



# RUNNING FROM THE PUMPKIN KING

by Tabitha Blankenbiller

**WE** leave with as much money as we can steal from ourselves. The highest amount the ATM will dispense in a day. I've saved but it's not enough; there's never enough. But bills aren't due for another week and that next line on the calendar seems so very far away, like maybe we could stop right here and refuse to budge, frozen on the first Thursday of October when we can still cackle and carve leering grins into a gourd's flesh and sleep knowing the worst is only yet to come. But not here. Not yet.

We left Portland before dawn and watched the sun rise over the nothingness where Oregon slips into Nevada. A shuttle whisked us from the terminal to our hotel that was new but not really—bones of a vintage

casino re-hauled, costing investors hundreds of millions of dollars. The Las Vegas Strip shed and imploded and gutted itself like a rolling tide, drawing the landscape new each year.

My luggage sags with falsehoods: fake eyelashes, Spanx, costume jewelry. I leave my husband Matt at a machine where our finances will be decided by a dancing lobster in sunglasses. I pass girls in pasties, painted as American flags, and Mexican women in *Orgasm Clinic* t-shirts, beyond a lake with a depth only reaching my ankles and into the Bellagio's gardens. They shipped in the same giant pumpkins they grew in my rural Oregon town and arranged the exotic gourds in a cornucopia the size of Matt's Toyota Tundra. Asian tourists lower their phones and brush their fingers against the waxy orange skins as if searching for a pulse, a sign that they are nudging something real. The pumpkins are true but they are terrified. As sad as the lettuce in Portland after Christmas, still dreaming of Mexico and accepting its inevitable rain-soaked death.

In the Bellagio salon a man teases my baby fine hair into an enormous bouffant I don't dare touch for fear it will disintegrate like cotton candy. Next door at Caesars Palace, another man paints my eyes with winged Cleopatra liner. It takes him thirty minutes to get it just right, each stroke a deeper disguise. I arrange my face in an optimistic smile as he tells me

about his long-distance relationship with someone in Tunisia. These men talk about music and wearing what you love and fucking haters and who their cousin the Uber Black driver has picked up between the Hakkasan and XS nightclubs. This contrived world of joy and beauty and pleasure seems untouchable. None of us mention who we're voting for and how terrified we are of the incorrect answer because the decision is obvious. We elect for this never to end.

I leave the Forum Shops at Caesars with the same MAC makeup bag they hand out at the mall I visit back home, but this mall is painted gold with casts of naked gods and goddesses emerging from cerulean fountains and a three-story spiral escalator twisting up to a fresco sky. At Venus's feet, an old man naps on his shoulders, a Panda Express cup waiting to catch falling pennies. The value of one Fendi purse in the windows above him could house him for a month, maybe two in something small and away. What is more vulgar, I think, than carrying around a bag worth as much as someone's shelter?

My fluffed hair and black eyes would feed him for a week. I am just as disgusting as the dancing fountains as California's orchards die of thirst, the buffet plates piled and abandoned, the million lights drowning out the stars.

The implosion is as inevitable as it is beautiful. It creeps through in the dumpsters and parking garages behind the casino's perfect front doors. It wafts up from the sidewalk confetti of escort calling cards and rapture pamphlets. It wafts up when you get a little too close to a woman in skyscraper stilettos and a sequined dress, and can trace the bags under eyes that have barely seen two decades around the sun. And then, a falling sensation as you realize that the city is a vampire and you're only here for a couple of short days in a whole life outside of its bubble.

But unlike in that real world, here there are ten thousand ways to forget. I duck into a cocktail bar disguised as a smoothie shop. They add an extra shot of Patron to my cucumber mint infusion.

"On the house, gorgeous," he says. He slides me a punch card to earn one free.



A few weeks before Vegas I was in Seattle visiting an old friend. The naked, micro-penis Donald Trump statue had just landed on Capitol Hill. It was

still September and there was time. You could register, you could get a passport. Maybe we could all be better.

“Do you have to come back up here for the holidays?” he asked after we’d finished shots.

“I think so, but Christmas is going to be weird this year, so close to the wedding and everything.” My sister was getting married in January. People were still marching forward, making plans for 2017 as if seasons would keep unspooling. As if life went on. “We’re all going to be broke and I don’t have any time off.” I was using it all up on vacations. Glacier National Park, Disneyland, Las Vegas. Two thousand sixteen would be a contender for best year of my life if I weren’t so panicked it would be my last.

“But you’ll all be on the same page at least,” he said.

“Yeah.” The liquor slicked my tongue just enough to let loose what I knew better than to speak. “I’ve been thinking about the holidays and how special I want it to be, like get out all my decorations and bake all my favorite cookies and just try my best, you know? Because maybe it’s going to be the last one we have.”

“Jesus, you’re scaring me.”

I apologized. I should know better.



We eat at a Chinese restaurant designed to make you feel like you're inside a fish bowl, framed in goldfish tanks and carved white wave ceilings. I remember it from the first time I was in Vegas as a teenager, at the mercy of parents trying their best to make a memorable summer vacation within budget. It was as impossible for me to get into as the DJ-side table at TAO was for me now; expensive food that no one else in my family wanted to eat.

“Let's try this place,” I told Matt, feeling one of those rare jolts of adulthood joy that no one can tell you where the fuck you can and can't have lunch, or pressure you not to order a soda, or that appetizers are off-limits.

We order pork soup dumplings that arrive in a bamboo steamer. A woman with a convention lanyard watches us fan the magma-hot pillows. Her table is wedged closer to ours than necessary. “Have you been here before?” She strikes up a conversation. She asks if we have kids, and I

guffaw. The laughter ricochets off the tanks, louder than I intended, like when I answer someone with my headphones on.

I want to ask her how I could possibly send anything I love out into this husk of a world. I want to tell her about how whenever I read about the impending doom of avocados or coastal cities or reindeer or aboriginal fishing villages I take their rough estimate year of doom and count back how old I will be, and feel relief flood through my nerves when I realize that I'll most definitely be dead. I want to know if anyone else in history has daydreamed on the promise of the future and rejoiced mortality.

Instead, I ask if she's planning to see any shows.

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We walk until our feet feel like hamburger. There are no idle moments to scroll through Twitter. None of the bars or restaurants are playing the news. I only hop on my phone long enough to post pictures. Pretending to be squashed by the two-story flamingo statue, a selfie with Gordon Ramsay, a steak that cost almost as much as our hotel room. The Instagrams are framed by cryptic missives from my friends.



*Is this real life?*

*TFW you see the GOP hit the iceberg.*

I wonder if it's possible—if leaving Oregon after months of banning myself from the evening news and *New York Times* thinkpieces because I felt like my heart was going to stop—that I could come home to a resolution? That escapism could work?

While I order hard root beer and feed the last of our twenties into a machine that eats it up and spits out spins, the Pussygate memes are launching. The 140 characters seem so optimistic, as if everyone I know is glimpsing light. It's easy to forget that nothing, not one single heinous, irreversibly disgusting thing this monster has said or done or promised, has lingered longer than a daily paper run. Not while it's knitted into the fear. Not when the alternative is a woman.

We walk to the end of the strip, further than I've ever been before. The resorts and shopping palaces level into vacant lots and abandoned projects. Trump Tower stands alone, glistening gold like the tinfoil in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory's* ticket. I snap a picture of my left hand flipping it off and post it to Facebook and Twitter.

*Thank you!* My friends say. It feels just as powerful as my vote, and as worthless as my dread.



When I was a kid in history class, I used to play “Would I Kill Myself?” Europe in World War II was Yes. The Revolutionary War was No. The Great Depression was a Maybe. The theoretical nuclear annihilation my 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher made us watch in *The Day After* was the most rousing ABSOLUTELY. It was all a dialogue in my head; I just assumed everyone else was asking the same question.

It’s not that I wanted to die. A Yes sank me; the knowledge that I’d rather end than endure the suffering and witness the cruelty. I was a coward but at least I knew it. There was comfort in that acceptance—in case of apocalypse, break glass.

Can I live through the end of American government, I silently ask myself. The jury is out. I wonder when I’ll need an answer. Everything has happened so incrementally, this acceptance of white supremacy, xenophobia, totalitarianism, this Pumpkin Hitler. There is no winning, even

if I wake up from a Xanax-induced coma on November 9<sup>th</sup> and my phone screen is filled with soft shades of blue. His legion remains. A flutter with implosion awaits every fourth year from now until my eternity.



We wait to leave on the ass-end of the casino. Defeated fans in LA Kings jerseys chain-smoke and wait for Uber rides. A whole SuperShuttle bus loops around to pick up only the two of us to an airport that will be so empty, the TSA takes the time to unpack all the souvenir soaps in my carry-on.

The driver turns away from the lights onto Paradise Road, past a string of mobile unit hiring centers, an abandoned nightclub and a shuttered auto dealership. The bus TV screen runs down everything we didn't do: Chippendales, indoor skydiving, the Atomic Testing Museum.

“You two voting for Trump?” the driver asks from nowhere.

I slip on my sunglasses even though it's dusk. I don't have the energy to police my expression. “I'd sooner die,” I tell him.

“He sure beats the alternative though, ya know?” He continues. “At least you know what you’re getting into with a businessman. Not a liar.”

I wonder how long I can stretch out the last few hundred dollars in our bank account, if they’d give us a higher credit limit, if we could stay hidden in the blinding shadows of Treasure Island for the rest of the month. I wonder how long the gold will glisten after this is all over. How much time will pass before the sand carves the glass and cement into phantoms of what we once used to be.

I turn my headphones on. I wait.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tabitha Blankenbiller is a graduate of the Pacific University MFA program, currently living outside of Portland, Oregon. Her essays have appeared in a number of journals including *Barrelhouse*, *Hobart*, *The Establishment*, *The Rumpus*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, and *Brevity*.

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