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Red Leaf

BY MORGAN CALLAN ROGERS

THE HALLOWEEN WIND is bullying a fallen red leaf stuck in a crack between two rocks in a stone wall located across the street. So far, it refuses to be blown away, and I admire its tenacity.

I'm in the rocking chair in the kitchen with my daughter. "Do you know that leaf has been there for a couple weeks?" I call to her. She's making us supper. She's a good cook, except for her tendency to under-salt foods. She says too much of it isn't good for me or for her father. "We're ninety," I tell her. "What the hell. Salt away." But she's always followed her own recipes.

The oven bell dings. She turns it off and walks over to me. "What leaf?" she asks. My hand trembles as I point to where it flutters like a bright rebel flag. "There," I say.

She squints. She's nearsighted, like her father. She studies it for a long time. Finally, she says, "I don't want to bust your bubble, Ma, but that's a new surveyor's ribbon. Remember? Someone's going to build a house in Lovett's field, and they brought in the surveyors to mark the land."

I'd forgotten that. "Maybe," I say, "but that's a leaf if I've ever seen one."

"It's not, Ma. And it's pink, not red," she says in her soft, Oh-the-poor-dear voice.

"No, it's not," I spit back, equal parts embarrassed and disappointed that I've been cheering on the fortitude of a plastic ribbon. Then I concede. "You sure?" I ask.

She hunkers down and takes my hand and rubs it for a minute because it's always cold, and then she does the other one. She tells me it's important to pay attention to both sides of your body. Sometimes we do a little stretching when she's here. I don't dare do it on my own because I'm pretty sure something will snap.

"If you want it to be a red leaf then it's a red leaf," she says.

She kisses my forehead and goes back to the oven. I've been patronized and dismissed. Call me done. "Don't forget to add some salt," I grumble at her. "You never add enough salt." I grab onto the handles of my walker, hoist myself out of the rocking chair and shuffle off to the living room with what's left of my dignity.

Every day, I'm reminded of all the ways my parts are failing my body. If they aren't dried up, they're leaking. I depend on diapers. One of my teeth fell out during supper the other night. Only a podiatrist can control my unruly toenails. My skin is so thin I can see through to the thick river of blood trudging through my veins. I'm not senile yet, but a little pinch of madness might break up the monotony.

I reach the living room where my husband is sleeping in his lounge. He sleeps more and more. We've angled his chair in front of the television set. He can't see his sports shows straight on because he has macular degeneration—another sign that we've outlived our bodies. Masculine degeneration. Feminine degeneration. I can't remember the last time either of us felt like fumbling through the mattress dance.

My husband raised hell when he was younger. Not bad hell, like going out on me with another woman, but hell with his drinking buddies, his hunting buddies, or his buddies at the fraternal order of some animal or another. I had to call around to get him

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FICTION



home for supper at least once a week. That part wasn't much fun, but most of it has been pretty good. I almost lost him last winter. We had a bet as to which of us would go first. Looked like I was going to win. Some ghastly infection found him, and we took him to the hospital, where he spiked a fever of 104 degrees. They told us to expect the worst. But he came back and here he sits.

I fall back into my lounge just in time for our talk show. Everyone is cheering the host. They're all so damn perky. From the game shows in the morning to about four o'clock in the afternoon, we get relief only when the shows break for ads selling pillows, mattresses, or discount sofas.

My daughter comes in and tells me supper will be ready in about twenty minutes. She winks and says she's added more salt. It won't be enough for these shriveled taste buds, but I know she's trying. She's a good girl.

She and her father used to lock horns over everything. After one nasty shouting match between them she asked me why, out

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of all the men I could have picked, I chose him. "He's a good man," I said, and he has been for the most part. I'm glad he's asleep, in the chair. I can keep an eye on him here.

Last winter, outside our living room window, I spied a small oak branch that had detached itself from its mother tree and fell, where it nestled into the wide branch of a pine tree. I cheered for those branches to rock each other throughout the snow months. The oak branch finally slipped and fell in the spring, where it was carted away on yard waste day. Call me superstitious, but I think the resolve of those branches to stick together through the worst of it was part of the reason my husband made it back to me. Old age isn't pretty, I know, but it's something.

That's why I was happy when I found what I thought was the red leaf. I'll have to keep looking now for something else tough enough to hold on despite the fact it's broken. I know it isn't an easy thing to do. ■

Morgan Callan Rogers is the author of two novels, *Red Ruby Heart in a Cold Blue Sea* and *Written on My Heart*. She lives in the West End of Portland.

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