

Summer Squash  
by Isaac Ryals

“Ellis,” Matthew said breathlessly outside the screen door. “Another one got in.”

Ellis allowed herself a sigh and wiped her hands on her apron. “Alright,” she said. “Just the one?” She untied the apron – stained tan with work, but it wasn’t like they could spare the bleach to brighten it again – and hung it from its hook in the kitchen. Sunlight streamed through the window and turned the floating dust motes golden. Compared to the fiery gold in the sunbeam, the rest of the house looked dim and dingy. It hadn’t been illuminated in five long years.

Matthew swung the screen door open on well-oiled hinges. “Just the one. It’s in the—”

“Don’t you think about taking a step inside this house in those dirty boots,” Ellis snapped at the boy. “It just rained yesterday. You can wait on the porch, unless it gets closer.”

She trudged to the bedroom to get Stanley’s gun. She couldn’t think of it as her gun – not with Stanley’s name still carved into the stock. It stood in the corner against the wall, close enough that she could reach it while still in bed. It was already loaded.

Stanley would have a cow if he saw that: loaded gun, sitting out where just anyone could get to it. She could hear his voice in her head now, the rounded, too-loud words a well-trodden path in her mind: *‘How would you feel if a hooligan breaks in? Shoots ya with our own gun? Won’t you feel a fool then?’*

Ellis couldn’t remember the last time she saw another *person* alive, let alone a hooligan. The gun had only ever been for shooting prairie dogs anyway.

She clicked her tongue as she emerged from the bedroom. Matthew still stood anxiously by the door. He kept glancing out into the yard.

Ellis set the gun down by the screen door and ruefully pulled her own boots on. *Wouldn’t it be nice if prairie dogs were still the only things to worry about? At least those little shits stop at killing the garden.*

“How far did it get?” she asked evenly as she hoisted the gun in her arms. It seemed to get heavier every time she used it. She really should let Matthew do this. He

needed to learn sometime. But not yet. Not while she was still strong enough to carry it. Not-yet-seventy wasn't too old, not by a long shot, and Matthew was far too young. Thirteen? Fourteen? She realized she didn't immediately know.

His eyes were wide as he held the screen door open for her. "It's... it's in the summer squash patch," he said. "It's going absolutely crazy. It's eating... it's getting all the summer squash."

"Alright then," Ellis said with a nod. "You stay here. If you see more, you know what to do?"

"Run to the cellar to hide," Matthew whispered. "Bolt the door. Wait until you get back."

Ellis smiled gently. He was a good boy. He had time to learn how to do all of this, but not yet. Not while she could still carry the burden for both of them.

"Alright." She stepped out the door and into the yard. "You stay here. I'll be back in a moment."

Herbs brushed her legs as she picked her way through the garden planted just outside the door. The sweet scents of rosemary, oregano, and mint wafted up to her. She pursed her lips; the basil was starting to bolt. It was a hot summer. Nothing had been growing the way it should, and plant after plant had wilted from lack of water or gone to seed no matter how carefully she and Matthew pruned. Once she was done with this barbarous chore, she would have to try and save the basil. Better lose the basil, though, than something that would actually feed them through the winter.

Like the squash. Like the damned squash.

*Damn these damned creatures.*

She rounded the corner of the house and headed for the summer squash patch. It was tucked behind their tiny corn field, just big enough to feed the two of them plus their chickens. The acres and acres of fields beyond lay dead – or they had started that way, at the beginning of all this. The corn had rotted in the fields, sending up a stink that had seeped into the house, into their clothes, into their skin, and it hadn't gone away even after they bathed. Five years later, grass now grew from the offal. Tiny trees sent up their shoots with shivering green leaves. In twenty years, it might look like the

cornfields were never here at all. In a hundred, maybe the farmhouse would cave in on itself too, and Ellis's home would eventually turn to dust.

She could hear the thing.

Its inhuman, twisted voice roared into the noiseless air, punctuated by rustling silences. Ellis knew those silences indicated summer squash disappearing into the creature's ravenous maw. Her hands tightened around the shotgun. She had left disgust behind years ago. She had left fear behind, too. All she felt now was exhaustion, with room only for a single, perturbed thought: this would cost her a shotgun shell.

She wound her way through the uneven rows of corn. Stanley would probably have despaired at that as well. Ellis couldn't use Stanley's planter for the little plot she shared with Matthew; she had used all the gasoline they had to drive into town the time Matthew had tripped on a rake and gashed his hand on a rock. The pharmacy was mostly looted, but she had found two bottles of antibiotics under the piles of broken glass and antacids. She considered it a fair trade: Matthew's life for a few uneven rows of corn.

As she cleared the corn, she saw how the creature had gotten in. She and Matthew had strung up a barbed wire fence around the entire, shrunken homestead a year ago; one of the posts lay on its side, torn right out of the ground made soft by recent rain. Ellis cursed herself. *We'll have to check the entire fence.*

A flurry of movement drew her eyes on the damned creature that was tearing its way through her squash patch. She stiffened and nearly dropped the shotgun.

The creature was on its hands and knees with its back to her, but she recognized the back of its head immediately. Even with the hair grown out longer than she had ever seen it – outside of one picture from high-school – she recognized the bald spot at the crown. She recognized the blue shirt it wore, with the collar that had never laid flat, no matter how many times she ironed it. And, even wordless, even twisted and mindless, she recognized the booming voice, round at the edges, because the man never did listen to her and see that doctor about getting his hearing checked.

He never listened to her. He didn't listen to her when she begged him not to go out when the world was ending five years ago. *'Let me take the truck and get us some things,'* he had said. *'Then we'll go to your sister's. I promise.'*

He never goddamn listened.

She was rooted to the spot. The steel of the shotgun had turned to ice in her hands. She couldn't have dropped it if she wanted to. Half the squash patch was already gone, but she just stared fixedly at the back of her husband's head.

As she watched, he reached out with hands smeared yellow with squash. He yanked another fruit right off the vine and ripped into it. His teeth tore through the outer skin. As he ate, he groaned, rocked, swallowed so loudly Ellis could hear it from fifteen feet away.

She side-stepped. She just needed to see his face. He finished another squash and bent his body to begin eating the rest of the plant, leaf and stem.

*We have so much squash canned. Besides, it grows fast. We have time to grow another harvest before the season ends.*

He finished eating the plant and reached for another squash. Before he sank his teeth in, he let out a snarl.

Ellis swallowed. He always did like her squash recipes. Stuffed squash, squash soup, squash baked with cheese, her secret-recipe summer squash lemon cake that she made every fall... maybe this was a sign. He hadn't broken in and eaten the corn, after all, and corn had been *his* crop. He hadn't gone after the chickens. He hadn't gone after Matthew, and Matthew was a stranger in his house. He had gone after the squash.

Stanley finished that squash and began another. He shoved squash fruit, leaves, and vines into his mouth. He ate voraciously, like he was starving. Ellis crept closer. She could see his profile now. She could see one of his eyes.

It was fully black, like it was with all of them, glistening and opaque. Back when the radios were still working, the scientists said it was because the virus caused vessels to burst in the eyes, and then the blood congealed and turned black like a bruise. People at church – when there still was a church to go to – said it was because the creatures were demons.

Seeing Stanley so close, all Ellis could think was: *it looks like a deer's eye.*

He began eating another squash. When he was finished with that, he ate another. His stomach was distended. He kept eating.

Ellis watched him silently. If she could keep him fed, there was no reason she couldn't take him back to the house, was there? He belonged there. She hadn't removed a single picture of him from the walls: pictures of him on their wedding day, him on his tractor, him in front of his grill, him on their honeymoon to Greece a full fifteen years after they'd gotten married. *'Give me a honeymoon,'* she had begged him. *'We aren't having babies. Please give me my trip to Greece before we're too old.'*

Hordes of these creatures were dangerous, she knew. She'd *seen* it. But just one? As long as she kept him fed, couldn't they stay together? Couldn't she get him back? Matthew might take some convincing, but wasn't this a sign?

Hadn't he come back for her? Hadn't he come back home for a reason?

He ate another squash. Most of the patch was gone.

*Matthew can hunt rabbits,* Ellis thought. *He can learn. Or prairie dogs. God knows we've got those in spades. We won't starve this winter, I'll make sure of it. We can go without this.*

Stanley finished another squash, and started in on yet another.

*He came back for my squash.* Tears stung Ellis's eyes. *He came back for me.*

Stanley finished consuming that squash plant and fumbled around in the churned earth. It gave under his hands. He let out a roar and spun clumsily on his hands and knees, looking for the next thing he could eat.

Ellis felt the cold finger of dread sweep up the back of her neck as Stanley's black eyes landed on her. She waited for that flash of recognition, for his face to change shape, for his mouth to curve into a smile. Instead, yellow pulp dripped from a lip that curled to reveal broken teeth. The front of his shirt was stained – not with summer squash, but with dried black gore.

His eyes were not the liquid black eyes of a deer. They were the dull black eyes of a shark.

He snapped his teeth at her and staggered to his feet, far faster than someone who felt all the pains of his age should have been able to. His mouth pulled wide in a deafening scream as he charged her. She swung the rifle up, aimed it at his chest, and pulled the trigger.

The first blast threw him back, but did not kill him. A high, keening wail tore from him as he flailed in the soft black earth. Tears poured down her face as she went to his side. Still, his face held no recognition. It held only the agonized terror of an injured animal about to be euthanized.

She looked away as she shot him a second time. She stared at the destroyed patch of summer squash. Only one plant remained, its stem bent and nearly broken from the creature's trampling. She drew her sleeve over her face as she inspected the fragile plant.

It would probably survive. She thanked her lucky stars that she had more seeds stored away, and prayed they had enough time to bring up another crop before the frosts. Even this one plant would yield enough fruit to get them through a few weeks, at least.

She hoped. She hoped it was enough.

She skirted her husband's body and lifted the gun to her shoulder as she turned and made her way back to the house. When she cleared the corn, she could see Matthew's face pressed against the window. She bent her head and checked the angle of the sun in the sky. Matthew dashed toward the back door to meet her. When he pushed the door open, she saw he had placed his boots on the mat beside the entryway.

"Everything alright?" he said, checking her over. "I heard two shots. I was... I thought there might be more than—"

"No, just the one." There was a photograph of her and Stanley hanging on the wall facing the back door. If she raised her eyes, she would see it. She stared at the worn planks of the porch.

Matthew shuffled his feet. "...I'm glad."

The world was going blurry. Ellis quickly blinked her tears away. "Well, put your boots on. It came through the fence, got most of the squash. We'll need to repair at least the fence before the end of the day. We'll do the rest... later."

The boy nodded as he pulled on his boots. "I'll look around and see if we have enough wood stockpiled to the burn the—"

“No,” Ellis said. “Not this one.” She didn’t glance up, couldn’t raise her gaze to look into the house filled with her and Stanley’s things. “Now come on. We’ve got a lot of work to do before the sun goes down.”