

The Valiant Leaf

A Mind Wander

by Lisa Hering

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Music by Peter Helland, entitled “Thoughtful”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GVgncA9oiw>

later recorded to The Feather Theme in Forrest Gump

It's autumn, and my work is slowing down from the busy summer season. The leaves on the trees are turning beautiful colors, and I know this won't last long. I'm tired from the previous months of steady and long hours, very tired. I'm in need of relaxation, and so I decide to enjoy the outdoors this afternoon and read a book in the hammock outside beneath the large old oak. I set myself down upon the hemp ropes which have been hand knotted into a makeshift bed and I gently rock myself to and fro. I lie there under a shade tree and stare at the sky. I have nothing urgent. I have a moment to rest. I don't need to rush. I'm at my bed-and-breakfast in Galveston and I have no guests scheduled to come in for a while. Business is fine, but exhausting at times. I used to worry and run around and try and do everything myself, and make it perfect. There was never enough time. I wore myself out. Now I've stopped all that nonsense. I can take what business I can gather without becoming a slave to my job. Sometimes one just needs to sit down and take some time out. So, I am doing nothing but swinging in my hammock at the end of a hand-laid brick sidewalk. There is peace and quiet, no one here to interrupt my solitude. It's me and the breeze and the rustling of the leaves on the ground. I think about the leaves, each leaf changing places with other leaves, socializing and gossiping, living the life of leaves. But we must each be who we are. If I try and become a leaf, I wouldn't be good at it. Imagine me, dressed as a leaf, trying to fit it. It just won't work. I'm not a leaf.

Perhaps even the rain and the clouds have lives we know nothing about. But I'm not those either. I can't be anything but what I am. But I am fortunate because I can stop for a moment and admire the lives of others I'm not. I can wonder about them. What would it be like to be a cloud? Do clouds have a busy life? Must they be at a particular storm at a given time? What if they are late? Do they fret? Does the storm have to wait impatiently? Does the cloud get in trouble? Must he become a lower cloud for a day? And what does a raindrop think? Does he fear the long fall from his tormented cloud? Is he afraid of the last step onto the earth? Does he have a journey through the dirt and rocks below, to an underground river where he flows he knows not where? Does he leave his family for this silent journey before he precipitates from the rocks into a spring into a creek, into a river into the sea, into the lungs of a fish and out the gills and beyond?

But I'm not that. I simply swing. I hold a book which recounts the tales of an adventurer to the North Pole. But my own imagination is restless and although I begin reading, by the second line the words are already becoming hazy and my mind is turning elsewhere. It's comforting to have the book, but I don't want to read. I'm surrounded by the sounds of nature, and I prefer to listen to the chirping of the locusts and the birds. A breeze kicks up, and a small, young green leaf, falls to my chest. I examine it intently and come to the conclusion that the leaf and I are both equally a part of nature, neither more important than the other. And what does the leaf think? Does he think we are equals? Does he have hopes and dreams the same as I? Such a pretty leaf it is, with no blemishes or scars, this infant green leaf who has fallen prematurely from his perch on the tree. What shall he do now? At too young of an age has he been severed from his home, possibly by some arch enemy. He is but an orphan cut off and alone in the world. What chance has he? I don't want to read about the adventures to the North Pole right now. I want to know the life of a leaf, and of this leaf in particular.

I wonder, if I wish hard enough, perhaps my story book will become about this leaf and tell me the story I want to know. So I hold the book to my chest and wish very hard upon it that the story which answers the questions in my mind will come to life on the pages of the book. I wish, and then I open the book. Upon the page are the words,

“He wandered restlessly to the North Pole, as fast as the wind could take him.”

Well, that doesn't seem to be about a leaf. It didn't seem to have worked. I'll wish harder this time. I make a grimace as I try to block out all other thoughts and wish only for the story of the leaf. But the book has not changed.

The sun peeks out from behind a cloud, and I place the book upon my forehead to shield my eyes from the rays, and there upon the breeze rocks my hammock just so slightly. For me, it is the feeling of a babe in a cradle. My conscious brain stops thinking and allows my subconscious to take over. I'm somewhere else. I'm near, yet, at the same time, very, very far away. I believe, from time to time, it is good to consider the view of someone else. If we can put ourselves in the place of another, we communicate and bond. Knowledge is power, and in this endeavor, we become wiser, more gracious and compassionate, and perhaps more appreciative of our own lives. But most of all, it allows us to transcend our own limitations and live the lives of many, to understand the perspectives of those whom we are not and will never be, but with whom we share space in this universe. A leaf is surely more than what we often give it credit for. In our haste, we forget its complexity and maturity, and that it is alive, that it is a life. Why would they not have lives as important to them as ours are to us? The thought of becoming the leaf awakens a whole new chapter in my mind. It's a story unto itself, like visiting an alien planet and finding things I never would have otherwise discovered. In my imagination, I can go to all those places and be all those things without leaving my hammock. I can do this all in my own backyard, when I'm resting, when I need some sun and a little breeze in the shadows.

I close my eyes and have the sensation of gently swaying in the breeze. Soon, the feeling becomes stronger and I'm somewhat dizzy and disoriented. It's no longer the back and forth of the hammock, but a downward undulation the way a feather rocks as it heads earthward. I open my eyes and find that I'm indeed drifting down, but ever so gently from the shade tree above me, sashaying from side to side. It's all new to me, and I simply watch to see what will happen next. It is a whole new experience, yet I feel safe and know that this ride will do me no harm.

I see an empty hammock still moving. A book on it is open and the pages flutter in the breeze. Rays of light pierce through the openings in the shade tree and the brick path is adorned with speckled light. The life in the garden is a setting of comfort, quietness, and rest.

The wind settles me to the ground, and then quickly lifts me back up and blows me to the white picket fence, past the garden filled with wild scents of lemon grass and lamb's ear. I greet them as I'm cousin to some. But they are bound to the mother Earth, while I'm a free spirited individual going wherever the wind goes. I have no roots. The wind carries me past them. I blow between the pickets of the fence and make my way to the street where there are cars meandering up and down, people passing, dogs running, and insects finding food and shelter. I go further, as a stowaway in a bicycle basket. I have a front row view as I'm plastered to the back of the basket. We pass street after street, house after house. The girl riding the bicycle is humming a tune. I've never been this far, having spent my entire life up to this point firmly attached to a branch. Many of my friends did not make it. Some were eaten by caterpillars and other leaf demons. A few got sick and could not hold on. I shall miss them. But I'm on a life adventure, and I shall see many wonderful and exciting things I could only dream about back there, upon the grand oak where I was bound.

Then, suddenly, I fly out of the basket. The girl watches me as I pass over her head. She softly says, "Goodbye leaf."

I smile in my leafy way, but she does not see. I fall to the curb where a man is raking his yard. So many individuals just like me, becoming trapped in a row of petrifying metal rake tongs, then forced inside a black plastic bag. I shudder to think what their fate might be. I want to help, but I cannot save them. They are doomed. I must leave, and quickly. I position my right side to the wind like a sail, and with the next breeze I'm lifted up high as the air wraps itself into a small torrent. The man looks up in surprise to see me escaping. I must be more careful. They didn't tell us about the dangers to a leaf while I was back on the grand tree. From my branch, all I could think of was leaving. Maybe I was wrong to purposely sever my own umbilical cord. But now, I can't go back, I can't undo what's been done, nor do I want to. I have tasted the magic of flight and the joy of independence. It is too great an experience to give back. No, I shall bravely continue this life of peril for the sake of having the only experience in life I will ever have the chance to have. I shall learn of birds and people and towns and traffic. I shall fend myself from the dangers of mud puddles and tires and shoes. They shall not capture me. I shall bravely wander the earth. I will be an explorer of legendary acclaim. I will see what no other leaf has ever seen. To the lands of ice and cold is my expedition. It is a goal too grand for a leaf,

of that I'm sure. But if I don't think big, I shant make it far at all. Filled with both fear and an anxious longing to depart, I salute my native land, and set my sails for the barren north, with thoughts of adventure and expectations of personal encounters requiring bravery, all of which shall be preserved in the rarest of leaf memoirs. I shall be the first leaflet to write a leaflet. And thus it is, to the treeless polar ice cap I go!

I begin to feel a bit chilly and I reach for something to pull up over me, but there is nothing. I open my eyes to find that I am rocking in the hammock. It had been a sunny afternoon when I came out and I brought no sweater or blanket. But the weather now is cloudy and the air is cold. It seems an unusual northern had blown in. An icy breeze passes around me causing the hammock to rock and brings in brown leaves of winter setting them beneath me on the bricks. I feel as though I've been half way around the world, yet I'm in my hammock with a book resting on my lap open to the last page. I'm a bit drowsy and disoriented, and I feel my nap is unfinished. The sun is dipping into the western sky sprouting rays of pink and blue. A moment later, they fade beneath the horizon and the day is coming to an end. It's time for me to go inside where it is safe and warm.

I sit up, still holding the book. I place my feet onto the ground amongst numerous fallen leaves. The northern wind brings one last leaf in particular and places it right onto my lap. It is covered in frost. How odd, I think. It must have come from high up in the atmosphere with such evidence of frozen coldness. This leaf has been on a very long journey, and its brown and battered look confirms that. The old age spots and cracks on it have made a pattern, and the pattern looks like a smile.

"Unusual," I think to myself, "that a leaf might smile." I pick it up and hold it close.

"You need to be warmed up," I say, "or you'll catch your death of cold." The frost melts almost instantly, and the shrouded smile is fully revealed. It is the smile of accomplishment, of finality, of knowing one has done what one intended to do. I turn the leaf over where upon I see the most unusual lines in the tiny dendritic veins. They appear like writing, tiny scribbling, or perhaps hieroglyphics, a secretly coded note. But, of course, it is merely the scars of the old torn and tattered leaf.

In the intermittent breeze, the old leaf shivers against my hand. And then, as the breeze dies, the leaf becomes unusually still. It is the type of stillness born of complete rest.

A gust blows the leaf into a small torrent that picks it up and carries it somewhere else, a new journey.

“Good bye, Leaf,” I say, and watch it fly off and vanish into the distance.

My focus returns to my book and I thumb through several pages until I come to an image of a leaf with the caption, “Leaf Journeys to North Pole”.

Below that, it reads, “Leaf Erickson, valiant leaf of the Grand Oak that stands in Galveston, Texas at the Coppersmith Inn, is the first and only known leaf to make it of its own free will and ingenuity to the North Pole and survive to write his memoirs.” It continues, “He wandered restlessly to the North Pole, as fast as the wind could take him. He was never reported to have been seen again after his departure from the arctic.” The image shows a portion of a memoir written on the soft underside of his belly, forever after known as a leaflet. This was the story I had been wanting, but now it’s almost superfluous as I feel I’ve been there myself.

I rise from the hammock, walk inside my home and start a fire in the fireplace. I sit down with a warm throw and a cup of hot chocolate and settle in to read the book. The story is about a courageous leaf who slayed dragons and saved a fair maiden while on his journey to the icy arctic regions of the north. There is a photograph of Leaf Erickson, standing proudly atop a vast blue glacier in the arctic, with a spear of ice and a shield of hard packed snow. His color is yellow and orange, somewhat mottled as his battle scars begin to show in the September days of his life towards the end of his journey. With my finger, I trace an almost indistinguishable smile in the spotty pattern in the onset of dark red and brown wrinkles, a smile I have seen before. There is an inscription below the photograph that reads:

Vinny Veedy Vichi, nunk volo domey Latin for: “I came, I saw, I conquered - now I want to go home.” (Veni vidi vici, nunc volo domi.)

He had his journey, and I had mine. And we both went somewhere that made our blood flow fast even though it was for but a short time, and we both came home. I shall always enjoy the journeys I take when I close my eyes. The world is more mine than at any other time. It doesn’t matter so much where I live so long as I can sail the winds of not only the earth but of the universe. There, I can transcend all my humanly limitations. I

can go far or near. I can be anything and experience life otherwise not possible. I have two worlds. One filled with reality, and one filled with everything else.

The day and the adventure had been what I needed. It had restored my mind and my body and I was ready to carry on. All living things share certain things in life, as well as in death. We all seek love and pleasure, and we are all afraid of something. What makes us different is what happens when we allow our minds to wander.

Dedicated to Joel Garcia

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