

## MR. RUNKLE'S PUMPKIN

By Betse Brydon

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MR. RUNKLE stroked his trim beard, speckled brown and white like the breast of a sparrow. "Neat and tidy, neat and tidy," he murmured, looking out at his garden. Not a weed in sight. Not a bug hiding anywhere. The corn marched in orderly rows; the beans, straight as the jars of food lining his pantry shelves (in alphabetical order). And the pumpkins! Training the wandering green vines had been a difficult task, but now they grew in a beeline toward the fence.

"Neat and tidy," he said again, picking up his copy of the Stonylake Annual Fair book. He opened it to the vegetable section and began marking his entries. But he couldn't concentrate on filling out the form. Something nagged at the back of his mind. Something about the fence.

Mr. Runkle frowned and looked at the fence that separated his garden from the one next-door. Some sort of yellow, weedy thing nodded its ragged head at him from the other side. The lemony spot marred the evenness of fence and sky. Mr. Runkle reached past the can of bug spray for the pruning shears. Standing on a handy crate, he prepared to snip the bold bloom.

"Don't you dare!" On the other side of the fence stood a tiny woman with sparkling eyes. Bits of leaves clung to her wispy, mouse-colored hair escaping from under her battered straw hat. She shook her garden trowel at Mr. Runkle. Lumps of mud flew about wildly.

"You leave my pretty flowers alone, do you hear?" She tried to look stern, but failed with a smile.

Mr. Runkle sniffed. "Miss Appleby, your garden is a mess. There is no order to it, no order at all. There are weeds and bugs everywhere. It is a disgrace!"

Miss Appleby wiped her hands on her apron, bright with blue and green roses. She looked around her garden, as though seeing it for the first time.

“These ‘weeds,’ as you call them, are beautiful flowers. The ‘bugs’ are dancing butterflies and bees gathering pollen. In the evenings I can sit on my porch and watch the fireflies light up. I can hear the crickets chirp and smell the perfume from those ‘weeds.’ Weeds indeed!”

Mr. Runkle sniffed and rolled his eyes. “Please try and keep YOUR garden on YOUR side of the fence, Miss Appleby.”

He turned sharply and paraded away. Miss Appleby sighed and shook her head.

As Mr. Runkle entered his small, spotless house with relief, he thought with a shudder of the hopeless disarray in the cottage next-door. Books with leaves sticking out, old newspapers stuffed in couch cushions, a brown apple core in a stained teacup and dust everywhere. He had only been in Miss Appleby’s house once, but he would never forget it.

“Disgraceful. Inside and out,” he said aloud and whisked away a few specks of dust. Then he carefully locked the door behind him and marched down the sidewalk toward town.

As he passed Miss Appleby’s house, he quickly glanced into her garden.

“I wonder what new weeds are growing there today.” Mr. Runkle peered through the shrubbery. With a surprised snort, he halted in midstep, his eyes bulging.

Birds sang in the trees. Butterflies hovered over a jungle of rainbow-colored flowers. Insects buzzed and hummed. The sweet scent and the bright colors reminded Mr. Runkle of the sugary cereal section in the grocery store. But what stopped him so abruptly was the sight of a huge pumpkin. An ENORMOUS pumpkin.

“What. . . How. . .,” he sputtered. “How did she do it?” He thought of the small, unimportant pumpkin growing neatly in his own garden.

“I don’t understand it. My pumpkin should be much bigger.” He went on to town where he filled a shopping bag at the Stonylake Garden Center with spray cans and boxes.

The next day Mr. Runkle carefully poured fertilizer over the pumpkin’s roots. He sprayed it with Bugnot. He pulled all the tiny weeds. He straightened a few stray leaves. Day after day he tended his pumpkin. On the other side of the fence, Miss Appleby’s

pumpkin thrived on what seemed to be neglect. It smothered weeds and flowers alike. It provided shade for chipmunks and a seat for Miss Appleby. It grew and grew until it was bigger than a beach ball, bigger than a TV set. Mr. Runkle stopped looking. His pumpkin, like an orange and green-streaked volleyball, lost a few leaves.

The day of the Stonylake Annual Fair arrived at last. Mr. Runkle gathered his straightest carrots, his roundest red tomatoes, and the most perfect of his other well-trained vegetables. He packed them carefully in shiny wire baskets and walked sadly to the fairgrounds, leaving his pumpkin behind.

Flags fluttered in the breeze; children laughed and shrieked. Mr. Runkle trudged through the dust. The smell of popcorn and caged animals filled the air. After leaving his vegetables at the judging tent, Mr. Runkle strolled around stiffly, looking at the exhibits. Between a display of lawn tractors and a booth selling hot dogs on a stick, he caught sight of Miss Appleby struggling up the hill to the judging tent. She was pushing her gigantic pumpkin in a wheelbarrow, her face red as a beet.

Mr. Runkle sniffed and looked the other way. Why should I help her, he thought. She's going to win anyway.

The next day Mr. Runkle hurried to the fairgrounds. Passing Miss Appleby's gate, he saw her locking her door. Mr. Runkle walked faster. Miss Appleby overtook him at the corner.

"Going to the fair?" she asked, smiling sweetly at him. "Mind if I walk with you?"

"If you like," he answered, walking so briskly that Miss Appleby had to trot to keep up.

"I'm sure all your nice vegetables won prizes," she said, panting a little.

Mr. Runkle sniffed.

As they entered the vegetable tent, Miss Appleby took his arm, preventing him from making a polite escape.

"Look!" she exclaimed in front of the carrot table. "You have a red ribbon on your carrots."

"Second prize." He scowled. "They weren't straight enough."

His tomatoes and corn wore blue ribbons. First prize, Mr. Runkle sniffed smugly. The pumpkins, piled high on a table, were next. The largest pumpkin, Miss Appleby's, was adorned with a blue ribbon. Beside it stood a silver trophy for Best-of-Show.

“Congratulations, Miss Appleby,” Mr. Runkle said curtly. He started to move to the next exhibit.

“Wait.” Miss Appleby grabbed Mr. Runkle’s arm. “Look at the pumpkin.”

Mr. Runkle glanced at it again, rolling his eyes. Then he stared at it, almost choking on a disdainful sniff. He turned to Miss Appleby, his mouth opening and shutting like a fish.

“I don’t understand,” he said finally. “It has my name on it.”

“It’s your pumpkin,” said Miss Appleby. “The vine escaped through a crack in the fence. I just left it alone. You did all the work.”

“But I was so rude to you. Why didn’t you just cut the vine off?”

“I like to let nature take its own course. And look how it turned out,” she said, pointing to the prizewinning pumpkin.

On the walk home, Mr. Runkle stopped in the Stonylake Garden Center and bought a book on flowers.

“I was thinking of putting in a few marigolds,” he explained to Miss Appleby with a small sniff, “just to keep the vegetables company.”