

Autumn

The puppy's gotta pee in the middle of the night. On my way through the kitchen I notice the clock on the microwave reads 1:58 a.m. and something registers in my brain that yesterday was the autumnal equinox. So it's autumn now.

Outside it's cool. The dog holds its snout high in the air taking in the night scents. It smells like autumn. It smells like summer packing its bags and heading south, like winter hiding around the next corner waiting to kick you in the balls when you least expect it. It smells of wood fire and fungus, of diatomic earth, wet dogs, and the warm beds of lovers dank with slumber.

I think of old loves, of the beds we shared in apartments in drafty old houses with creaky floorboards and temperamental radiators. I think of those girls and they will always be girls to me. I'd fall in love in autumn. By summertime it was usually over. Still, I'd take five consecutive autumns over 10 sweaty summers any day. How could you ever tire of caramel apples or Halloween or cool crisp nights or falling in love and bringing your new girl home for Thanksgiving? Could you ever get bored of jack-o-lanterns glowing on doorsteps? Forget the plastic costumes and latex masks kids wear nowadays. No, there's always one kid who shows up at your door dressed in a bedsheet, and memories of your childhood come flooding back, of stale candy hardening in your sock drawer that you couldn't bring yourself to eat because somehow that would mean the end of Halloween, or childhood, or innocence, or something.

It's autumn now, when fathers berate their kids to rake the damn leaves, and freeze their asses off in pumpkin patches out in the country or in shopping mall parking

lots – suburban “pumpkin patches” with a little straw strewn on the blacktop and gourds spilling from the back of tractor trailers. Inevitably, at least one kid ends up bawling because all the “good” pumpkins are gone.

“Just pick a damn pumpkin,” the father growls. The mommy shoots him a dirty look, and he turns and sips warm cider from a Styrofoam cup, thinking of the receptionist at the office with her tight little mini skirts. He wonders how the hell his life turned out this way.

And now, in the middle of the night that guy pauses at the window, unable to sleep, watching me standing in my backyard waiting for the dog to pee. It’s fall now, he thinks, opening a window to let the night air in. He remembers bringing his new girl home for Thanksgiving, and thinks of old lovers, of his childhood, his hometown, and his parents, long ago laid in their graves. His wife stirs and tells him to come back to bed.

It smells like autumn, like hay rides and apple cider, and leaf mold and black rot and death. After a moment he turns from the window and crawls back into bed, curling up next to his wife. And the dog sits at my feet looking up at me, wondering why the hell I’m crying.