people by locking them in a burning building and using exploding, acid-filled pumpkins on them. That part didn't clue you in that he was insane?' It appeared that Mark had made his assessment of Tommy Firebomb's mental instability earlier in the story, and he backed up his thoughts with words. 'You didn't think that he was crazy until after you found out that the accident in which he was severely burned was just part of the plan. You might be as crazy as he is.'

'I know that he was messed up, I am just saying that for him to burn himself like that on purpose, makes him even more sick than if it were an accident. That doesn't matter. What I really want to know is why didn't they destroy What is left of the building? I mean usually they don't leave buildings that size up as memorials.' Jim posed a very logical question.

'The city took bids from demolition companies. A week later, Smith Construction signed a contract to demolish the building. They were going to leave just this playground as the memorial.' My words sent a shiver up my spine, so I assume that the brothers were scared as well. 'That same night after signing the contract, the warehouse where Smith Construction keeps their trucks, was chained and firebombed. Thirteen employees were killed. Then there were nine deaths at the offices of

Construction Specialists. No other company put in a bid after that. So the city council decided that it may be wise if they just left the building.'

'If Tommy was found dead, then who burned that warehouse, and who do you think puts that pumpkin in the window every year?' Jim asked, no he demanded of me.

'That takes us to the last words that Stacy said to her brother.' I provided an answer, though I doubt it was the one that he was looking for. 'After telling him about the awful things that occurred at Fire High that Halloween night, she complained of the persistent screams that rang in her ears. They pointed her to the ambulance, and she turned back and asked her brother the question that still keeps him awake at night. Who chained the doors and windows from the outside if Tommy was already inside?'

We walked home the long way that night, as Jim did not want to walk beside Fire High. I can't honestly say that I blame him. Our party was not the same that night. In fact, Halloween has never been the same since. Jim and Mark never bring it up, but neither of them goes near the old school anymore, not even in broad daylight.