

Shining Leaves

He always has a hard time facing his complicity with the world when things go wrong. It's not his fault, being mostly just caught up and swept along. He gets out of bed and opens the blinds. The sun is up and he sees the window is dirty and spattered, giving him a sadly marred view of the old clothesline, the broken concrete patio, the budding plum tree. Any other day, he would deny his part in all this. Not his fault that God insists on driving the rain at an angle to the glass, nor that the man who used to come and wash the windows died last year on a cot in the YMCA. But just at that moment of dawning denial, he remembers the day.

It is Saturday, and it is his birthday. And it is his custom, on this one day every year, to admit that he is, after all, the one guy who is always around when things start going bad. Other people are around for some of it, and some are there for most of it, but when it comes right down to it, he is the greatest common denominator. He blinks through the grime and thinks of the Windex under the sink, and the paper towels hanging there.

What he really wants was to sit on the edge of the bed for two hours or three, watching CNN Headline News, to see if he can spot variations in the reports from one half hour to the next. He always hopes that it will change, that he hadn't already missed everything that was going to happen. But since it is a special day, he needs to get moving. He is burning daylight.

He eats oatmeal with honey and raisins, listening to a country station. Hears a song about a long haul trucker whose wife died home alone, while he pulled a long load of pipe through a cold Georgia rain. All the trucker had left was a photo in his wallet and the cat they found together at the shelter, who dozed in the sleeper while he drove and drove, trying to outrun his grief. Despite the comfort of oatmeal and coffee, he thinks he can relate.

With his face shaved, belly full and shoes tied tight, he feels damn near heroic. Fit to go forth and stand fast to the winds of personal responsibility. On the hall table, he finds his paycheck. He bends and rubs the dog's ears and head, reassures her of his swift return, and goes out. And behind him there is commitment in the sound of the lock.

His dog wakes up. She gets to her feet in the space between the couch and the coffee table, where she feels safe when she is alone, and goes to the center of the room. She stands a moment to get her bearings.

It is day. The man is gone. I can smell him not here.

The sliding glass door is open just enough for her to go out and no more. There is a broom handle in the track at its foot.

Across the patio, between the potted bromeliads to the grass. She pees. Back on the patio, she drinks from her dish, turns around three times and lays down on her Astroturf mat.

The world is made of grass and birds, things to eat, and everything is full of sound. It all smells wonderful. There is the fence, and everything beyond it is suspect, a threat. It must be warned to stay away.

I like the park. I watch the birds and growl at other dogs.

For my food, I give the man a great and happy yelp.

A cloud moves across the sun and it grows cold in the place where she lies. From the barbecue she smells the meat that was cooked there last week.

When I was little there were toys and a ball. I went around with the ball in my mouth. I could run from the beach to the trees! Now I have water and food twice a day. I walk between the places where I sleep.

She rises and decides to go inside, back to her place by the couch. She stands and barks her loudest bark, just to hear her voice from the metal garden shed bounce back to her.

A small dark cloud moves across the face of the sun. He notices the dimming as he stands in line at the bank. A potted red begonia in a bright brass pot beside a desk, deep green and reflecting long fluorescent lights. His mother had begonias, roses, mums. She watered them and sang

I come to the garden alone
while the dew is still on the roses

She might have said these leaves have been polished for hours by an angel with a can of wax. His mother believed in angels, loved to cook. He thinks about corn and buttered baked potatoes, until it is his turn.

He hands his deposit slip and check to the teller. They both say good morning and she turns to her computer. That's when the cloud moves on and lets the sun come out. He notices her hands as she types and lifts a receipt from a stack of blanks.

If he shaved very carefully, her hands would feel wonderful on his face. He looks away before she catches him staring. A young man with a red tie comes out of the vault.

It's been forever since a woman touched my ears, he thinks.

She would be offended by his thoughts.

If I die on the road home, she'd never know. But if she knew I think her hands are beautiful, she would hate me forever.

The clock in the tower of the school is five minutes slow. What a shame, he thinks, that no one cares. And another cloud is filtering the light, so that all along the gray-black streets the leaves are shining with yesterday's rain.



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