

Gourd Groupies

The lady across the street had been the neighborhood fascination since she moved in three months ago. We were a social street, often hosting barbecues in the summer and two block parties every year. Everyone knew everyone, which made it even more odd that my neighbor rarely left her house.

I tried to give her excuses. Maybe she was one of the lucky ones with a remote job, so she never had to commute. Maybe she was painfully shy and needed more time before she would say hello. I'd tried knocking on the front door of her small house twice, but she never showed. It really would have been fine, except for the kids.

Most of the surrounding houses were bursting with young ones growing up with boundless spirits for adventure. Whenever they weren't in school, they were drawing with chalk on our quiet street or daring each other to ride their bikes at full speed through the sand washed into piles by recent rainstorms. When they needed a break, they knew they were welcome at anyone's home. Sometimes they stopped by my place for sugary treats their parents wouldn't buy and the occasional pre-scheduled math tutoring session.

I didn't have kids of my own, so they never stayed long. I didn't have scooters in my garage or a trampoline out front. The neighborhood kids always arrived with friendly smiles and waved goodbye when they noticed the sun begin to set from my front porch. They ate their snacks and sipped juice on the front porch and bantered between bites. They lacked the sharp edges of cynicism I'd grown accustomed to in the adult world. And still, they never stopped at the house across the street from mine.

One night while I brushed my teeth, the thought of my neighbor's mysterious presence swarmed my mind. All of our local events operated through social media calendars. She must not be online, I thought. That had to be it.

I bought special stationary the next day and dropped off invitations to upcoming dinners and parties at her front door. She could come to charades night at the Nelson house or the chili cook off I planned to host in a few day's time. Each note was painstakingly written and sealed in an envelope with a seasonal sticker. Everything about it screamed, "You're welcome here!"

No response ever came.

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Then a few weeks ago, I was sipping my first cup of coffee and noticed the sun glinting off the back of her old station wagon as it pulled out of her driveway. She brushed her curly brown hair behind one ear, adjusted her round, oversized glasses, and drove away. My eyes froze to that front window. It felt like a clue.

Every time she came home from her new morning errands, she threw her backpack purse over her shoulder and carried pumpkins inside. I didn't think much of it at first. After all, October had just begun. She didn't know that the Gardeners threw an annual pumpkin carving event a few days before Halloween. Maybe it was her favorite holiday and she couldn't bear to wait.

In the middle of October, she arrived home from her errands earlier than usual. The overcast drizzle had stopped like it knew she wouldn't have a free hand for an umbrella. I happened to be reading at my favorite kitchen chair, definitely not waiting for something new to happen across the street. Thinking about it too much embarrassed me. Everyone asked me for updates about her, since my house had the best vantage point. I didn't like to snoop, but truthfully, I wanted answers. I needed to know more about her.

That morning, she stood from the driver's seat and stretched. Her oversized brown sweater hugged her as she settled back down, determined to move on with her day. After ducking into her garage, she emerged with a small wooden wagon. She quickly towed it around to her trunk and the hatch sprung open.

Eleven new pumpkins wobbled on top of each other by the time she'd closed the trunk. They were the biggest I'd ever seen, their deep orange hue comforting and inviting. Leaning her weight forward, my neighbor pulled the wagon around to her backyard.

I hadn't heard of anyone decorating the back of their house with pumpkin carvings, but it made sense. By that point, her existing pumpkin collection lined her front porch and the steps below. Curved smiles and empty eye sockets guarded the length of her driveway. None of them sagged or showed signs of rot. She was too quick to replace them.

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No one covered their property in so many pumpkins, not even the most competitive decorators who lived at the front of our neighborhood. I closed my book with a satisfying thump. There would be no more watching.

I slipped into my favorite maroon cardigan that I'd draped over multiple jackets on the coat rack by my front door. Patting down my hair, I found my favorite boots and locked the door behind me.

The morning breeze carried a chill as it escorted me to my neighbor's house. Thick trees leaned over her yard and overgrown bushes guarded her home's brick exterior. The air around it felt heavy with mystery. I couldn't help but shake my head as I walked up her gravel driveway. Each footstep seemed to reverberate from the hollow pumpkin masses that watched my progress. The spirit of the season was starting to get to my head.

Weaving my way through the tiny, faded carvings along her front sidewalk, I noticed something strange. None of them held any candles, battery-powered or otherwise. Instead, tiny teeth had chewed along the holes. Scratch marks peeled some of the rinds like toothpicks had gone to war.

I made a mental note to watch for racoons and ambitious squirrels at my place for the next few weeks. If they had found food here, my garbage can and vegetable garden definitely weren't safe. I climbed the last few steps and rang the doorbell, debating the effectiveness of ultrasonic repellents and humane repellent sprays.

Thirty seconds later, the only sounds in the world were a few birds calling in the distance. I knocked again, louder and more forceful. Should I wander to the backyard? I didn't want to overstep. Just politely and passively interrogate.

When the front door swung open, I nearly jumped in surprise. A reminder that yes, she did exist. She could answer the door.

"Hello," I said, clearing my throat. "I'm Sophia Barnett. I live across the street."

"Oh," she said quietly. Her big brown eyes looked me up and down, her free hand balling up in her oversized sleeve. "Hi. I'm Irene. Irene Newman."

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“It’s nice to meet you.” I gave her my biggest smile, but my heart faltered. There was no segue to make this conversation seem any more natural.

I know we’ve never talked before, but tell me everything about the crazy amount of pumpkins in your yard. It’s no big deal, but literally every house on the block wants to know if you’re insane and I will broadcast whatever you tell me as soon as I leave.

“I love your pumpkins.” My voice came out a bit weaker than intended. “I was just wondering why you have so many.”

I expected her to give me a passive answer and get back to her day, but Irene brightened like the first spring sunrise.

“Would you believe me if I said the animals love it?”

“Like . . . raccoons?”

“Some,” she laughed. It was a light, tinkling sound that softened some deep cavern within my heart. “I’ve always wanted to turn my first house into a certified natural habitat. Do you want to see?”

“If it won’t take too much of your time,” I admitted curiously.

“Come in,” she said, stepping back with a wave.

“Sorry about my wet boots,” I murmured, wiping the dew from them on her entry rug before looking up. Irene brushed past me with a dismissal sound and I glanced around. Treasure covered every inch of her home. Mismatching picture frames lined the walls, each containing an unrelated memory. Where there weren’t pictures, tall plants grew towards the ceiling and tapestries hung from the door frames.

Even in her carpeted living room, thick rugs relaxed under old, forest-green couches. A distressed wooden coffee table showed off a collection of notebooks and magazines. A pair of overfilled bookshelves hung out in the far corner.

Irene led me through her living room to an open back door. Soft acoustic strings pulled us onto the screened-in back porch. It had simple plastic furniture and lots of tupperware bins, still

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labeled from her recent move. Pumpkin guts splattered the concrete floor, seeds thrown left and right. Her current work in progress sat on the small central table, the other ten pumpkins waiting in the wings.

I glanced at the small wireless speaker that wore a string of pulp and slowly played a comforting folk song from underneath it.

“Your place is incredible,” I said honestly. Irene turned around and beamed at me.

“Thanks,” she said. “It’s taken all my free time to unpack even this much. But look out here.”

I followed her out into her small yard. A fence surrounded the area, lined first with bushes and then a pumpkin army. Some smiled, some frowned. They all wore faces devoid of life, beaded with lingering dew.

Irene pointed to a few of her smaller minions by the porch.

“I started with these,” she said. “Before you can get officially certified, your habitat has to have a source of food. Rabbits love pumpkin and the first of those were on sale at the grocery store. I love watching them hop around early in the morning and late at night.”

She stared dreamily at the pumpkins before briskly walking over to spin one around. A large hole was cut out of the back.

“They like to feel safe while they eat, so they take turns inside each pumpkin to snack.”

“That’s actually adorable,” I said with a grin.

Irene laughed and crossed her arms against the cold air, nodding towards some of the larger pumpkins along the middle of her fence on either side of her yard.

“I wanted the squirrels and racoons to eat the bigger ones, which seems to happen.” She shrugged. “I guess they try to eat all of them, but at least there are a few extra to distract them. Rabbits need to eat sometimes too.”

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I nodded, silently noting to research those repellent measures after I got home. Sure enough, the middle pumpkins also had small teeth marks in them. Nibbled bits of orange skin covered the grass like confetti.

“Those carvings are my favorite,” Irene mentioned, like she almost forgot about the massive pumpkins along the back wall of the fence. There were so many, they pushed under the bushes and sometimes sat in pyramids.

I nodded again, thinking of a pleasant excuse to leave. It was a strange hobby, but an answer that would definitely placate the neighbors. Then I really looked. Saw the bite marks in the pumpkins. Saw the gaping wounds bigger than a human mouth. A quick assessment made me wonder if the fence was somehow not tall enough to keep out bears. But we’d never had bears in these parts before.

“Um,” I said, unable to tear my eyes away. “What eats those in the back?”

Irene looked down at her hands, suddenly at a loss for words. “Just some bigger animals.”

“Like what?” I glanced around, as if I’d suddenly spot some wild cougar on the roof. “If it’s dangerous, I’ll have to let everyone know and call animal control.” Those kids that biked in the afternoons, they had no idea how close they were to danger. Everyone would panic. I had to proceed cautiously.

“No, no,” Irene said quickly, stepping a little closer. “It’s not a big deal. I think they’re satisfied to stay right here.”

My heart picked up a bit, thinking of all the people around here who also let their dogs and cats roam. “What’s satisfied, Irene?”

She flinched at my harsh tone, but my anxiety was on a roll now. We would not become the next neighborhood news story of missing children and murdered pets.

“Well,” she began, “I started hearing them about two weeks ago.”

When she started bringing home pumpkins. Yes, that made sense.

“Did they come here for the food or did you purposefully feed dangerous animals?”

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“They’re not dangerous,” Irene said with a huff. “I don’t know . . . how to explain it.”

I put all my effort into not grinding my teeth. “Start from the very beginning.”

“At the start of the month, I woke up one night.” Irene ran a hand through her curls nervously, glancing up at the sky like she hoped a wall of rain would end the conversation. “I could hear someone whispering my name outside.”

My heart stopped.

“Like someone was stalking you?” I asked, worried for myself and the three other women who lived alone a few blocks down. Who exactly was in danger here?

“Did you report it?”

“No,” she said, “because they went away.”

A calm wind blew between us, shifting our hair in front of our eyes and rustling the nearby trees. Irene took a deep breath and said, “They really don’t worry me, even with the roof damage.”

During the quietest moments of the night a few weeks ago, when even the stars slumbered and the moon closed its eyes to yawn, Irene woke up to scratching. She immediately sat up and pulled her heavy blankets closer to her face. The inside of her house was silent, except for the ticking of her grandfather clock out in her dining room.

The roof was a different story. Thin, tiny claws crunched across her shingles, sliding through the asphalt like icing on a cake. She wondered how many animals were finding their way towards her gutter during their descent. The moonlight was just strong enough to push through her shuttered blinds, but not enough to see anything beyond the pool of dim light on her floor.

A few last trailing nails hit the plastic gutter with a screech. Then the sounds stopped. Irene couldn’t pull her eyes away from that lone window, hoping beyond hope that she’d remembered to lock it before going to bed.

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Irene, came the first whisper, heavy with malice. The sound dripped from the gutter above her window and pulsed through the glass. This was no animal. Irene's eyes darted around the room to where she knew her dresser and desk sat. Did she have anything sharp? Anything heavy? Could she reach them in time?

Another whisper spoke her name — *Irene* — with a lazy pull that stretched it into a coaxing call. A nail tapped slowly on her window, then another joined it from below. They gently beat the glass in sync as new clawed feet traced their way down her roof.

Her whole body shook and she closed her eyes tight.

“This is a nightmare,” she whispered, barely hearing her own voice. The blankets convulsed with her.

Irene . . .

“Wake up, wake up, wake up—”

The sounds stopped.

Feed, was the last thing she heard before the night fell back into a peaceful slumber. Irene sat wide awake against her headboard just in case, but eventually woke up in the same position as the sun rose.

“The first thing I did was rush outside,” she said, snapping me back to the present. I turned slowly and noticed my arms hugged around my torso, a shield of human frailty.

I wouldn't have seen the peeling shingles before. The claws had been tiny, but there were so many. Over the window I assumed led to her bedroom, the scratched roof looked like the house itself had been terrified that night, clawing at its own face to get rid of the creatures.

Irene cleared her throat nervously. “That's when I started buying the biggest pumpkins I could find.”

“You fed them?” I asked, my voice nearly breaking on the word.

“They asked nicely.” She shrugged her shoulders. “And it worked.”

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The creatures ate quickly, she discovered. The first morning she positioned the massive pumpkins as far away from her house as she could, settling them along the back line of her fence. The next day, she had slept through the night and only the stems remained in a pile of pulp and seeds.

“They’ve been mostly quiet,” Irene said as I tore my eyes from her damaged roof and looked at the fresh pumpkins along the fence. She’d cleaned her yard thoroughly. I wouldn’t have been able to tell any had existed before the haul she brought home that day.

“Mostly?” I squeaked.

“Last night,” Irene said, her eyes drifting anywhere away from me, “they came back.”

To her window. They beat out of sync against the wall of her house, many more than the first time. All of them whispered into the night air, talking over each other. Some called her name in breathless, broken voices. The others chanted one word.

In.

“So,” Irene began, her voice returning to her normal as she shook a lock of hair from her face. “My main worry now is that I’ll buy out all the local farms. They’ve got a big stock ready for Halloween carving events and sales, but I keep getting all the big ones. The farmers mostly seem appreciative, although I can tell they would rather have more than one customer for them.”

Her tone. Light, as if she were talking about accidentally buying all the eggs for an obsessive baking habit. Not placating nightmares with snacks, hoping to keep them quiet and hidden.

My mouth felt dry, my tongue barbed. I tried to swallow and unhooked my arms from each other. I’d found more than enough answers to my questions. More questions than I’d known to ask.

“I need to get back,” I said, glancing her way. “Lots to do.”

“Like what?” The question was bright and friendly, but I’d forgotten anything I’d actually planned for the day.

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“Lots of stuff,” I mumbled. Conversational niceties snapped back into place in my mind. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Come over any time,” she replied with a smile. “Hopefully the next time you’re here, my yard will be a certified habitat. For whatever needs food and a home.”

My heart pounded too fast. I couldn’t escape the thick scent of raw pumpkin in the air. My nose begged for relief, my feet for movement. Some active part of my brain told them to move and they turned, my body jutting forward towards the side of her house. I would not exit through her carving den.

Over and over, I silently told myself not to look at the house or the roof. Not to inspect the damage and obsess over what actually caused it. The voices could have been an early Halloween prank by a few of the local teens, but the property damage? The bite marks on the half-devoured gourds? I couldn’t think of a single animal that whispered into windows during the night.

I took a deep breath as I walked, curving around to the side of her house. I focused on the dying grass, preparing itself for winter. Hiding itself away.

I wouldn’t have noticed it if I hadn’t been so focused on each step I took. But very quickly, from the corner of my eye, I saw movement. The bushes along the fence that curved around Irene’s house. The leaves that skirted the ground, that rustled and parted just beside me.

The dark, scaled tail as big as my forearm, with three feet on either side of it. The long, thin nails that gripped the grass to push the rest of its body into the dense undergrowth.

A soft, inhuman laugh danced along the cold wind that pushed me home.