

Pumpkin Spice and Everything Fright

In the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of Rayburn, Kansas, August 1 dawned steaming hot and pumpkin-spiced. At least, that's how the folks at "Brother's Best Creamery" advertised their seasonal return: *Pumpkin Spice Pandemonium! Beginning August 1!* Across the street, "Brother's Best Funeral Home" maintained a more somber air, but even their marquee felt compelled to get with the times: *Ask About Our Pumpkin Spice Memorial Packages.*

Long ago, the founding brothers—Earl and Melvin Klabough—had parted ways over a card game and a woman, but neither ever strayed far: both built their empires on Maple Street, insisted on the same name "for brand recognition," and never spoke again, except through icy glares at the annual Pumpkin Festival. But only a few years ago, most townsfolk thought this was hilarious, so no one blinked when "PUMPKIN SPICE" became the flavor of the month on both sides of Main Street.

When the brothers' rivalry first took root, the annual Pumpkin Spice Saturnalia in Rayburn was a modest affair, sensibly confined to the fortnight before Thanksgiving. But as any student of human folly—or small-town politics—knows, rivalries escalate with the inevitability of autumn leaves. Each year, festivities crept earlier. By the late 1990s, Pumpkin Spice madness had overrun Labor Day, and a cabal of forward-thinking shopkeepers sounded the alarm before the town council: "You can't buy Independence Day hot dogs in March!" they objected, voices echoing off the linoleum. "Back-to-School sales can't start before the old school year's final bell has even rung!"

"August 1st," they declared. "No further—hold the line!"

The council, whose sense of restraint was inversely proportional to the councilman's tenure, agreed in a rare moment of communal lucidity. Thus, Rayburn became the only town in Kansas to impose a legal start date on the cinnamon and nutmeg Bacchanalia. With the passing decades, the August 1 kickoff came to seem stodgy—anachronistic, even. Yet paradoxically, in holding back the flood, Rayburn became the grand finale: the last, largest stop on the Pumpkin Spice pilgrim's trail, where fervent devotees gathered to await the ceremonial release of fall.

The trouble began with delivery. Timmy Pohl, summer help with the town's only forklift, was fully absorbed in that summer's salacious best seller, *Fifty Shades of Deterrence*, by "H.K." (A fact that scandalized the local library board and led Miss Cartwright, Rayburn's longest-serving librarian, to note it was "the most checked-out and least-understood book of the year.") Timmy barely noticed the labels: pumpkin, spice, Brother's Best—onto the dolly, no problem. As a result, twelve kegs of industrial embalming fluid wound up in the freezers at the creamery that Thursday morning, and twelve giant plastic tubs of sickly sweet ice cream base rolled, sweating, into the mortuary's prep room.

By noon, Rayburn was lined up out the door for the season's first scoop of Pumpkin Spice. Children giggled, mothers exchanged polite gossip, and even gruff old men softened under the onslaught of what one newspaper inexplicably dubbed "*autumnal euphoria in frozen form.*" Within minutes, however,

confusion set in. Faces tingled, eyes watered, and a peculiar coldness seeped through the crowd, indecipherable (thanks to Midwestern politeness) from ordinary air-conditioning discomfort.

Soon came the complaints: “Does your tongue feel... rubbery?” “Honey, is that formaldehyde?” “My jaw’s locked up. Is that... normal?”

Next door, the funeral staff noted, with delight, that the Pumpkin Spice Memorial packages were *incredibly* lifelike. “I swear these look fresher than at the viewing!” said Melinda Klabaugh, director and daughter of Earl. “Must be that new energizing aroma. The families love it.”

But then came the moaning.

At first, townsfolk thought the groans from Brother’s Best Creamery were simply children on a sugar high. But as more “customers” wheeled out their twitching relatives in supermarket carts, and phones erupted with messages like “Mom needs to see a dentist—her lips are grey,” it became clear the Pumpkin Spice craze had finally jumped the rails. Or, more accurately, had shambled down Maple Street. By dusk, Rayburn’s first Pumpkin Spice Zombies were shambling toward the water tower, sticky orange dribble leaking from their jaws.

The Centers for Disease Control dispatched an agent from St. Louis—where, as every Midwesterner knows, the summer air on the Mississippi can prepare a person for any olfactory assault this side of the grave—and most on the other side, too. Agent Jasper Holcomb, unimpressed by either chaos or clove, arrived wearing his best “Pumpkin Spice Hazmat” suit (bright orange with subtle latte art).

To Holcomb’s mild disappointment, Maple Street was already ringed by the vigilant women of Rayburn’s “Live Green, Die Leafy” society, who had cordoned off the block with a wall of kale smoothies, chia pudding, and experimental vegan casseroles. The zombies, confronted with these defenses, had faltered: several were seen languishing between the beet-ginger shots and the gluten-free flax muffins, unable to muster the will to nibble so much as a single frisée leaf. It was, observed Holcomb with clinical detachment, “the most decisive public health victory kale has ever achieved, and likely the last.”

Holcomb pronounced the outbreak “spice-based—a tragic consequence of unchecked brand synergy and speculative embalming practices.” After a contemplative sniff, he added, “Compared to the river on the Fourth of July, this is practically wholesome.”

Then, peeling off his “hazmat” suit and producing a hip flask from his jacket, Holcomb declined the proffered green concoctions with a sideways glance. “Non-alcoholic drink?” he said, unscrewing the cap. “I never touch the stuff.”

National news was quick to pounce on the absurdity, dubbing it *The PSL Outbreak* (Pumpkin Spice Living-dead). Marketers seized the opportunity, releasing limited-edition “Undying Gourd!” energy shots and screen-printed, ironically bloodstained tees: *I Survived Pumpkin Spiceageddon, Rayburn*.

The zombies proved only slightly more animated than the town's regulars after Thanksgiving dinner. Most were placated with hefty scoops of pure vanilla, and the few who remained hostile were distracted with heavy dashes of nutmeg in the local bingo parlor. When all was said and done, most returned to normal, save for an unshakable urge for turtlenecks, yoga pants, and atmospheric coffee shops.

The Klabaugh brothers, reunited to face the lawyers together, at last shared a rueful laugh in the shadow of the Pumpkin Festival marquee. Said Melvin: "Well, Earl, at least our legacy is sweeter than we intended." To which Earl replied: "Depends on your definition of sweet, brother. Cremation costs are up, and nobody can get the smell of cloves out of their hair."

And that is why Rayburn now celebrates August 1st with a Toasted Marshmallow Festival—a day when the only things rising from the ground are sticky campfire treats, mercifully free of seasonal spices. Which brings me, members of the committee, to the matter at hand: I propose for your consideration House Bill 237—The Pumpkin Spice Regulatory and Civil Defense Act. Under its provisions, no flavor, scent, garnish, or decorative motif containing more than 0.05% cinnamon or nutmeg by volume may appear in any retail establishment prior to August 1st. Violators will be subject to summary confiscation of latte art and mandatory remedial Thanksgiving re-education.

Let Rayburn's suffering not be in vain. Hold the line!