

THE QUARRY

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Hollow Smiles

Katrina Van Tassel, a restless child plagued by the age-old foe of boredom, found herself in search of a pumpkin.

The eight-year-old shot through the plains of produce. The hodgepodge of orange that contently sat at the edge of her father's farm was the most familiar of them; the pumpkins were a decidedly perfect size for a lonely child to draw a friendly face on. A *real* friendly face, not like Edith Sawyer, who pulled on Katrina's hair

when the teachers weren't looking and bullied her because her father was large. The pumpkins weren't nearly as mean as Edith. At least, they weren't to Katrina.

She never chose any old pumpkin for her faces. No, Katrina often bore a pernickety air in her scrutiny, cultivated by a childhood of privilege and affirmation. It always wavered when she reached the pumpkin patch though, where the spindly limbs of the trees felt like they inched closer each time she visited. The forest that lay beyond was eerie to listen to, as odd sounds rumbled in the depths, a reminder that the wood was alive—alive and drowsy like a slumbering beast. The closest she ever ventured was the cobblestone fence at the cusp of the patch.

She poked a myriad of pumpkins and hoisted them up to sit level with her head. At last, she settled on one no larger than the farm well's pail and plonked herself down amidst the hay and crowds of squash. With a charcoal stick slyly procured from one of the farmhands, she began her task.

The eyes were misshapen and the grin stretched from one side to the other, reminiscent of a smile that unsettlingly showed just one too many teeth. Katrina, nonetheless, took pride in her work, finishing off her masterpiece with a shakily drawn '*Edith Sawyer*' on the back. She finally had a *real* friendly face.

The back of her hand rose to rub her cheeks as she beamed, the dark smudges from the charcoal leaving a smear. With a reinvigorated zeal, Katrina leapt to her feet. Her arms wavered under the weight of the pumpkin yet refused to yield, and her unsteady gait teetered as she approached the cobblestone wall. She was finally *just* tall enough to peek over the stones.

Weakly, she heaved the pumpkin until it comfortably sat on the fence, and with an exhale, eased away from the stones and wood. The sinuous shadows cast by the thicket slunk over the pumpkin, claiming the fruit with the friendly face for themselves.

Satisfied with her achievement, Katrina rested on the grass and chattered away with her new friend for quite some time, until the forest's shadows disappeared with the sun and the sky blushed pink and gold. The sounds of the farmhands' voices carried across the wind. They all chorused her name, a sign that dinner would be served soon. Dismayed, she gathered her skirts and bade farewell to the smiling pumpkin; the friendly face that would be long gone when morning came.

The sequestered glen of Sleepy Hollow was wide awake and in a frenzy not one day later. The town was known for its unexplainable occurrences, as the forest that encompassed it and its inhabitants sat far outside the realm of the natural. Often, however, it was the adults of the Hollow that fell victim to its supernatural snares, not the tenderfoot children.

Edith Sawyer returned home the following night in a state of hysteria, so thickly lathered in pumpkin innards that the smell—and the creature that covered her with it—haunted her for the remainder of her days. Whenever she so much as smelt a whiff of pumpkin, even as an adult, the scent sent her into a blubbering, whimpering mess, unable to form a single coherent sentence.

The adults of Sleepy Hollow surveyed the scene the next day. The muddied road Edith had trekked along was riddled with the suspected hoof prints of the famed spectre of the Hollow – the wicked Headless Horseman. Amongst the sludge and wreckage were the scattered remains of the pumpkin. One of which, was peculiarly marked with a broken, charcoal smile.

Spectres, however, did not last. Such terrors of the night are eventually met by daylight, which puts an end to all these evils like adulthood puts an end to childhood. The years came and went for Katrina, and with them came a true realisation of her actions. Of the witching power of her pumpkins. It wasn't a child's game to be had; it was real life.

And so, night gave way to day.

Katrina Van Tassel stopped visiting her father's pumpkin patch.

Her teen years were passing quietly. At the cusp of adulthood, Katrina grew acquainted with the relentless advances of men—such as the overbearing yet widely admired Brom Van Brunt—most of which she politely entertained out of expectancy. She was a well-mannered lady, tamed by the age-old sovereign of tradition. She plastered on a friendly face of her own; the spirit of her youth as far away as that forgotten pumpkin patch.

Then came the momentous age of eighteen. The sky darkened, and an icy chill uncomfortably settled in her bones.

Ichabod Crane wandered into Sleepy Hollow.

Odd as he was, after a month of the stranger cajoling the townsfolk Katrina sought him out for singing classes, influenced by the town's adoring recommendations. It should've been of little surprise to her that his gaze quickly dropped to find her more physically appealing features, and even quicker to find the financially appealing features of her father's estate.

Katrina nodded and smiled over dinner. Her father was more than happy to answer any questions Crane sent his way about the estate or her, and with every boast that leapt from her father's mouth, Katrina noted the devious green glint growing in the schoolmaster's eyes, the words honing Crane's sharp smile.

Magnanimous, they had said. Her lips tightened, recalling the townsfolk's words. *Charming, wonderful with the children.*

When Ichabod Crane's stare met with hers, Katrina found an overwhelmingly familiar sensation roll over her; that of Edith Sawyer pulling on her hair when no one was looking.

Old memories cracked like dried flakes of blood as Katrina sat amongst the pumpkins. Under the spotlight of the moon, they glowed a spectral orange. Her golden crown was sucked of its vibrancy and colour, until all that remained was a pale husk, much like the rest of her. The night was still around her, holding its breath. Frustrated, miserable words swelled in the back of Katrina's throat like storm clouds after a long drought riddled with pleasantries and propriety.

The insincere duplicity of the local *charming* schoolmaster plagued her day in and day out, positively delighting many members of the town. She may have felt sorry for the way he was treated by Brom Van Brunt, if the two weren't disingenuous towards her and feuding over her like she was a prized horse—a boon that came with the estate. Like a coil, she tightened each day, and tonight, she snapped.

Ichabod Crane's charcoal smile was skin deep; it was time she carved him a new one.

A farmhand's carving knife was firmly clasped between Katrina's whitening, strained knuckles, and sunk into the pumpkin with little resistance. It took longer with the knife, but like it, she was sharper. *This wasn't a child's game to be had.*

The eyes were slanted and calculating—devious like their counterpart. The smile was jagged and unsettling and could not be classified as friendly, even in the ignorant eyes of a child. Katrina felt something more than pride—a swell of something rapturous and cathartic and intoxicating—as she finished off her masterpiece with a steadily drawn '*Ichabod Crane*' on the back.

The back of her hand rose to rub her cheeks as she scowled, the innards from the pumpkin leaving a smear. With a single-minded fervour, Katrina rose to her feet. Her arms were strong under the weight of the pumpkin, and her tread so calm and resolute that she could hear the Hollow holding its breath as she approached the cobblestone wall.

When she finally glanced down, the *true* face of the greedy Ichabod Crane stared back at her. Soon, it would stare back at him too.'

The Headless Horseman, the grim spectre that plagued the glen of Sleepy Hollow, found himself in possession of a pumpkin.

It had been some time since the young Van Tassel had left him a head. He had thought the once zealous and imaginative child had long since fallen into a deep sleep, the kind that very few wake up from. And yet, it appeared that more than one spectre haunted the Hollow that night. *Something must have awoken the ghost of her youth,* he thought.

The fingers of one coarse leather glove traced the name haphazardly carved into the back of the fruit.

'Ichabod Crane'.

The greedy face of the pumpkin sat gravely in the arm of the phantom, and the slumbering forest hummed under the thunderous hooves of the rider's steed. In the years to come, the only memories of Ichabod Crane left in the Hollow were what

whispers remained stained on the wind, and in the carved pumpkins that unsettlingly smiled into the night.