

A PUMPKIN TALE

IT was October, the harvest month, and I sat upon a bale of straw watching the activities of a farm store in the valley of the Rio Grande north of Albuquerque. The late afternoon sun was warm. Despite the long shadows of the cottonwoods, the air was heavy with the scent of sunshine upon the straw and the verdant odors of new mown hay and manure. Stray aromas wafted by me, roasting green chile and cinnamon in hot, mulled cider. Beneath a fragile blue sky, New Mexico sunflowers shimmered, their lines sharp and distinct in the dry air. There was a dull drone of busyness and children playing. Somewhere in the distance a donkey brayed. The setting was rich and overwhelming to the senses.

Across the yard an old woman watched me watching her. She rocked gently in a chair in the shade of the verandah. A brilliant Navajo blanket draped her shoulders and her graying hair was pulled neatly into a bun atop her head. With great care and patience she raised a large mug to her lips and sipped gingerly. Her eyes studied me as she slowly lowered the mug in lightly quaking hands.

My attention swung to a man and woman selecting pumpkins from a flatbed trailer with their little boy. The mellow orange globes stirred thoughts of jack-o-lanterns and pumpkin pie, food for soul and body. The boy waved a caramel-coated apple toward a monstrous squash; it must have weighed seventy-five pounds. His parents sought to dissuade him from his choice. I imagined the parents' consternation, for a three-foot tall jack-o-lantern would be quite daunting.

The boy became agitated and began to stomp his feet while waving the apple with great energy. He jerked his arm and I watched in amazement as the apple launched from the impaling popsicle stick and struck a tall gaunt farmer upon the arm. He turned quickly and surveyed the scene as he walked toward the boy. Flushed with embarrassment, the man and his wife gestured apologetically. The farmer was silent as he folded lanky knees and squatted beside the boy. Wiping caramel from his forearm with a handkerchief, he spoke with the now subdued boy.

The parents watched quizzically. After a few moments, the farmer rose as he balanced himself with one hand placed lightly upon the boy's shoulder. He motioned across the yard with his free hand, beckoning two sturdy young men who came at a trot. The parents fidgeted as I began to understand. The men lifted the giant pumpkin onto a cart and headed toward the parking lot followed by the little boy skipping gaily and grinning from ear to ear.

WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

The boy's father extracted his billfold but the farmer shook his head while motioning for him to cease. He patiently nodded and smiled until the man and woman retreated, doggedly following the huge orange orb toward their car. It seems the pumpkin was their penance for an unruly son. Or, he may not have intended punishment, only the granting of a little boy's wish.

The raucous cries of crows caused me to look back across the yard. The old woman smiled at me from her rocker. She had been watching the scene and nodded her head in acknowledgment. The day seemed dreamlike then. I rose and followed my nose and stomach to hot, buttered sweet corn. Heavily salted, it was the perfect complement to the day. Then, I drank deeply from a cup of cider, which bathed my mouth in sweetness.

The boy will remember that day for a lifetime, while the pumpkin shall vanish into the earth from whence it came. In the tales he will tell it will grow larger and larger until its proportions shall match the magnificence of the event, though its size will be inflated. You may be assured; October will be his favorite month.