

Chapter Eleven

Ironhead

2005 / AIMEE BENDER

For the record, everything new is not worse than everything old.

Parents with heads made from -pumpkins have a habby with a head made from iron. I have, for what I assume will be very obvious reasons, been thinking about this one a lot lately.

—A.J.F.

P.S. I also find myself thinking of "Bullet in the Brain" by Tobias Wolff. You might give that a read, too.

The pumpkinhead couple got married. They had been dating for many years and by now she was impatient. "I'm getting cooked," she told him, and she took his hand up her neck to the inside of her head so he could feel the warmth of the flesh there, how it was growing soft and meaty with time; he reeled from both burden and arousal. Taking her hand, they walked over to the big soft bed and while he unbuttoned her dress, he thought about what she was asking for and thought it was something he could give her. He slipped his belt out of the loops and the waist of his pants sighed and fell open. When the pumpkinheads had sex, it was at a slight angle so that their heads would not bump.

They had a big wedding with a live jazz band, and she gave birth to two children in the span of four years, each with its own small pumpkinhead, aluminous moon of pumpkin, one more yellowish, one a deep dark orange. The pumpkinhead mother became pregnant with her third child in the seventh year, and walked around the house rubbing her belly, particularly the part that bulged more than the rest. At the hospital, on birth day, the nurses swaddled the baby in a blanket and presented him to her proudly, but she drew in her breath so fast that the pumpkinhead father, in the waiting room watching basketball, heard through the door. "What is it?" he said, peeking in.

She raised her elbow which cradled the blanket. The third child's head was made of an iron.

It was a silver model with a black plastic handle and when he cried, as he was crying right now, steam sifted up from his shoulders in measured puffs. His head was larger than the average iron and pointed at the tip.

The father stood by his wife and the mother adjusted the point so that it did not poke her breast. "Hello there, little ironhead," she said.

The siblings came running in from the waiting room, following their father, and one burst out

laughing and one had nightmares for the rest of her childhood.

The ironhead turned out to be a very gentle boy. He played quietly on his own in the daytime with clay and dirt, and contrary to expectations, he preferred wearing ragged messy clothes with wrinkles. His mother tried once to smooth down his outfits with her own, separated iron, but when the child saw what was his head, standing by itself, with steam exhaling from the flat silver base just like his breath, he shrieked a tinny scream and matching steam streamed from his chin as it did when he was particularly upset. The pumpkinhead mother quickly put the iron away; she understood; she imagined it was much the way she felt when one of her humanhead friends offered her a piece of seasonal pie on Thanksgiving.

"Next year," she told her husband that November, "I am going to host Thanksgiving myself and instead of a turkey I'm serving a big human butt."

Her husband was removing his socks one by one, sitting on the edge of the bed, rolling them into a ball.

"And for dessert," continued his wife, stretching out on the comforter, "we will have cheesecake from brains and of course ladyfingers and-" She started laughing then at herself, uproariously; she had a great loud laugh.

Once undressed, her husband lay his head flat on her stomach and she held the wideness of his skull in her hands and smoothed the individual orange panels.

"I think our son is lonely," she said.

They made love on the bed, in a quiet relaxed tangle, then threw on bathrobes and went to check on their children. The two girl pumpkinheads were asleep, one making gurgling dream noises, the other twitching. They shook the second gently until her nightmare switched tracks and she calmed. Shutting the door quietly behind them, the parents held hands in the peace of the hallway, but when they stepped into the ironhead's room, they found him wide awake, smoothing his pillowcase with his jaw.

"Gan'tyou sleep, honey?" asked his mother. He shook his head. He had no eyes to look into, but the loll of his neck and the throw of his small body let them know he was upset. They sat beside him and told a story about zebras and licorice. He tucked his head agreeably on the pillow and listened the whole time, but his parents tired before he did and tiptoed out of the room, figuring he was asleep. No. He never slept, not because he didn't want to but simply because he couldn't, he didn't know how. He spent a few more hours staring at the wall, feeling the sharp metal of his nose, breathing out clouds into the cramped sky of his bedroom. Around three in the morning, he read a picture book. At five, he snuck to the kitchen and had a snack of milk and cookies. He felt very very tired for four years old.

At school, the ironhead made no friends because he was expected to be a tough guy due to the sharpness of that metal point, but he was no tough guy and preferred the sandbox to the grass field. He

filled buckets with sand and then submerged them in sand. One afternoon, tired of being teased by the seas of children with human heads and his sisters who escaped ridicule by being the best at every sport, he left the playground by himself and went for a walk. He walked past the residential area of town, with the friendly rickety houses and their green-yellow lawns and an occasional free-standing mailbox in the shape of a cow or a horse. He walked past the milkman, whose arms were full with glass bottles of frothy white, all set to be delivered, and who laughed at the iron-head, which just made steam rise from the boy's neck. He walked until he reached a big field, one he'd never seen before. Beyond it was a building. Glancing around, the ironhead crossed the field, lifting his little legs high to clear the tall patches of weeds, and the air was shifting smell now, it smelled bigger than the town did, pollen riding on wide open space, immigrant seedlings.

When he reached the building he saw that it was an appliance shop. COME ON IN! it said on a sign in the window, so he reached high and opened the glass door and entered. This wasn't a large store, but it was the largest he had ever seen, bright white with fluorescent light like the inside of a tooth. He walked down the four aisles slowly, hands in his pockets, passing blenders and sewing machines and vacuums and toasters. Finally he came across the assortment of irons in the middle of aisle three, and here he stopped. There were four or five different styles, some in boxes with photos on them, some freestanding, chin up. He settled himself down across from the irons and looked up at them. He imagined it was a family reunion. Hello, everybody. Nice to see you. He greeted his aunt, his uncle, his cousins. Reaching out, he took the boxes from the shelves one by one and set them in a semicircle around him. They were silent and price tagged and cold company. The ironhead sat there all day long, from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon, breathing a slow hush of steam, and no one in the store even talked to him. Finally the cashier's boss entered, and when he found out how long the ironhead had been there, he called the police. "This is not a public park," he said. "We are trying, after all, to make some money here." In ten minutes, the cop car pulled up, and the two policemen walked over to the ironhead sitting quietly in aisle three trying to take that ever-elusive nap. One cop laughed out loud and the other pretended to pull out his gun in fake terror. "You never know what you're going to see in this podunk town," the laughing one said. "Got any wrinkles on your shirt there, mac?" His partner smirked. The ironhead leaned down and put his head on the white tile so that the boxes of irons rose over him like buildings.

The cashier, who was not unkind, put in a call to the iron-head's worried parents; they drove right on over, hurried in, hugged their son close. One of the policemen cracked a Halloween joke which made the mother livid but she was more concerned when she saw the half-moon of irons around her son's head; she asked him what it meant on the drive home but he just shook his head, snuggling against her warm hip. That night, he lay in bed awake again, for the thousandth night of insomnia, listening to the sounds of his sisters and parents sleeping in the next rooms, which was the most lonesome sound in the world, and by morning was so exhausted, down to the root of his

bone, that he begged to stay home from school. Because she loved him dearly, almost more so because he had been a complete and utter surprise, his mother gave him a good lunch of hot dogs and potato chips and chili and milk, set him in front of the TV with a blanket, and left for work herself.

When she came home at five, her ironhead was dead. He was in front of the TV with his ironhead turned toward the sofa, away from the screen, and when he didn't respond to her inquiries, she went to check on him, listening for his breath in its small steamy gasps, and she heard nothing coming out of him at all. She was so used to the slow steady hushed sound of his breathing that it was only the abrupt silence of him that convinced her he wasn't there anymore. She crumpled by his side and held him close and cried and cried and when the little girls came home from soccer practice they didn't know what to do and couldn't stand to watch their mother crying like that and so they got mad at each other and screamed and kicked on the front lawn. The mother held her little ironhead close and his body felt cool and distant. She stroked down the plastic handle and when her husband came home she nearly fell against him.

The doctor who came by that night to state the cause of death said that the ironhead had died of utter exhaustion, that it had nothing to do with the chili or the journey across the field or the iron in boxes or the laughing policemen. He weighed the iron and said that the weight of it was completely out of proportion with the rest of the body, and that it was frankly incredible that the boy had lived at all, carrying a head like that around all day. "This is rock-solid iron, and you can imagine-" he declared. The mother stood still as a stone; the father nodded slowly. The doctor didn't finish his sentence, and bowed his head in the face of their grief. The pumpkinhead family buried the ironhead in the cemetery which was only a few blocks away, and at the funeral, children from the school filled buckets with dirt and then submerged them in dirt. A few well-meaning but thoughtless types brought irons to put on his grave, but the mother, her body taut and loosening at the same time, flung them as far away as she could, flying irons, until they crashed among the trees, shading boat-shaped imprints into the earth. One thrifty mourner secretly collected them and took them with her and sold them for half price back to the appliance shop where they crowded the aisle, chins up. The pumpkinhead family sat together at the cemetery and the mother kept uncovering dishes of warm food so she could release steam on his grave, because she wanted to give him voice, to give him breath again.

For many weeks, all they ate were the casseroles brought by the neighbors. When they ran out of those, the mother went into the kitchen, gathered ingredients, and made spaghetti. She was slow and heaved, but she did it, and the family ate together that night: four. While she cut the mushrooms, she cried more than she had at the grave, the most so far, because she found the saddest thing of all to be the simple truth of her capacity to move on.

Thirty years later when the girls were having their own children, they had mostly pumpkinheads, but the recessive gene did rear its head once more and the second daughter's third child emerged with the head of a teapot. This seemed less difficult to live with than a pointy heavy head of iron and the

teapothead child did just fine, made many friends, and slept without trouble. She breathed steam just like her uncle had, and so they sometimes called her ironhead as a pet name even though it didn't fit. She was very good at soccer. The mother and father pumpkinhead still visited the cemetery regularly and sat there with their backs against the dates of their child's birth and death and the mother said, "I can feel my head softening," and the father said, "My shoulders are shrinking and my knuckles are growing," and they sat with their heads orange globes against the gray stone and green grass and after a few hours walked home together.

