

Ida Ferdman

When Autumn Leaves Don't Fall

I'm thinking again, and my brain hurts. Sometimes I think about old women gumming Zwieback in front of televisions. They eat nothing but Zwieback for days because social workers only come once a week, and no one else visits. There is no one else. Other times I think about shopping bag ladies whose husbands have died, and left them with nothing. They have no children to fall back on because of God's will or just bad luck. And sometimes I think about old waitresses who push carts to serve food because their hands shake and cannot hold the plates. Their orthopedic shoes barely shuffle them along and they listen to customers talk about children and grandchildren. They wonder what life would have been like.

Danny makes coffee downstairs. I can hear him searching the drawer for a spoon. I can smell the warmth of the steam. He hopes he will stop me from thinking by brewing a pot of my favorite coffee, Irish Cream. Sometimes he does; most of the time he does not.

When we were younger, before we were married, Danny and I used to walk down the long dock to the lake. Sometimes we would swim naked at night in the cold water. But most of the time we would walk down the grey-splintered boards, and sit on the edge, and dangle our legs off the side above the water. We would kiss and talk about the future.

I remember one evening in autumn when we had walked to the

edge, and it seemed like no other time before. The leaves had colored and begun to fall from their branches. The air was crisp, and the wind blew leaves and grass in circles. The lake rippled and each lapse of its waves brought the scent of winter where we sat. We watched the sun set behind a grove of orange splashed maple trees. I stare out the window, and cannot think about coffee right now.

The tree outside has turned red, yellow, and orange, while green leaves try to hold their hue a little longer. Soon the leaves will begin to drop. I've watched this tree change color, lose its leaves, and grow green again every autumn and spring for the past five years. It always acts this way; I expect it always will. But sometimes I look out the window and think how out of sync the cycle would be if these autumn leaves stopped falling, and stayed on their tree.

I don't think about maternity wards, nursery schools, or Mrs. Crater's morning sickness.

As I enter the kitchen Danny extends his arm toward me with a coffee mug at the end. I push past him, slamming the screen door shut behind me. I imagine him standing there, staring into the middle of my back. He calls my name.

Wouldn't he like me to turn around and come rushing into his arms? Wouldn't he just like that?

I hear him again as I reach the end of our driveway. I remember he calls me Daphne because I remind him of the bad witch in some old movie he's seen on the late show. It does not make me want to turn back.

I pass the Crater house, and Mrs. Crater waddles up the path toward me. I don't want to talk to her; I don't even want to look at her.

"Hi-ho," she sings to me as she arrives with her eight-months-along stomach coming first. I ignore her; she waddles faster, and plants herself in front of me. I close my eyes, but when I open them again she is still there. "I've been setting up my baby's room. It's all pink because I already know the baby is going to be a girl. Amazing what modern medicine can do, huh? Don't you think it's amazing?" I want to tell her that I think it's amazing that anyone

as stupid as her could have gotten pregnant in the first place. But I don't say that. Instead I walk away. She says I am a bad neighbor.

I want to tell her that she is the bad neighbor. But I don't say that either.

I can see the orange street sweeper grinding its way down our block. Its round brushes rotate fast beneath its lumbering metallic body, and make a swesh, swesh, swesh sound. I love the orange street sweeper, and always watch it clean our street on Thursday afternoons. It comes every Thursday, except when it rains.

It passes by, and fine mists of water spray my bare legs. I go through this ritual every Thursday. I know its time and rhythm better than I know my own.

Mrs. Crater watches me from down the street as if I were crazy. I can count on her to look at me this way, just as I can count on the sweeper to come every Thursday, and the tree to drop its leaves in fall. I can count on these things more than myself.

I watch the sweeper until it rounds the corner out of sight. The street is wet along the edges next to the curb. The wetness fringes the street like a ribbon on a package. It's sunny, so steam rises from the moisture, and curls upward until it evaporates into the air.

The wet asphalt smells as bad as a long-haired dog after a bath, but I like it and don't know why.

I stand on the sidewalk a while longer and watch the steam rise, and inhale the warm, moldy smell of the wet street. I will have little else to get me through the night.

On Thursdays when it rains and the orange street sweeper does not make its rounds, I stay in my room and think.

I don't want to think about the orange sun-splashed maple trees or that evening at the lake. So instead I think about old age homes, and cardboard boxes with pillows and blankets for sleeping at night.

I lie on the couch and watch the maple move in the breeze. Soon it will rain. When the tree is completely bare I can look through its straggly branches toward the lake. But I don't always like to think about the lake.

I remember that evening on the dock when Danny asked me to marry him and have some babies. The wind and water stung my face, and the trees surrounding the lake looked orange on one side and shadowed on the other. I did not like to see the trees halved the way they were that evening. And I don't like to remember them that way. But I do.

That evening as Danny waited for me to answer I watched another couple on a dock across the lake. They looked like our mirrored reflections, and I thought they were probably planning their lives, just as we were making plans we would never complete.

Sometimes I feel like a tree whose leaves won't fall.

Danny knocks on my door. I don't answer him. I can't. This is not a talking room; this is a thinking room.

Talk. He wants to talk, as if that will help anything. As if that will make me stop thinking, or think about something else. But he doesn't know what I think about.

I think about Mrs. Crater. She talks too much; all pregnant women talk too much. They are confident, and think just because they hold life within their uneven bulges they have something to say about the true meaning of everything. And they all want to tell you about it.

He'll go away soon because he can't talk to himself for much longer, and he won't force himself into the room.

I look out the window and see Mrs. Crater squatting over a cluster of crabgrass, grasping it between her pudgy fingers. As she tugs loose the piece she totters a moment then falls on her back. She cannot get up, and I don't feel sorry for her.

He knocks again, and I want to say I'll be o.k. It's just a phase. But I don't.

And besides, this is not a talking room.

It's Thursday again, and raining. These are my worst days when the wind pushes branches against my window. In this wind most of the leaves will be on the ground by morning. The lawn will be covered with color instead of the dry straw it now has. When I was little I used to rake leaves into piles, and jump on them. Then

I would roll through them and listen to the crackling of their brittle skins, and watch their flakes swim through the air. Now I let the gardener rake the leaves, and burn them. I promise myself I will never rake leaves in autumn.

I also promise myself I will never ask women when they expect to get pregnant and never drive past the school yard at three o'clock in the afternoon when children come pouring out and run up to their mothers and kiss them and hand them lunch boxes and show them scraped knees.

I promise myself I will never walk down the baby food and diaper aisle at the market; they keep Tampax in the same place. When I need a box, I send Danny.

I will never call my period my friend.

The leaves are gone, and small buds poke out. Soon new leaves will sprout, and the lake will disappear again for another year, and clusters of fruit will hang from the tree in the next yard.

When I was little we had an orange tree that would not bear fruit. My dad pruned and fed it, but it never gave us one orange. Every year it grew bright green leaves, and bloomed large white blossoms with yellow centers. But they would wither and fall away. One year he tired of the tree, chopped it down, dug out its roots, and packed the hole with fresh dirt. A week later he planted a new one.

Mrs. Crater had her baby last week. I heard her and the other Crater get into their car at three o'clock in the morning. I heard her groan, and rolled over and went back to sleep.

When she came home from the hospital she invited me to see the baby, but I would not go. So she brought the baby to me, as if it needed my approval. I have not seen her since.

I told her the baby looked like a gargoyle and smelled like dried urine, and she left.

I don't think about maple trees or orange street sweepers anymore.

I think about buying a white convertible. I will tie my hair in a ribbon, put on dark glasses, and drive to the desert. I could drive

in the desert for miles without really getting anywhere, and without changing anything. The sand covers all in the desert. And lizards with bumpy skins, and cacti with needles don't know about clocks or calendars.

I would keep a canteen on the seat, and stop to watch the Joshua trees bend their outreaching arms to heaven. Their harsh forms would seem to plead against a background of pale beige sand and washed-out blue sky.

The desert would be dry and quiet, and heat would move across my face like sand across the dunes. And it would scrub loose the thickness built-up on my brain.

I think about buying a white convertible and driving out to the desert. But I don't.

Instead I stop going downstairs on Thursdays, and buy a shade to cover the window.

At the lake that evening when Danny proposed I said yes let's. And as the last bits of sun sank below the grove of maple trees, casting them forever in shadow, I felt frightened. But I did not know why. Now I know.

I take off my clothes and let the breeze move over me, and watch the shade glide out and back, out and back.

I close my eyes and slip back into my white convertible. Soon I am in the desert: just me and the sand and the lizards and the Joshua trees. I start driving at sunset, and don't even stop when the lights are about to go out.

I hear a knock on the door and the first crackle of thunder, and see the wind play with the shade and droplets of rain splatter on the pinewood floor.

But I only think about the white convertible, and the bending Joshua trees.