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800 words

Leaf

But, lo! after the beating rain and fierce gusts of wind that had endured through the livelong night, there yet stood out against the brick wall one ivy leaf.

O. Henry, *The Last Leaf*

The fierce storm had run its course by morning. Scores of leaves now lay scattered on the ground in a thick pile of reds, oranges and yellows. Only one remained attached to the old maple tree.

Leaf clung to the tree's highest branch, stem battered but intact.

The fallen leaves started to dry out in the bright sunlight, soon to become thin scraps of dead matter. Some of them, though, still had a bit of spirit left and beckoned Leaf to join them.

"I don't want to jump. I'm comfortable here" replied Leaf. "Plus" she added, "I don't want to turn brown like you." The fallen leaves became silent.

Hours passed. Then the trunk of the ancient maple spoke to its daughter. "Leaf, it's time for you to go."

"I don't want to. If I do, I'll be gone for good, and there will be nothing left of me."

"Not true," replied the maple. I will rest a bit for the winter, recover my strength and then bring forth thousands of new children, all of them just like you."

"Maybe *like* me, but not *me*. I'll be gone and forgotten." The tree turned back in itself and continued to get ready for the winter, seemingly oblivious of its reluctant daughter.

As the day drew on, Leaf's fear swelled. But then, suddenly, the sun trumpeted from above the horizon,

“You won't be forgotten. “I'll remind one and all of who you were and how the drops of dew that gathered on your body cast glittering reflections of my rays and served to greet the day.”

“I don't want others to be reminded of who I was or what I did,” Leaf protested against the sun's empty promises. “Let them sing their own stories, be bathed in your light like I am now.” The sun went on its march and shadows extended over the valley.

At dusk a sudden hush and vast presence filled the forest. Its essence pulsed with an energy that filled every pore. Leaf shivered in fear and awe

“Mother!” greeted Leaf. She needed no intellect to recognize the spirit that animates all living beings.

“Daughter, why do you resist the laws that I have set to govern the world's existence? Hasn't everybody reminded you of your duty?”

“I heard my fallen sisters, and my father the tree, and my friend the sun, but I'm not ready to follow their urgings.”

“Why not?”

“I don't want to go. I'm in love with my past.”

“What do you mean?”

“Joy has filled my every second of this long season, from the early buds on the trunk where I sprouted to the changing of my colors these last days. I have loved the caress of the breeze, the warm embrace of the sun, the nurturing kiss of the rain, the flow of sweet nectars in

and out of my body. I have witnessed the nesting of birds and the trampling feet of furry beasts. I have endured high winds, crashing thunder, and blinding lightning.

“I have been fortunate to experience all of these things and want to continue doing so. I wish to live through what you call winter and be around when the days get longer and the earth warms again.

“Green still lives in my cells. These red and yellow spots will fade and disappear when I rebloom. Please let me stay!”

Infinite sadness enveloped the forest and settled on the core of Leaf’s being.

The unseen Mother spoke again with a soundless voice that resonated through all confines of the world. “What you wish is not possible. Everything has to follow its course. Nothing can be changed. I will, however, grant you a boon. You may, for one last moment, recall and relive all the most cherished instances of your life. Remember and enjoy—and then you must let go.”

Leaf, in dizzying succession, experienced anew the soft touch of the breeze in an early spring morning; the melodic songs of the birds that sheltered in the bough next to her; the warm kiss of the July sun; the startling bright colors of the blooming flowers that filled the meadow; and the overwhelming yet encompassing sense of being united with the universe —

Then it was over.

With a soft whisper that was lost in the evening silence like a secret sigh, her stem twisted and detached itself from the branch.

Under the watchful gaze of the full moon that cast a silvery glow all around her, Leaf fluttered in the air for one last moment of glory and then joined her sisters on the autumn pile.