



When the doorbell rang, Flag spurred into motion. Although a small dog, he bravely approached the door while barking loudly. His deep voice seemed to carry authority as he proudly represented his breed.

Coral, struggling with her oversized, plush bathrobe, slowly emerged from her room. She'd been sick throughout the entire week and did not feel up to company. In fact, she had intentionally left the porch light off. Decidedly, she sank onto the worn, denim-covered futon.

The doorbell, however, was soon joined by knocking. Flag, adding growling to the mix, began to intermittently throw himself at the door.

Coral's moss-green eyes darted about the room. An unfinished plate of nachos sat on the coffee table next to a puddle of spilled *horchata* and globs of *pico de gallo*. To the untrained eye, the puddle might have been mistaken for milk, but Coral instantly surmised it to be this Mexican rice drink: she could tell by the shape, size, color, and density of the spill.

A caked-up, plastic fork stood erect—pitchfork-style—on the floor and a broken, blue tortilla lay, partially dried, nearby. The television blared, as well, bringing her eyes to rest on its cheaply-taped, plastic remote. Instinctively, she shot out her hand to silence the noise.

Finally, the person left. The three-year-old, prize beagle crossed the room and seated himself beside his owner. Feeling ignored, he pressed his cold, wet, black nose against Coral's exposed knee. Absently, she began to stroke his tricolor fur. Once she stopped, he moved away, curling into a circle, ears flopping off from the denim cushion.

Coral rose to her feet, ignored the mess, and headed into the kitchen. Here she pulled a

plastic, lime-green tumbler from the cupboard and filled it with milk. Eyeing the cup suspiciously, she chugged down the cold liquid. She had never really liked the taste of milk; it was disturbing how much she had drunk over the past week. Shrugging, she decided that her body was merely craving protein.

Rinsing the glass, she refilled it with water and noted the time on the clock. She dosed herself with medicine, set the unfinished water on the counter, and then headed back toward her bedroom.

A bright orange envelope caught her attention. It appeared to have been slipped under the door. Had it been there before? She was not sure.

Crossing the room, Coral swooped up the envelope. She was about to continue on to her room when Flag flew from the futon and lunged for the letter. Perplexed, Coral placed it down onto the table; there were no visible markings. She determined to use her letter opener, so headed to her solid oak, rolltop desk.

This antique contrasted the other furniture; it had belonged to her father. He inherited it from his mother—her grandmother—and it held great worth. She was never to sell it. It was to stay in the family.

Flag continued to follow her every movement, almost causing her to trip. Yet the letter appeared to be harmless. Removing the envelope, she opened a card to find candy taped to the inside. Obviously, Flag had smelled this prize. The only message was a preprinted “Happy Halloween” and a handwritten “from your private pumpkin.” She didn't recognize the script so left the treat intact.

Coral began to rummage through the contents of the desk. She was sure that she'd read something about Halloween and a "private pumpkin," but she couldn't recall what. Finally, a dull, mustard-colored paper came into view. On it was a photocopied sketch of a jack-o-lantern with bits of paper bursting out from its eyes, nose, and mouth. The postcard-sized announcement read: "Halloween Event: Private Pumpkin Gift Exchange. Halloween's Secret Santa. Bring a wrapped gift to the fire hall, Friday at 8:00 PM. No gifts over \$10, please. Admittance fee of \$5. Pick a gift when your name is called. Be there!"

Coral scanned the invitation again. Had she received this notice in the mail? Since it was not addressed, and there was no stamp, she decided that she must have picked it up with her mail from the school office. Each teacher had a mailbox which they were supposed to check, daily.

The event was scheduled for tonight, but the card from the foot of her door did not appear to be a part of it. It also seemed to be more of a White Elephant party than it did a Secret Santa type of affair: the only noticeable difference was keeping whatever gift you chose rather than swapping it out for another. It definitely did not resemble Christmas's Secret Santa, yet the card she'd received did.

She decided to call her friend. Maybe they'd drawn names at the most recent book club meeting. She'd joined the group, with Jessi, a little over six months before, as an incentive to read for enjoyment. Had Jessi just forgotten to tell her about this "private pumpkin" thing? If so, why did they include her when she'd missed the meeting? It didn't make sense.

“Hello? Coral? Do you know what time it is?”

Coral tried to picture her friend's delicate face. She chose to play it safe and apologized. “I'm sorry, Jess. Is it late? Did I wake you?”

Jessi chuckled. “No, Hon. What's up? I thought you were sick. Have you been playing hooky?”

Coral blew out an audible breath of air. A loose strand of her fine, black hair flew forward and then settled. “Very funny. Today's the first day in about a week that I've been able to stand without feeling dizzy or eat without at least a portion of it making its way back up.”

“Okay. Okay.” Jessi grew serious. “So what's up?”

Coral explained the knocking and doorbell ringing and then mentioned the card. She also relayed Flag's strange behavior: he had never before thrown himself at the door like that. “But I'm not sure when the card arrived,” she added.

Jessi quickly assessed the situation. “Well I doubt that a 'private' pumpkin would make such a commotion. I'd say the card's from someone other than the person who Flag barked at. Maybe the card was there before the visitor, or it may have arrived after.”

Coral was growing uneasy. “So it's not a book club thing?” she asked.

“Not any that I know of,” came the reply.

“Well, then... do you mind staying on the phone with me? I've not walked Flag tonight. I'll just bring him outside. It's too cold to leave him in the dog run.”

They continued to chat while Flag did his business. Jessi, sensing her friend's

uneasiness, told her to get ready to accept visitors. She and her date would swing by to check things out.

Once inside, Coral thanked her. Hanging up, she raced to her room to change into some large, concealing sweats. When the phone rang again, she had just put on a kettle of water. Reading off the Caller ID, she then answered her friend's call. Putting on the front porch lights, she waited for them to come to the door.

Flag stretched, slowly, and then slid off from the futon so he could join her. When the doorbell rang, she peeked out the security hole and then unlocked and opened the door. Her friend stood beside a handsome “vampire.” Next to him was a wooden scarecrow that stood about a foot high. The latter was holding a small, plastic, pumpkin bucket that was filled with what appeared to be candy corn. She was about to thank Jessi for the gift when...

“What's with the scarecrow? I've never known you to decorate for Halloween.”

Coral furrowed her brow. “You mean you didn't bring it? Hmm. I guess we should take it in anyhow, right?”

Jessi frowned. “Well, it appears to be safe. What do you think, Chad?” She turned toward her date.

He wasn't sure. “Might not be a good idea if you don't know who it's from. But you don't want anyone getting sick off the candy, either. Maybe the garage?”

They settled on this last suggestion. Coral kenneled Flag and they moved the scarecrow off the porch and into the garage. Chad checked the door latches and secured them firmly. Then the lights were brightened so the three of them could study the scarecrow.

Flag, once released, growled and barked at the wooden gift, relentlessly: he had to return to the house so that they could get a better look. Coral did not like Chad's apprehensive expression.

“So what do you think?” she ventured. “Is it okay to keep?”

Jessi laughed. “What? You worried it's going to come alive and eat you during the night? Don't be silly,” she scoffed. When she saw the hurt look on her friend's face, she toned her voice to sound like an apology. “Oh, you meant the candy, right?”

Chad interrupted before Coral could speak. “That red paint doesn't look right. I don't think we should be touching this thing without the gloves that we used when we carried it in. I guess it's good that it's cold outside. In fact, I think we should call the police.”

Jessi immediately changed her demeanor. She knew that her boyfriend worked in a lab and now feared the worst. “Do you mean it's blood or something?”

But Chad was already on the phone. He motioned for Jessi to wait. When the kettle whistled, all three of them jumped. Coral went inside to comfort Flag and to turn off the burner. Aimlessly, she set up three cups and filled them with water. Placing an Autumn Spiced tea bag into each, she then returned to the garage.

They decided, instead, to wait in the house. Coral added gingersnaps to the table and they all sat, quietly, nibbling cookies and sipping their tea.

“Do you mind if I use your bathroom?” asked Chad. “I'd like to get out of character. The makeup's making me itch,” he continued, almost apologetically. Coral absently nodded her head and Jessi pointed him on his way. Just as he returned to the table, the doorbell rang.

It was the police.

Coral, again, secured Flag and then opened the door. Surprisingly, he seemed to understand that these people had come to help; he sat soundless, watching.

The policemen took pictures of the front porch area and then did the same to the scarecrow. Next they removed the candy from the bucket and placed it into a plastic bag. “Looks homemade,” one of the officers remarked.

At the bottom of the bucket was a folded note. It read, simply, “I guess I’m not the only one eating crow.” Coral was baffled.

Once supplied with times and events, the officers bagged the scarecrow, took the “private pumpkin” card—just in case—and headed out. “We suggest that you not stay here tonight, Ma’am,” the one policeman stated. “But we can’t tell you what to do.” They then drove away, leaving only their names and a phone number.

Coral threw together an overnight bag. For the first time since purchasing the house, she armed the alarm. Chad dropped them off at Jessi’s, promising to call after the weekend. And Coral was soon tucked in on her friend’s couch, Flag lying alongside.



While the rest of the town slept, those in the local forensics lab were running tests. Lined against a wall, Coral’s scarecrow was only one of many. Each wore a different facial expression and held a now-empty bucket that had once been filled with homemade treats. The buckets’ designs, and candies, also varied: no two were exactly the same. But all had

carried the same message: “I guess I’m not the only one eating crow.”

In addition to analyzing the suspect red paint, this statement had led the technicians to study the candies. And when the blood had been narrowed to that of a bird, it was only logical to test if the bird might have been a crow. Not only had the blood belonged to the *Corvus brachyrhynchos* (or black crow) but evidence of the bird's flesh was also cooked into the various homemade treats.

By morning, a news release had been prepared. It was kept simple, with no mention of blood, or of crows. It merely requested that anyone who had received a scarecrow with a bucket of homemade candy—anonymous or otherwise—should notify the local police. It went on to suggest that those who had eaten candy from such a scarecrow should report to the local hospital for precautionary testing. A sample photo was then provided with an added note that actual scarecrows might differ slightly from the one shown.

Coral and Jessi slept through the report. They were awakened by Chad, knocking at Jessi's door. Flag had been the first to respond and then Coral. After awaking Jessi, she opened the door. Chad immediately switched on the television's 24-hour news channel.

While they were waiting to see if the message that Chad had seen would repeat, Coral's cell phone rang. Not recognizing the number, she was about to let it go to the voice center when Chad offered to answer it for her; it was the local police. He handed the phone back.

“They want me to attend a meeting tonight. Something about trying to find the common thread that sews the 'quilt of recipients.' Oh, and Jess? I guess I'll be sleeping over

again. They're asking us to play it safe by living away from home for the next couple days.”

“Us?” Jessi questioned. “Do you mean you and Flag?”

Chad broke in. “No. That's what I came to tell you. It seems that a scarecrow visited more than just Coral. That's what we're waiting to watch. I was sure that they'd report it again. It sounded kind of important.”

Coral sighed. “Well, I need to walk Flag. He's not been out since last night.” She began to leash him as she continued. “Then I'll need to drop by the house to get his food and kennel, along with a few things for me. Is that okay with you, Jess? Or should I try to find a nearby hotel instead?” As she struggled into her coat, Jessi assured her that she could stay with her. She was still thanking her as Flag pulled her out the door.

When they returned from their walk, Coral discovered that Chad had left. This wasn't really surprising: he had not planned to see them again until Monday. She went into the kitchen where she could hear Jessi bustling around. “I forgot that I don't have my car. Is that going to be a problem?” she queried.

Jessi's face looked lost inside her full, ash-brown hair. Her hazel eyes appeared extra large, similar to the drawings of Halloween cats. Coral had never seen her friend's hair this way—it almost always was pulled up into a French twist. Now she understood why.

“We'll head over after breakfast. I rarely plan out my Saturdays. If you want, I can even go with you to the meeting tonight.”

Although she would welcome the company, Coral had to refuse: “I wish you could,” she answered. “But they distinctly said not to bring anyone. They thought it might lead to

confusion.” Coral shrugged.

Jessi poured out two cups of coffee and then set them onto the counter that served as a table for the kitchen's breakfast nook. The sugar, milk, bowls, cereal choices and creamer were already there. Coral crossed the room and sat in one of the tall, classy chairs. She took a bowl, poured in some *Cheerios* and then added the milk. Next she poured some creamer into her coffee. They ate in silence.

Once finished, they each rinsed their dishes and placed them into the dishwasher. Jessi went to get her coat as Coral, again, leashed Flag. Soon they were out the door and on the road.

When they arrived at the house, Coral opened the door with her keys. An alarm sounded. Both women jumped backwards. Jessi tripped over Flag and landed in the nearby grass. It was still moist with frost and left a dark, muddy, green stain along the left knee area of Jessi's expensive, ecru suit. Ignoring the noise, Coral immediately turned to check on her friend. Jessi, however, was using her head to gesture toward the doorway and holding her hands over her ears. “The alarm, first,” she pleaded.

After the alarm had been disarmed and they were inside, Coral had her friend change into one of her outfits so they could drop the suit off at the dry cleaners before the stain had set. “I'm so sorry,” she voiced. “I guess we both forgot about that dreadful alarm. This is exactly why I don't use it.”

Jessi laughed. “It is rather obnoxious. Why is the box located so far from the door? You'd think they'd planned that out a bit better. Well, no harm done.”

“*Some* harm done,” Coral corrected. “You love that suit.” When she received no response, she unleashed Flag, feeding and watering him in the kitchen. Then, as she went about collecting things that she would need, she encouraged Jessi to take her suit to the cleaners. “I’ll be fine,” she insisted. “Besides, I have the extra key that you gave me when I looked after your plants. I’ll use my car so you don’t need to play chauffeur.” When Jessi didn’t budge, she added, “Go on. Take your day of rest. I’ll feel terrible if we can’t save your suit.”

Finally, Jessi agreed to leave so long as Coral kept her posted. “And lock the door behind me, *You*. Don’t assume it’s safe because it’s light outside.”

Coral nodded and pushed her friend out the door. Then she returned to the task at hand. First, she set up her home phone number so that it would automatically forward to her cell. Next, she brought Flag into the backyard and placed him in the dog run.

She went inside. Gathering all things “Flag,” she carried these into the garage and loaded them into her car. She then put together her stuff, threw it all into a suitcase, and brought this to the car, as well.

She was about to leave so decided to use the bathroom. Her parents had programmed this into her. While a child, she and her siblings were told to make one last trip to the bathroom anytime they were going to travel whether they really needed to or not. Eventually, she *always* had to go.

She returned to the garage, unlatched the door, and drove the car out into the driveway. Here, realizing that Flag was not with her, she cut the engine, got out, and

switched on the car alarm.

After securing the garage, she went back into the house and locked the adjoining door. Coral made a quick walk around, checking windows and doors. Then she brought in Flag. It seemed to have taken an eternity. She texted Jessi, armed the house alarm, went back to the car—this time with Flag—and sped off in her pearly-red *Honda Civic*.



Dropping her things off at her friend's, she relaxed in front of the television. Later, she met Jessi for pizza, returned to walk Flag and placed him into his kennel. It was now time for her to go to the meeting. She printed out a map from the Internet, sent Jessi another text message, and then locked up the house.

Soon she was standing in a room that resembled a college lecture hall. Three police officers were at the front of the room behind a table spread with papers. To their right was a smaller table that offered bottled water, coffee, and packaged mini donuts. Coral took a water and then seated herself near the middle of the room. She was fifteen minutes early. Taking her cell phone from her purse, she began to play a game. She must have become somewhat absorbed because the next thing she knew, it was time to start the meeting.

“Attention everyone.”

She turned off her phone and returned it to her purse. The rest of the room continued to buzz with activity. As she scanned the area, she began to wonder if maybe her time would be wasted; she didn't recognize anyone.

“Your attention, please. Can we please have your attention?” The room slowly became silent. “Thank you.”

A different speaker then took over. Only one man stood in the front of the room. The other officers had taken seats that were off to the side. “Thank you for coming,” he began.

Once the introductions were over, a line formed as each person carried out the instruction to take a pen and one of each of the papers that were in piles on the table in front. A stapler was provided at the table's end so that the handouts could then be united. Coral decided to take another water. She grabbed some donuts, as well. Eventually everyone had returned to their seats.

The third officer now took his turn. He read through the materials, looking up every so often to make sure that the group was following along. When the packet was finished, he again sat down, and the original officer took his place.

By the end of the meeting it was determined that five of the people who had received scarecrows knew each other from a local after-school, youth program. Three others attended the same church. Seven of the people had nothing in common with anyone else. Another five or six were family to those who had already been counted. Coral was one of the seven.

It was dark when the meeting adjourned. Two of the officers went out into the parking lot with their guests while the other began to clean up and organize the room that had just been vacated. The lot had sufficient lighting and Coral was able to see that her car was, indeed, empty as she had left it. She unlocked the doors, climbed in, locked the doors, and then secured her seatbelt.

After a little more than five minutes of driving, she realized that she had headed toward her home and not to Jessi's where she would be staying. Embarrassed, she drove through the nearest *Starbucks* and bought herself some coffee. Once clear of the drive-thru, she pulled into a parking spot, located under a parking lamp, and called her friend.

“Where have you been?” rushed Jessi. “I’ve been trying to text or call you for the last hour or so!”

“Sorry. I shut off the phone during the meeting. We only now are getting out. I’m not really sure that I needed to be there, either. At least I got donuts out of it,” she joked.

“I’m just glad you’re okay. I was really starting to worry.”

“Yeah. Again, sorry. I’m on my way back now. Should be there in about twenty minutes.”

They hung up the phone. Coral backed out of the parking space and pulled onto the street. This time she was heading in the right direction. When she arrived at the house, the porch light was on and Jessi was outside with Flag. She carefully parked to the side, so as not to block in Jessi's car, and then climbed out and went over to Flag where he could jump up on her.

“Thanks for walking Flag. He can be quite the handful. I really didn't expect the meeting to go this late. There were about fifteen of us, not counting families. My group was the 'no, sorry, don't recognize anyone here' group. So far there have not been any casualties, though. At least that's good.”

Jessi was beginning to shiver. “Do you need help carrying anything in or did you get

that all done earlier,” she asked as she tugged on Flag to get him to move toward the door.

“Everything's inside,” Coral responded. The car honked as she checked to be sure that it was locked. She followed Jessi and Flag into the house.

Surprisingly, Chad sat on the couch. Coral hadn't expected to see him—there was no car in the drive.

Chad sensed her discomfort. “Jess was worried,” he stated. “Glad you're okay. I walked over from the library.” He held up his portfolio to show his diligence. Notes were scattered around a nearby notebook. His careful, precise handwriting neatly covered a page and a half of the two pages that were showing.

“I'm so sorry,” Coral blushed. “Now we've seen you twice since you said you'd call Jess on Monday. How's the thesis coming? Were you able to get anything done?”

Jessi took offense at this last statement. “I was worried, not distraught. It's not like I was crying all over him or demanding his attention. He mainly came so *I* could walk the dog. He didn't want me outside so obviously alone.”

Coral crossed the room and sat next to Flag. She looked like a very old, pressed rose that had just dropped to the floor from a book. Surmising that Jessi thought that she still liked Chad, she rose to go. “I'll head home,” she managed. “My group seemed to be merely a decoy, anyway. Besides, I've got both an alarm and Flag to watch out for me.” She began to gather her things.

“That's not what I meant,” Jessi began, but Coral was already leashing her beagle and taking her things out the door. It was safer to leave while Chad was still here; Coral could tell

when her friend was not going to just let a subject drop. Chad sat quietly, organizing his notes.

Once everything was loaded into the car, Coral gave Jessi back the borrowed house key, thanked her, and got into the car. She fastened Flag and herself into seatbelts and drove away.

Arriving in her neighborhood, Coral was no longer brave. There were no street lamps along the residential roads; only an occasional garage light would shine due to an activated motion sensor. Coral drove back out to the main road and down to the corner gas station. Here she opened her cell and called her parents. She knew that her fears were irrational; she could leave her things in the car and take only Flag in with her. But the house alarm was armed, as well, and she was tired.

Her parents were pleased she planned to visit. They lived a mere half hour away, but Coral seldom made the drive. Her childhood home held unpleasant memories and her parents lived in a bubble of denial: the proverbial elephant sat directly in the center of the room and no one spoke of it. Yet tonight she text-messaged both Chad and Jessi of her intentions and then made the trip to her parents'.



Coral awoke to the protests of Flag barking and throwing himself against the kennel. Although dressed warmly, the air outside her bedding made her shiver. Light poured in through two windows above the bed.

The room was barren compared to how it had been when she had lived there; she had shared it with her older sister, Amber. She smiled as she recalled the invisible line that distinctly defined their opposing tastes. Now only one picture hung on the wall, the bookshelves had been replaced with a wardrobe, and what was once the closet was now a small, walk-in bathroom.

Coral shifted to a sitting position onto the edge of the bed and pulled on her sneakers. She then headed down the steep staircase which led to the dining room. Here she donned her coat, opened the kennel, and leashed Flag. Together, they headed out the side door.

Stopping at her car, she opened the trunk and grabbed one of the pet waste bags. Her thoughts immediately went to a memory of her father: “Think of the environment, my girl. Don't tie that bag; leave it so you can dump the waste into the toilet. And bring him where there's no grass. I don't need him ruining my lawn.”

It did no good trying to reason with him. She purchased biodegradable bags so she wouldn't have to do this; yet still he would insist. For the moment, she was glad that her parents weren't home. Later, however, she expected she would face a lecture about her avoidance of church. She would do her best to calmly listen. Inevitably, though, it would lead to an argument that her mother would try to dissipate and then later ignore.

The comforting cover of trees was absent during the winter months. Although November had merely poked her head through the door, and winter should have waited his turn, it was not uncommon for the trees to be stripped naked, even now, with snow attempting to dress them once more. Flag tugged on his leash, pulling Coral back from her

thoughts.

Surveying the area, she realized that she had not paid attention to her dog's activities and had no idea if he had relieved himself or not. Thankful for her decision to walk down in the trees so she could capture a view of the river, she allowed Flag to lead her back toward the house. Her parents rarely ambled along these paths and most remained overgrown throughout the warmer months.

She pondered her carefree attitude: here she perceived safety among towering trees and concealing bushes, away from civilization. She felt protected—sheltered. Yet was not the threat, in truth, now greater than it had been last night? At this realization, a sudden tremble snaked its way down her spine.