



# THE LEAF

by Mausumi Banerjee

A balmy summer evening was melting into the overpowering shadows of night. I was watching silver ripples of water — their sparkling waves intensified by an almost full moon — when something stirred around me. Only mildly curious, I looked about to discover what had caused the slight disturbance. It was just as I had suspected — my fellow leaf mates had fluttered in response to a seasonal breeze. I returned to gazing at the waves and contemplated my life.

The life of a leaf is not an easy one, I thought decidedly. When we — all the leaves, I mean — had first met in the early spring, there was a disturbing amount of competition, even bordering on subtle hostility, amongst us. We each wanted to be the prettiest leaf on the tree, and it seemed that this stood in the way of true friendships. The air of tension hovering around the tree made it hard for any of us to be happy.

However, even though we didn't like each other very much, oddly enough, we all admired and respected one particular leaf: Her name was Robin. She was just like the rest of us in many ways, but she also had an exceptional store of wisdom and kindness which we all recognized. She had extraordinary influence over us and made us believe that it didn't matter how we looked individually. It was the tree with all the leaves collectively that mattered. Because Robin told us, it became true. It eased the tension among us and life improved a little.

I found it somewhat ironic when a young lady walking by one afternoon explained how pretty Robin was and took her home to put in a book.

Since she had left, some of the strain had returned — not to the same degree as before but everyone could feel its presence. I did understand, though, why the leaves, myself included, felt this way. It gave us a sense of personal worth to know we were needed to make the tree one of the loveliest in the area. Besides, no one would even acknowledge the poor leaves that prematurely withered.

I suddenly felt drops of water falling on me. Rain, I think it was the cool and soothing drops which lulled me to sleep.

The next day was another glorious one typical of August. The sun was so bright and the sky so blue that nothing could daunt us. I felt refreshed after the wet night and looked at ourselves.

The day wore on as any ordinary day. I had become quite used to the pattern by now. My short life, nonetheless, made me feel old. Sometimes, we were lucky and a bird would sit on one of our branches. That was the single most exhilarating thing that happened to break the monotony in the otherwise dull day in the life of a leaf. When a particular sweetly singing bird paused near us, even the whispering willows of the trees in our proximity halted their activities. Not only did I, myself, feel carried away by the music, but to see everyone else enjoying it so much sent a chill of excitement through me.

So my days passed, quickly, yet somehow incomplete. I was never quite sure of what was missing. I did not really have close friends, and the one or two friends that I did have were more a source of sorrow than of any happiness. I tried to be to them what I thought they wanted, but, in the end, I lost patience. It was almost not worthwhile, because I just couldn't reach them on any level beyond the surface. I couldn't reach them.

But solitude didn't bother me. I respected it, but loneliness often caught me by surprise. It was especially at those moments that I missed Robin the most desperately. A throbbing pain always remained within me knowing that the one leaf I might have loved had its chance taken away. It was the day I realized she was never coming back that made me saddest. It took me a surprisingly long time to realize it, even though I had always known it. It was much easier just to be superficially happy.

In any case, I was one of the luckier leaves. I somehow always managed to avoid being sprayed by those horrifying pesticides. I enjoyed my life and looked forward to the future. I never wanted to go back to the past. Knowing that I couldn't even if I wanted to made me feel protected, in some sense, from the past, at least.

Yes, I enjoyed life ... but sometimes I wanted to move to a new tree to see if a maple leaf was different in personality from an oak tree leaf. Were the vascular bundles of a spruce tree leaf more efficient than a sequoia leaf? At times, I felt very limited and wished that the wind would carry me somewhere else. I wanted to fly!

One day, I noticed something different. A different type of wind seemed intent on cooling the heat of summer. It was that dreaded season — autumn, I guessed. It was my first, and I knew it would be my last.

At first, it was lovely. The long, sunny days grew shorter and chillier, but something was happening to us. Our healthy green tinge began to fade, and we turned yellow and orange and other brilliant shades that we had never known before. I was happier than I had been for a long time, but, each day, I felt myself becoming weaker and less able to cope with an increasingly robust wind. I tried to fight with it at first, but the harder I tried, the weaker, it seemed, I became, until it was just easier to stop — to give up what could be nothing but futility. I had lost the fight.

Once I accepted that, everything became easy. Losing was not hard. It took no effort from me — just a little bit of my soul. I was suddenly free, because I did not care. What else mattered? The tree did not need me to survive. Next year, a new leaf would take my place, even as I had done the previous spring. I needed the tree, but the tree did not need me. I loved the world, but the world did not love me.

I floated to the ground as shouts of human laughter approached. I knew what would happen, so I did not even feel the pain when several pairs of feet ran over me and buried me in the ground.