

PRINCESS OF THE PUMPKIN

Karen Rosenbaum

The cat was curled against her legs. She didn't move them, she lay very still, feeling his little warm breathing body through the electric blanket. She stretched her arms out of the sheets and reached for the alarm. A quarter to seven. It would go off in fifteen minutes. She flipped the buzzer button down quickly so she wouldn't have to hear the jangling which when she didn't wake up herself jerked her out of bed. This would be a pleasant morning.

Madelyn sat up and reached for the cat, mashed him against her, and fell back to bed. "Timothy, Timothy," she orated, "wherefore art thou, Timothy, art thou not next to my bosom, in the cradle of my bosom?" She dangled him above her. "Do you love me, Timothy?" she asked and dropped him on her stomach. He gave a whining sound and sprang off the bed. "No, of course you don't, your kind doesn't feel. You take my food, you take my bed, but you don't give a damn about me." She scowled at Timothy, who was rubbing against the doorframe waiting for his breakfast of kidneys and catfood.

The phone rang and she pushed back the covers and leaped over the foot of her bed, reaching the end of the cord before the second ring. She perched over it, catching her breath and eliminating with each ring everyone it could not be. "Hello," she finally said, as throatily as possible into the receiver.

"Miss Turnip?" said the receiver.

"Miss Tearnip," Madelyn snapped. "Kenneth?"

“Yes, Miss Tearnip.” She waited. He’d probably lost the refrigerator keys again.

“Miss Tearnip? I can’t find them keys anywhere.”

“Did you put them back in my drawer last night, Kenneth?”

“Well no, Miss Tearnip, I didn’t, but Mabel said she would.”

“Kenneth, I’ve told you time and time again to put those keys back in the drawer when you lock up.”

“I know, Miss Turnip.”

“Miss Tearnip!”

“Miss Tearnip, but Mabel was right there and she said she’d do it.”

“I hope,” started Madelyn, “that this teaches you.” She stopped and sighed. Why get excited after all. “All right, Kenneth. Look around again. Try the cupboard by the oven. I suppose you tried phoning her.”

“Yes. She ain’t home, her brother says. Lotsa times she don’t go home.”

The radio next door was on, she could hear the overture from Camelot and she felt suddenly anxious to hear it better, in her own kitchen.

“Look again,” she said. “Call me back in 15 minutes if you can’t find them.” She hung up and tripped over Timothy on her way to the radio.

It was a beautiful morning. The sun through the drapes made the front room rosy and warm. Madelyn waltzed around in circles on the carpet, claspingsome unembodied Columbus until she became quite dizzy, then fell back on the couch. “David,” she said—there should be someone marvelous somewhere named David—“David I love you.” She blew the name out and leaned back and pouted. Timothy was judging her from under a chair. Timothy disapproved of such foolishness.

Madelyn slid into the bathroom and pulled back her hair with an elastic. She washed her face and leaned up and kissed the mirror, leaving a wet mouth mark on it. She rinsed her face, blotted it. A pimple on her chin. Probably from the chocolate she’d eaten last night when she was watching television, uneasy for something to do with her hands. You’d think when you’re twenty seven you’d have outgrown teenage skin problems, she thought, eyeing herself in the mirror. She wiped out the mouth mark and left a streak from her finger.

She mixed a plastic pitcherful of frozen orange juice and poured some out into a small brandy snifter. She put it on the dresser and began dressing, smoothing up her stockings, smoothing down

her slip. She leaned against the door. Maybe today someone would come into the convalescent home. She reviewed the men in her past. Michael, maybe, from her trip last December to Mexico. Maybe he had tried to get hold of her—he had called Cherry where she last lived and Cherry had said, “Madelyn’s moved, but she’s probably at work. Why don’t you drop over to the convalescent home and see her?” Michael was tall and his skin felt cool and she had danced with him every night for a week at La Lopa de Leche in Guadajajara, always until the waiter had told them they had to leave, it was closing time, and that in Guadajajara, it was light and six or maybe seven. The phone ringing startled her. She picked it up. “Hello, Miss Tearnip?” said Kenneth. “I found them keys. They was in the cabinet just like you said. Didn’t want you to worry anymore.” Madelyn grimaced. She dropped the receiver back onto the cradle.

She pushed the car radio button and changed Bach to Broadway. She couldn’t sing the “Brandenburg.” Someone behind her honked and she glanced in her mirror and then down at her speedometer. She was only going fifty. She pushed on the accelerator. There was a bus in front of her, a green one, full of Mexican-American kids whose faces and arms appeared mashed against or hanging out every window. The bus rocked slightly on the road. What if a car—that white station wagon in the next lane—swerved over, and she would have a dark-eyed, dark-skinned, dark-haired little girl, unconscious or crying in her arms, and she would wrap her wounds, the neatly theatrical kind—a lot of blood but nothing serious or permanent—and a curly-haired little boy with big wet eyes would ask her about his sister, would she be all right, their mother had lost one girl already, with meningitis, he sputtered, and this sister, his mom had told him to watch out for her.

Madelyn took the Ralston Avenue turnoff.

Sandra the receptionist, who had bright blue eyelids, looked up at her when she pushed open the doors of the convalescent home. “Hello, Madelyn,” she said. “How’re things back in the kitchen?”

“I’m on my way to find out,” Madelyn said. She would have liked one of these mornings to waltz through those doors with Michael or someone, and say to Sandra, “How’re things in the lobby?” She clacked down the hall, waving at Mrs. O’Myers, who was sitting already on the patio, her orange afghan over her legs.

“Good morning, Miss Tearnip,” said Lillian. Madelyn wrapped herself into her white jacket. “Heard about that boy calling you up this morning. A muttonhead, that’s what he is.” Lillian turned

her fat, dark, uniformed self back to the cabbage leaves she was separating. She hadn't worn a net again today. "Boy got no sense of responsibility" she continued. "Did you see in the paper last night" (she turned back to Madelyn) "where a boy his age, seventeen, is on trial for raping two eight year old girls? Why, I'm afraid to let my girl out at night."

"How old is your girl?" Madelyn picked a piece of celery out of the vegetables on the cabinet and put it in her mouth.

"She's thirteen, my youngest," said Lillian. "And it ain't safe for her to be outside, even with her girlfriends."

Madelyn leaned over her shoulder and picked a frizzy hair out the cabbage. "Wear a net tomorrow, Lillian," she said.

"Yes ma'am. I'll do that." Lillian spread out the cabbage leaves. "Miss Tearnip, I don't think you're eating enough lately," she said. "Look at you, all thin like that. You'll never catch a man in skin and bones."

"I'm not so thin," Madelyn said. "I weight 130 pounds."

"Too thin, too thin," said Lillian. "Why look at you! Mabel," she called to Mabel just coming in from the dining room, "ain't Miss Tearnip too thin?"

"Miss Tearnip's just right," said Mabel, who bleached her skin and her hair, painted on a thick streak of eye liner and wore her uniforms two sizes too small. "I wish I could say the same for Mrs. Beauchamp. She wants to talk to the dietician, she says. She's in a dither because we forgot the metamusel in her apple juice."

Madelyn swung through the dining room doors. There were a few patients at the tables, talking mostly over crumbed but cleared placemats. The late eaters would come to breakfast at the untouched tables within half an hour. Mrs. Beauchamp, eighty-eight, sat by herself, mumbling at the tall yellow vase—Madelyn had bought the whole lot of them at forty-nine cents apiece from Woolworths—filled with dried flowers.

"Good morning, Mrs. Beauchamp," said Madelyn loudly. "I've come to talk to you about your food here." She sat down. "What kinds of food would you like to be eating?"

"Well, first of all," Mrs. Beauchamp chirruped, "I must have apple juice for breakfast with metamusel. This morning they forgot that. They tried to give me orange juice." There were little white hairs on her chin. "Without metamusel," she whispered intensely.

"That won't happen again," Madelyn said. "Now then, you're on a salt-free diet. What other things do you like to eat?"

"I've got to have my metamusel," Mrs. Beauchamp said. "Every morning. I can't function without it. And its got to be in apple juice."

"Yes, Mrs. Beauchamp," Madelyn said. "Now how about dinner? What do you like to eat for dinner? Vegetables? Peas, pumpkin squash, stuffed cabbage?"

"Stuffed cabbage," repeated Mrs. Beauchamp. "No, what I really like is apple juice. In the morning. And I've got to have my metamusel."

Madelyn's office was a corner of the kitchen, walled off by a cabinet filled with potatoes, onions, and powdered milk. She sat down, checked over the week's menus and shopping lists and picked up *Moby Dick*, which she knew she'd never finish. She looked at the words, listened to Mabel and Lillian talking, their voices melodic and low in contrast with Kenneth whistling and stacking metallic trays. Her eyes were tired and she let the page blur in front of her and saw instead herself, on a rocky beach, wading in and around the cliffs, climbing up to try to sun, and seeing something red in the water, scraping herself as she tumbled off the rocks, pushed herself out into the ocean toward the red thing, a person perhaps, in a red suit. Caught by the waves and current she swallowed salt water, drinking it in through her nose and throat when her mouth was closed, thrashing against the whiteheads, being flayed finally on the rocks, struggling up and throwing herself again against the breakers and in the end washed ashore, wet, limp, lying on the beach, slowly a circle forming around her and someone, someone who cared coming forward and picking her up like a rag doll, like a beloved of course rag doll.

"Campbell man to see you," Lillian announced, and Madelyn let *Moby Dick* drop on her desk and pushed at her eyes to blot the tears that Moby Madelyn had brought forth.

"The Campbell man with a Campbell can," he sang out and set on top of her desk and *Moby Dick* a carrying case can which unzipped to spew forth a whole litter of little red and white cans in assorted flavors. "Malibu stew," he said, "that's what's new," and he made a little tin tower on top of this week's recipes. "What'll ya have?" he grunted finally, relaxing in a chair. He reached for his pad in his jacket pocket.

"A carton of tomato," Madelyn said. "And one of cream of mushroom." You could do so much with tomato soup.

"How about chicken gumbo?" The Campbell man leaned his red round face forward. "Old folks always like chicken gumbo."

And Campbell's gumbo is the best. By gum," he said. "The dad-gummed best gumbo."

Madelyn looked not overly amused. "Okay," she said. "Give me a dozen."

She opened her cupboard wall and pulled out an orange, carried it to Mabel, who was chopping pumpkin and squash, and laid it in front of her to be sliced. She looked over Kenneth's shoulder. He was sitting at the end of the table reading *Mechanics Illustrated*. There was a yellow pimple on the back of his neck and his hair was too long. She walked around the table. His pores were black and swollen. He was Absolute Reality, Kenneth was, and she felt vaguely sad and upset.

She sucked on the orange halves as she wandered through the corridors and peeked in on the patients. Most were in the recreation room where Miss Tregagle in her teaching falsetto was giving them instructions for making straw rose doilies "good for putting hot dishes on and saving table tops and tablecloths." The straw doilies would be displayed and offered for sale in the lobby (next to the bottle cap coasters and the artichoke flower centerpieces) by Sandra the receptionist.

Madelyn tossed the orange peel into a barrel ashtray, then recovered it, twirling it on her finger. That was her favorite story as a child, the princess in the orange. The prince, noble, wise, handsome, thirsty, rides along, peels open his third orange—birds flew out of the first two—and finds another bird, but this one drinks from his lips and becomes a beautiful maiden—slightly tangerine-skinned, true, but beautiful just the same. When she opened a door or picked up the phone or slit an envelope, she hoped for something special, like out of the orange. She was going to a party Friday, at Cherry's; maybe she'd open that door and, floating around on the carpet, touching elbows and glasses, Cherry's bright blue and chartreuse living room taking on an unreal, a funereal, quality because everyone always wore black—maybe there among the bare arms and necks and backs and white shirts thrust out of black she'd find someone, someone in green maybe, or maybe in blue, someone who'd waltz her away, who'd pour liquidless bubbles into her glass, who'd run his large warm hand down the little bones in her back.

Or maybe when she got home there would be a letter, a fat one, inviting her to join the medical staff of an American charity clinic in Bolivia. Or a telegram from Jay who had lived downstairs until three years ago when he went to Texas to work on missiles leaving her uneasy about their relationship and writing

occasional letters when the work and weather became unbearable, eulogizing the Peninsula and half-suggesting that he might return. Or a letter from *Life* magazine saying that they wanted to do an article on a day in the life of a dietician and Miss Provost, her supervisor at Letterman Hospital, had suggested her name. Ah—a picture of her in her quilted duster, legs tangled around the kitchen stool: “Conscious of her own diet, Madelyn spoons out a breakfast of low calorie yogurt, while Timothy, her three-year-old Siamese, scrutinizes his regime of canned beef kidneys.”

“Hello, Mr. Friberg,” she said, stopping at the door of his room.

“Hmph,” he said, or something that sounded like hmph. He was propped up with pillows and a pile of magazines and was writing letters, as he did every afternoon to other octagenarians he had met at the annual flying saucer convention at the Claremont.

“How are you feeling this afternoon?” She dropped the orange peel in the basket by his bed.

“Don’t come too near, young woman,” he said. “You know I can’t keep my hands off you.”

She grinned at him. “Are you writing to a Martian?” She leaned over his paper.

“For a well-brought up girl, you show a shocking lack of respect,” he said. “I am writing about the philosophy of government on Venus.”

“What is the philosophy of government on Venus?” She sat on the edge of his bed.

“Well, there is no war,” he hmphed, “and no crime. Everyone has enough and everyone works.”

“Are there dieticians on Venus?”

“Certainly. They don’t eat the same things we do though. Their bodies and tastes are much more refined.”

“What do they eat?”

“They gain nourishment by special processes from the air and earth. You know,” he said, “there are some on this planet working in laboratories and factories who are helping us make scientific advancements.”

“Are there any here?” She stood up. “Maybe I’m one.”

“You,” he said, “are much too foolish for a Venetian. They are very mature and wise.” He looked down at his writings. She reached across his bed and squeezed his arm, then turned back into the corridor.

Mrs. O’Myers was out on the patio again, smiling at the late afternoon sun. Madelyn liked Mrs. O’Myers. She was as simple

as a child with a clear pink wrinkleless face. She pulled now at Madelyn's pocket. "Sit down, dear," she said. Madelyn sat on a cement planter and straightened Mrs. O'Myers's afghan. "Tell me about yourself," Mrs. O'Myers said.

"There's nothing to tell," said Madelyn.

"About a nice looking young girl? Nothing to tell?" She winked at Madelyn. "You must have some fine secrets. Some fine stories." She leaned forward. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Madelyn smiled a little. "You tell me your stories," she said.

"I never had any stories," said Mrs. O'Myers. "I married too young. I had a baby every year for seven years until I convinced Mr. O'Myers I couldn't take any more. That's part of what's wrong with my back," she confided, "all that pickin' up after seven kids. But you," she cooed, "you have a life of your own."

Madelyn stood up. "It's almost quitting time," she said. "Would you like me to take you back in?"

"No dear, thank you. There's a good half hour of sun left." She closed her eyes and opened her face to it.

Madelyn had made sure tonight that Kenneth would lock up like he was supposed to and she'd counseled Lillian on the color of her daughter's dance dress—yellow, they decided—all on her way out of the kitchen. The car was steamy and the traffic inching south. She pushed open the car door, grabbed her mail, and ran up the stairs to rinse her face and take off her shoes and stretch out on the sofa. She unfastened her stockings and peeled them off. There was a postcard from her mother. "Everything fine," it said. "I had Aunt Fran and Uncle Ernie over to dinner. I fixed my chicken salad casserole and that orange sherbet mold and a lemon chiffon cake and they just drooled." There was a grocery circular from the corner market and a letter inviting her to join the Great Books Club. She tossed everything into the straw wastebasket at her elbow. "The round file," Miss Provost had called it.

She lay on her stomach with her eyes closed. Her back was sore from sitting. She wished someone were there to rub it. Playfully she rubbed the side of the lamp on the end table. "I wish," she said, "that the genii of geriatrics would appear and massage my aching bones." She noticed that the phone was ringing. She drew herself up and answered it.

"Miss Tearnip," said Kenneth. "Mabel left part of a roast in the oven and it burned black. What do you want me to do?"

"Leap in after it," said Madelyn softly.

"The kitchen smells awful."

She sighed. "Have you thought of taking it out?" she asked. "And open the top windows, but not the screens. And Kenneth," she said, "put the keys back in my drawer."

She sat for a long time on the sofa, watching the sky darken outside. There was nothing to get up for, to wash for, to eat for. She closed her eyes and watched it appear, a vision this time of Jay, loose-lipped, hairy-armed, stretched out on the rug. She opened her eyes. You ass, she said to herself, you fool. And she remembered how Michael had said once that it had taken him a very long time but he had learned to think about nothing at all. She tried that, but little thoughts kept coming in—unfulfilling, unfulfilled, and then their antidotes, the truths.

Madelyn cried—long, hard, not letting herself imagine she was crying for anything beautiful or meaningful and then she stopped and, purged, repeated stern little vows that the dreams were over, that Alice would wander no more back into Wonderland. Getting up, she padded over to the window. Timothy sat on the sill. The sky was sullen, not quite dark. She softened. This was her favorite time of day. The brass wind shingles she'd hung outside clanged and rippled. She watched for the first star, found it, and scolding herself went ahead and whispered, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may." She stopped. Had she ever really believed in wishbones and baby teeth and first stars? And the rest of those marvelous things—taking your feet off the car floor when you crossed over railroad tracks and not stepping on the sidewalk cracks?

She dropped a disc onto the stereo and opened the refrigerator to pour some ginger ale into a champagne glass. She leaned across the bar and turned on the tiny stove light. The music was brassy and deep and Madelyn pirouetted in little circles on the carpet holding the glass delicately over his shoulder.