

# *Fall*

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I was always staring out classroom windows. Because I didn't like classrooms or their windows. But staring out the window, there were things I liked. This day it was a red, red leaf. And I wanted to put it in my mouth. I wanted to taste it, crisp and bitter, like a small, fresh cranberry.

The problem was this—the leaf was in my imagination. Because at the beginning of spring, I wanted fall.

I can go on imagining, even now, but I'm waiting for my imagination to come true. This is what will happen when it does:

The glass in that classroom window will start dripping. Slowly at first, like very cold and thick syrup, and no one will notice. No one but me. The drips will turn to trickles, and before I can stop the teacher's drawling, the window will be a puddle at his feet. Then the leaves will sail in through the hole left by the melted window. And we will all be buried to our eyelashes, and then that last leaf, the red one, will muscle past all the rest. Into my mouth.

Things that came first:

Come in to supper, Susanne called, and I was young and liked that she did not say dinner, like my own mother.

I followed Claire into her house and her mother's supper. Her father was sitting at the head of the table, drinking beer—something my own father never did.

Hello, Amy, he said to me with a swallow.

Please, call me Loretta, I said to him.

Well hello Loretta. Please be seated. May I ask from whence you come to our supper table?

I'm a very poor child, I told him. Papa's been out of work since before the Depression hit, and the good times you fine folks had in the '20s left us behind. I do greatly appreciate the victuals you offer me this evening.

Claire giggled, and her father turned to her.

And you, young lady, he asked, are you also a child of the Dust Bowl?

Yes sir, I surely am, she told him.

More that will eventually be true:

With that red leaf in my mouth, I will be able to swim. I have never swum before, but when I find myself in the center of the biggest ocean I can conjure, I will not be alarmed. Simply, I will swing my arms forward and sway my legs along, and I will swim. No need for clothes or floats, because I can swim. And the leaf will taste of Claire's lip mark on a wine glass.

I will swim ashore, and there she will be, a specter in broad sunlight. She will brush aside the red leaves covering her, and then we will swim together.

But the things that came before:

Harriet Tubman, I suggested.

It was summer, and Claire and I had exhausted the '30s, the charming northwoods nomads, the war between the states, and even the great westward migration.

That's the same as the war, Claire said. I'm tired of it.

And that's when I got the idea for the gallows. Hot weather and romantic notions of people who had gone too far, and publicly paid the price, went to my head like they had been there all along, waiting these hundred odd years.

A beautiful woman who slept with the man she loved instead of her husband, another who drowned her baby in the river for reasons too profound and tragic for the townspeople to agree upon, a man who sold property he didn't own and then murdered the people who did own it, even a child who burned his father's barn down with the father inside. These people, I was certain, had hanged for their desire. And being such passionate people, they were immensely imitable.

So we decided to play gallows.

Claire, at first, misunderstood.

Will we hang the rag-dolls my mom made? she asked.

And then she thought we'd be the hangmen.

But the leaf came first, because spring precedes summer:

During recess, we decided to play lizard poachers. We were evil men, on a mission to destroy all the lizards of the earth in order to turn their skin into polka dots for rich women to sew on their dresses and hats.

We collected the tiny green flowers of budding maples and they were balled lizard skin.

Sir, Claire as lizard poacher said, I must warn you that you are hunting on my land. Therefore, I shall kill you.

As a gentleman, I replied, I must challenge you to a duel.

You are no gentleman, Claire's character reminded mine. You are a cad; you have lived as one, and now you must die as one.

Our duel took longer than was left of recess, for we could not agree on who would emerge victorious. We realized too late that the rest of the class had gone inside.

We caught up, and the teacher, who we liked to think of as a schoolmaster, was not happy with us. I imagined his thrashing me, or putting a dunce cap on my head, and wished for such ignominy. And I stared out the window, at a red leaf that was not there.

What will be true when my imagination is:

Claire will come to me, alive and dead at the same time. A girl again. I will ask her if she is a ghost, and she will smile seductively. Remember the gallows, she will whisper. And she will unfold her fingers to reveal that red leaf.

At first, we used the tree fort, a low affair among the larger bottom boughs of a pine in Claire's backyard. Sometimes I would be the condemned, but I liked better to stand in the crowd, watching as Claire played the part of the near-to-death. She had the most eloquent last words, and many times I was able to cry for her, as she implored me, the crowd, to pardon her.

But there was never a pardon.

Something that came later, after the game had been going a while:

It'd be better if we had real wine, I suggested.

I don't even know why we would have wine, Claire said. It's a public execution, not a sacrifice.

But the wine makes it more like a ceremony, I said. I didn't know why I wanted a ceremony, but the game would be more thrilling and real with wine, I knew.

And so we stole some from Susanne's pantry. Because she had so much, we were certain she wouldn't miss just one bottle of red from the bottom shelf.

I brought a swallow of wine into my mouth after putting a leaf on my tongue. I pretended the wine was the spirit of Claire's leaf. A liquid woman, a dryad made of wine. And I was drinking her.

I'm still waiting:

I know someday I will find that leaf, on a branch at the edge of the gallows. The gallows will shine, and the leaf will be like the perfect jewelry Claire's mother wore, going on dates with Claire's father, while we stayed home and filled our mouths with merlot and our paper with plans for the gallows.

After school, one Thursday:

Good people of Fir Township, Claire as horse thief and adulterer began. I assure you I was driven to these desperate acts by these desperate times. Not only has my husband always been a poor man, he has always been a poor lover. He has been cruel to me, and left me shivering in the cold more nights than I care to reveal. The only thing I could do to get any affection at all was to join Mr. Wilcott in his enterprises, and in his warmth.

Pray for your soul, wench, for you find no sympathy among us, I shouted up to her.

I beg of you, good people, give me another chance. I shall seek spiritual guidance and give up my wicked ways.

Hangman, release the scaffold, I shouted.

And Claire took a big swallow with her stained lips before she jumped.

This will happen:

I will go back to that classroom, and Claire will be there, a fresh noose round her neck. Leaves will scurry across the floor at her feet, and she will be dressed in the calico we once fought over before she hanged. This time, I will bring the wine and we will share it with the whole class. Claire's lips will be the darkest, and she will wear the leaf in her hair.

We built it ourselves:

Now that we have wine, I said one Saturday morning, it's a bit ridiculous to be jumping out of a tree fort.

What do you mean? Claire asked. This is a good game.

I mean we need a gallows. Like the one in the history book.

Ooh, Claire let out a breath. That would be amazing. Where could we get one?

We'll have to make it.

And we went to find our supplies. Father, we require wood, Claire said to James when we found him.

Daughter, there is wood in the shed. May I ask why you need it?

No, you may not. Are there nails and a hammer in the shed as well?

There are. Clean up after yourself, please. Amy, will you need some wood, too?

We're working together, I told him.

We began right away, but we didn't end up with a gallows that day. There were problems we couldn't, as unseasoned carpenters, have foreseen. We worked on that gallows in the back shed every day after school and Saturdays for three weeks. The trap door, the most important part, gave us the most trouble. In the end, we had to ask James to take us to the hardware store to buy hinges. I felt uncomfortable involving him, but there was no choice. We told him the project was secret, and he didn't press us.

The day we met:

I was the new girl at school. My family had moved across town, and I felt too far from the lake.

At recess, I sat at the farthest edge of the schoolyard, gazing westward, straining my eyes to see the shore, three miles away. I was getting ready to pirate a ship and take the lake.

Where'd you move from? Claire asked as she traipsed over to me.

The other side of town, on the water, I told her. Her hair was the blondest I'd ever seen, nearly as light as mine was dark.

That's far, she said. Do you like it here?

No, I said.

I'm going to play woodswoman. You can too if you want.

No one had said anything like this at my old school. What's woodswoman? I asked.

You put leaves from this tree in your hair, and you pretend to be made of wood. When you talk, you have to sing it soft and deep like this—and she sang, Oooh, I am the Beautiful Lady of the Elm.

I think instead of a woodswoman, you should be a dryad, I said.

What is that? she asked, as she slid a red, red leaf behind my ear.

The day we finished it:

Wooden and creaking with newness. An unsettled, fresh

smelling gallows. A gallows with promise.

It was a pride I've never known since. We kept it in the back of Claire's parents' lot, away from the house and among the trees we considered a wood. It belonged, and looking at it among the rustling leaves, it looked so natural and pastoral, I marveled it hadn't always been there. A chipmunk crawled along the platform, and hopped down the steps like it could deny eternity.

You try it first, Claire said. It was your idea.

Okay, I said, and unzipped my backpack. But first I have a surprise for you.

What?

I pulled out the noose. I told her, I made it. I found the rope in my garage. Now that we have the gallows, it'd be stupid to use a tie.

Put it on, she said, touching its tight spiral and blinking.

I did, and as I mounted the steps to the gallows, I became my favorite—the woman who drowned her baby because she couldn't bear for it to grow up in poverty.

Neighbors, I began my last words. You are as guilty as I. Have you not turned blind eyes upon my suffering, and my need? Did one of you, ever in all your prosperity, offer me either food or shelter? Did one of you ever offer me a kind or encouraging word? You did not! Hang me, but know that you will be the ones to burn.

And, with the noose snugly about my neck, I fell when Claire pulled the rope, releasing the trap door in the floor. I wished, as I fell to the ground, that a pile of leaves were waiting for me.

Something that will one day be true:

I will go back to the gallows, to find a fresh coat of varnish on it. It will be darker this time, a rich cherry finish. It will gleam with the setting sun, and Claire will be there, waiting to mount the steps upon my arrival. She will clutch a bottle to her chest and drink long before she sees me emerge from the trees at the edge of the clearing.

I will bring the noose—a new one made with love in the morning—and she will embrace me when she sees me. I will slip it about her neck and climb the stairs with her. We'll reach the platform, and I'll be just tall enough to tie the other end of the rope about a tree branch.

April:

We had been playing several months. We had four nooses by then. I had made three and gotten more skilled with each. Claire had made only one; hers was of a fine, silky rope like her hair. It was the one we used for the children. We draped the three extras from the hanging beam, and I longed for necks to fill them.

Should we make another? I asked her.

No, we already have four, and we can only use one at a time, she said.

I looked at her and swallowed. I thought about pouring the rest of my wine down her dress front. Instead, I said, Let's use your noose.

After the game ended:

I had just started junior high and felt too far from the wood. Gazing out a newer window, all I could see were basketball courts. I imagined Claire coming into the classroom, taking my hand and drawing me out into the silent corridor, then out the school doors, back toward the gallows.

I'm sorry, she would whisper.

Later in the month:

I think I'll just keep my jeans on, Claire said. And I should have known then.

Instead I tried to reason. I said, No way. No one ever hanged in jeans. At least put on the overalls.

Someday:

She will not protest when I tie the other end to the beam. Simply, she will walk across the platform to the trap door. I will go back down the steps and ready myself to pull the rope to release the floor on which she stands.

Have you any last words, Betrayer? I will ask her.

She will look down, and her lips will be plum colored with wine. Amy, she will say, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I don't know

*E&F.V.IX*

why I stopped, and I don't know why I told. They were the best days.

Pray for your soul, wench, I will say as I release the trap door. She will not be surprised, but content, even after her tongue lolls out of her mouth. She will be remembering, and thankful.

May:

Do you want to be the crowd? I asked her.

No, I'll hang.

Who do you want to be? I asked.

She finished her wine and climbed the steps, a little unsteadily and with a grimace. At the top of the platform, she looked out across the treetops. I'm thinking about kissing Tim, she said, a little too loudly.

What? You're supposed to be saying your last words. What're you talking about a stupid boy for? I asked.

Ugh, she said. Hang me, just hang me.

But I couldn't do it.

Later, much:

I was working in the grocery store, scanning cakes and bagged produce after school and Saturdays. My next customer in line was Claire's mother, and I could tell she didn't recognize me, not yet or not anymore.

Hello, Susanne, I said as she placed her items on the belt.

She started up and smiled falsely. My own mother wouldn't have bothered. And, had he been there, James would have been a little more comforting.

Amy, she said. I didn't recognize you. You look lovely. It's so good to see you.

I didn't return her smile, but I still missed her just a little.

The last time:

Amy, she said, are you going to the fall dance?

Just put the overalls on so we can play. I'll wear the ruffled skirt with the apron, I said.

Listen, I want to talk about that dance. Are you going to go without a date? she said.

Can you please just get dressed?

She didn't look at me, but climbed the stairs in her jeans. She walked squarely onto the platform, above the trap door. She pulled the rope herself, and when she landed, she walked away, toward the house.

I watched her go, in jeans so tight we would have both laughed at them a few months ago.

We had just started junior high. The next week in school, Claire pretended she didn't know me, and held hands in the hallway with Tim.

She told him too, because in gym class some of his friends hanged themselves at me, by sticking out their tongues and rolling their eyes while tilting their heads away from raised hands, holding the ends of imaginary nooses.

It will happen:

She will be a ghost, and haunt me. She will be iridescent, with a glass of wine in her hand and red leaves in her hair. She will appear from the branches of a tree, like a shadow of sunlight at first, but she will glimmer out of the tree, into herself. And she will be a girl again, and beg me to play. And we will. Over and over again, and we will hang her properly, her feet dangling a few feet from the dust.