

The Leaves

By Coco Richter

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The alarm woke Kathryn at seven, rousing her from the warmth and comfort of her bed. She considered burrowing in for the day, maybe even the week. Paul was away, and an enticing stack of books sat on the bedside table. She could do it if she wanted to. There were no clients, school bells or PTA meetings to consider. No one would mind; hell, no one would even notice.

Kicking off the comforter, she climbed out of bed and pulled back the drapes, yards of deep blue silk hanging floor to ceiling over the home's original leaded glass windows. Morning light poured in, shimmering through the frost. She touched the glass, the crystals melting beneath her fingers. Oliver was already out in his yard, meticulously collecting leaves without a rake, just with his hands. It was ridiculously impractical. The Hendersons had massive oak trees that shed hundreds of leaves a day, yet there was Oliver, year after year in the same red fleece jacket, bending over to collect a single leaf – never more than one despite the abundance at his feet - before depositing it in the large leaf sack. At the rate he was going, the bag would only be half-full by first snowfall.

Kathryn followed a stream of sunlight into the bathroom, a gleaming monument to white marble and chrome. She leaned into the mirror, plucking an errant strand of gray that had escaped the dye bottle. A faded pink velour robe hung on the back of the door. She pulled it on, wondering if it was time for a new one. Patches of fabric had worn thin making it resemble something between a flea market find and couture lingerie. She spread a gloss across her lips, puckering in the mirror before deciding that the robe had to go. Now she had something on her agenda besides yoga at ten.

Along the hallway, a wall of silver-framed photographs told the story of their lives. Their three children in all their glory. Nicky, age nine, playing baseball then smiling in his maroon cap and gown at high school graduation; a brace-faced Holly at the violin recital and as a triumphant teenager at the state swim championships; Bobby, the baby, forever in the background, vying for a moment in the spotlight. Further down the hall, he finds it with his guitar, the music awards and the posse of young women surrounding him in a collage of press clippings. At the end of the hall, there's one of Kathryn and Paul skiing in Vermont, Paul's hair now fully gray and hers a shade of brown that doesn't exist in the natural world.

Kathryn wished now that she'd gone with Paul to New York. She hated being alone in the

house. It was big and old and full of hissing and creaking sounds that were endearing when Paul or the children were around but unnerving when they weren't.

She straightened the last picture frame wondering if it was time to begin a new wall. But how could it compete with the other? Maybe when there were grandchildren. Kathryn laughed off the thought because the children, all in their twenties now, weren't even married much less thinking about children. But someday they would be. It would be nice to have children running up and down the stairs again, like it was when hers were young and children streamed in and out of the house. Some mornings, she'd wake to find another six kids camped out in the living room, the shower running all morning as she made breakfast in stages. Bacon and eggs and blueberry pancakes, the smells permeating the house.

She tried to conjure the smell, as though a whiff of it might bring it all back. When it didn't, she headed downstairs, the house strangely silent. Where was the creaking and groaning of the hundred-year old wood? She used to love that, the beacon alerting her to the kids' comings and goings, their feet pounding against the stairs like a stampede of elephants when they'd forgotten to pack something for the day or gingerly touching down when they broke curfew. Houses like

this held all the secrets. That's why she'd never be able to leave it.

In the kitchen, she measured the coffee and set it to brew. She opened the refrigerator to find a paltry selection of foods. A few eggs, some milk and cheese and a loaf of bread. Two people didn't eat much and Paul liked to go out most nights anyways. He reveled in their newfound independence, their ability to go away on a day's notice and eat whatever and whenever they wanted for dinner. It did have its benefits. Family dinners were challenging with Holly now a vegan and Bobby on some sort of macrobiotic diet. And even if they could agree on what to eat, the children were always pressed for time.

She bit back the resentment brewing like the coffee before her. What did she expect? They'd raised their children to be curious and open and to travel and be independent. They wouldn't be coming home for Sunday dinners or to do their laundry as so many of the neighborhood kids seemed to do. Maybe she should have held them closer, tugging back on the leash of life. But she knew that wouldn't have worked. That's not who they were.

She poured the coffee and added the milk. Where was the damn newspaper? She scanned the counters before remembering that Paul wasn't there to bring it in. She tightened her robe around her and slipped on a pair of old loafers sitting by the door. The brass handle

was cold in her hand. She pulled it toward her, cold air rushing in, cutting through her robe. The newspaper wasn't in its normal spot by the door. It lay at the far edge of the yard, nearly on the sidewalk, just across from Oliver's house. As she crossed the damp grass, Oliver waived his arms enthusiastically.

"Hi Mrs. G!" he said.

Kathryn waived back. "Morning Oliver."

"I'm getting an early start today," he said.

"Yes, I can see that."

Leaves drifted toward the ground, one sashaying side to side before landing near Oliver's feet. He stooped down, examining his latest find.

"A new one," he said to her, holding it high.

It was the color of honey and the size of his hand. Oliver put it in the bag and raced to another fresh find, a speckled one in deep burgundy. Kathryn followed Oliver's movements, this ritual lawn maintenance of his. She could still see the gawky teen out there on the lawn when her family first moved on the street, all the other neighborhood children circling around him, peppering him with questions. Can I help? Want me to get my dad's rake? We should get a wheelbarrow! If Oliver was annoyed, he never showed it. He answered their questions and went about his work as the children moved on to foursquare or sidewalk chalk or riding their scooters.

Every leaf seemed to fascinate Oliver. “Mom, look at this one,” he’d say. “It has seven points.” Or, “Mom, you gotta see this one. It’s purple!”

As the children grew older, they assembled in basements to play X-Box or choreograph dance routines, leaving Oliver alone in the yard. She and Paul would pile the children into the Suburban and traipse off to sporting events, music recitals, birthday parties, their calendars brimming with places to be and people to be with. In winter, they’d load all the ski gear into the car and head north to Vermont, and in summer, they’d pack up the boogie boards and beach towels and head south to the Cape, waving as they passed the Hendersons in their yard or on their twice daily walk to town.

“It must be so hard for Judy,” she’d say to Paul, referring to Oliver’s mother.

Kathryn and Judy socialized periodically, meeting for coffee in town a few times each year. They’d make small talk about their lives, Kathryn never quite able to ask her friend what it was like or how it must feel. She knew the particulars, of course. Everyone in town did. Oliver didn’t get enough oxygen at birth. It was as simple as that. A few minutes inattention or a twist of fate that forever changed the course of a family’s life. The Hendersons didn’t have any more children. They didn’t do Little League and themed

birthday parties. They didn't travel. They didn't take up snowboarding in their forties and go windsurfing in their fifties. They stayed home, watching the leaves fall.

"Morning, Mom," Oliver said, his voice several decibels louder than necessary. Judy stepped out on the front porch, her hands circling a coffee mug.

"Hi Ollie. How'd you sleep?" his mother asked.

"Great but I gotta get back to work now," he said. "There are going to be a lot of leaves by this afternoon."

Judy laughed.

"What's so funny?" Oliver asked.

"You Ollie, you're so funny," she said.

Oliver beamed, his feet practically dancing across the lawn as he pursued his next target. Kathryn stood staring, mesmerized by a performance that had been going on for years.

"Morning Kathryn," Judy said. "Ollie, did you see Mrs. G?"

"Yeah, I saw her before," he said, turning to Kathryn. "Hey, Mrs. G, what are you doing outside in your pajamas? You'll catch a cold, silly."

Kathryn's hands were cold, indeed her thin body was chilled to the bone. Everything came into sharp focus. The steam rising from Judy's cup, the dew drops teetering on the blades of grass, the trail of her own breath as she exhaled, the vibrant colors around her, deep

reds and buttery golds. Judy opened her mouth as if to say something. Kathryn waited, her heart beating faster. Gone were the children who'd given form to her life. Now she was just a woman in an old worn robe, understanding that the curse of the perfectly normal is that they grow up, leaving shadows of themselves as they once were.

Judy smiled in a way that said she understood. Kathryn returned the gesture, a communion of spirits forming between them.

"Need some help, Oliver?" Kathryn asked.

"Sure thing, Mrs. G," he said.

She ran into the house and charged up the stairs, the house awakening to her presence. Within seconds, she'd pulled on her jeans and a fleece, bounding back down the stairs and out the front door. The leaves were falling and Oliver could use a hand.