October

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It was almost winter. The trees outside, having turned to magnificent shades of orange and red, were now almost bare—leaving skeletal shadows in the pale light of the gray winter sun. The gently blowing breeze sent the last few leaves still clinging desperately to the trees spiraling gracefully to the ground, littering the sidewalk with various shades of browns. She pulled her coat collar up closer around her neck as the breeze brushed past her, sending its cool air down into her thick coat. The crunch of the leaves under her boots seemed to echo loudly off the houses in the empty street as she made her way toward the edge of town. She had been waiting for this visit all year, and yet, she dreaded going back. Glancing at her watch, she quickened her pace. She had never been late for this yearly meeting, and today would not be the first time. Pulling her glove back over the watch, she stuck her hand back under her arm and continued her solemn walk down the street. Though the trees were bare, they were also beautiful. The leaves created a symphony under her feet, the only music in the cold October air. It was both sad and magical; the first signs of an end.

“Come sit,” he said, gesturing towards the swing. He held the chain of the swing in his hand out to her.

“Are you sure?”

“Would I offer if I wasn’t sure?”

She carefully approached the swing and sat down in its seat. It hugged her wide hips and squeezed at her thighs. He got behind her and, placing his hands firmly on her back, he pushed her forward. She gently swung her legs back and forth with the rhythm of the swing as he pushed her. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. He pushed her higher and higher.

“It’s too high.”

“No, it’s fine, I have you.”

“I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry, I promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

He continued to push her higher and higher into the air. Her hands gripped the chains nervously. She didn’t want to fall all that way to the ground.

“Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Just close them.”

She closed her eyes, still clutching desperately to the chains of the swing.

“It won’t work if you don’t relax.”

She let her shoulders fall. The sensation was like flying. It was a feeling of ultimate peace. After a few minutes, he gradually slowed her down and stopped her. She opened her eyes and slid off the swing in slight embarrassment. He laughed and smiled at her.

“See?”

She hit him on the shoulder and, despite herself, grinned back.

She looked longingly at the park as she passed it. Leaves of varying shades covered the grass of the field in a large, ornate rug. The faint squeak of the rusty chains of the swings could be heard as they swayed in the cool breeze that again stirred past her. It wound its way around her legs, past the trees and moved into the field of leaves. The breeze picked up the leaves as it passed, creating a kaleidoscope of colors, then died, and left the leaves to float once again onto the bed of grass. The sound of laughter could be heard as two small children ran towards the great plain and scattered the leaves gleefully, kicking up great piles as they ran through the field. They then stopped and picked up handfuls and threw them as high into space as they could, spinning with glee as colors rained on them on their way back down to earth. She stopped to watch them for a few moments before glancing at her watch again. She had to hurry and move on, or she would be late for their meeting.

“And after we rake them up, we have to jump in them.”
She paused and leaned on her rake, gazing at him skeptically.

"Why?"

"Because that's what you do. You rake the leaves into a pile and then you jump in them."

"Then you have to rake them up into a pile again."

"Little Miss Logical."

"Hey now! You like being out here raking up leaves when we could be inside drinking cocoa?"

"No, I don't like being out here any more than you do, but if we are going to be out here, we might as well have some fun in the meantime."

She took up her rake and kept raking the leaves into a large pile. They were both silent as they worked. The only sound that was distinguishable was the scratch of the rake on the grass as it swept up the leaves.

"Well, are you going to jump or not?" he asked after a few minutes.

She stopped her work and looked at him.

"It means we have to rake them all into a pile again."

"But it's fun. You know what that means?"

"Yes, I know what fun is."

"Then try having some sometime."

She looked from him to the small mountain a few feet away and back to him. She ran the few steps to the pile, leaped as high as she could, and turned to land on her back amidst a cloud of swirling colors. He laughed and jumped face down next to her, sending more leaves scattering along the freshly raked lawn. They looked at each other and laughed.

"See, now wasn't that fun?"

"Not as much fun as this!" she laughed throwing a handful of leaves in his face.

"So you want a war, eh?" he asked as he pelted her with leaves. They sat up laughing, grabbing leaves by the fistful and putting as much force behind them as possible. Staring at each other in exhaustion, he smiled at her.

"You can't have cocoa until the first snow."

The breeze blew fervently past the trees with a faint whistle in the bare branches. She pulled her coat tighter around her

and listened silently to the soft crunching beneath her boots as she climbed the hill. The smell of wet earth filled her nostrils as the breeze continued to blow past her, wrapping its cold arms around her and sending chills down her spine. Reaching the top of the hill, she turned and observed the path behind her. The hill was not very tall, but everything looked so small somehow—the park with its rusty swings and the children playing in the field, the neighborhood, the school, were barely visible. Her eyes clouded and she turned and moved on slowly down the other side of the hill. Passing through the enormous iron gates, she made her way up a grassy knoll, observing the large barren oak trees as she went. Some of the oaks still had bursts of color, but as she walked past, the leaves broke their connection and spun silently to the ground. She looked away from the trees and continued her trek across the lawn. She soon paused and stared at her feet. There was a small tombstone next to which she squatted. Brushing the dirt, grime and leaves away from the marble rock, she read as she had so many times before the name, followed by birth and death dates (the latter of which was some three years past) and the words that followed: Son, Brother, Friend. She stared contemplatively at the stone for a moment, tears falling from her eyes.

"I know you told me that crying would never bring you back, but there are some times when you need to get a good cry in. Wouldn't you agree?"

She stared sadly at the tombstone and smiled through tears.

"This is for you, a smile through tears—the most beautiful of all. I thought you'd be glad to know I finally learned how to smile."

She paused.

"I'm waiting for the first snow to have cocoa. Just like we used to do. The sad part is, they don't think it will snow this year. Then I won't get my cocoa I guess."

Tears formed and ran like rivers down her already frozen cheeks.

"I promise to come back next year. Maybe then it will be snowing. I know how much you loved the snow."

She turned and stood up, brushing the wet tears from her cheeks with her gloved hand and again pulled her collar up around her neck to keep it warm from the frigid fingers of the
cold October air. Sniffling, she walked back down the knoll and through the gates. Something cold fell down the back of her coat as she passed through and she shivered involuntarily. Looking up at the gray sky, snow began to fall silently around her. Catching the flakes in her eyelashes and letting them fall on her cheeks, she slowly spread her arms, palms up towards the heavens. Closing her eyes, she let herself wade in the wonder of the moment. There was nothing more beautiful, innocent, or pure than the first snow. She brought her head back down, opened her eyes, and faced forward. The landscape had very quickly become pristine and glittery, the brown and gray sidewalk transformed into a sea of white; the breeze that had accompanied her all the way to the cemetery had died. She pulled in her coat more tightly around her and made her way back up the hill. Once again at the top, she stopped and turned, looking back at the final resting place of the man who was both her brother and her friend. The cold once again embraced her as she stared into the distance, snow swirling silently around her. Turning, she made her way down the hill, and disappeared out of sight.