

The Nature of Us All

By Laura R. Howells

For as long as anyone could remember She had stood on the corner of Pienan Place.

She truly was a magnificent creation, bold and beautiful with boughs that could have been fingers of the divine itself and leaves, each one a sweet and resounding note in her visual chord. She was a masterpiece of nature, no doubt the finest on the street, perhaps even the city. And everyone loved Her. Had always loved her.

For years She had been the centre piece of many a family picnic, the playmate in countless a child's adventures. Who knew for how many autumns She had kissed the sky with colour, who could count the winters She stood as beacon to the snow. Generations past and present, had unfolded in Her shading, had never been harmed under Her careful watch. And now.

The people of Pienan Place had tried, really they had. But city council had orders, and with that there was no stopping them. Never mind the rallies or the petitions, they were fruitless efforts. For whatever reason, She had to come down.

The statement was made final one foggy morning in early October. Though not many were outside, news of its affirmation still spread as a silent blaze up the cul-de-sac. When it reached the corner, a violent wind shook Her arms into a fit of thrash that did not cease, even after the wind had moved on.

The people were angered, of course they were. But it was an anger that had subsided by supertime when they were warm and inside, surrounded by people and other things to be cheerful about. And other things to gripe about as well. Things of the now, things of themselves. But She had nothing. Nothing but the knowledge that even the silent find a voice.

It was the next day and a young boy sat beneath Her, fingering a collection of snails at Her roots. They were like gems, he thought, perfect gems on the end of a necklace. He had been collecting them for weeks, feeding them and stroking them daily- even if it was against their wishes- and then storing them there, in the vault at Her feet. Kissing them goodnight, he ran into his home, calm and happy in blissful childhood ignorance, his eyes absorbing all that was good, all but the destruction of yesterday's fire.

After school the next day, he ran out again. But his gems were empty now, dry and cracked and very much shaken. Though upset, he thought not much of it but that weather must have been

harsh last night, or perhaps some animal had come poking. He went inside and his moment of sorrow escaped with his gems' last breath.

She screamed for him to come back, to cry, to mourn, to acknowledge their mother. But the boy could not hear the silent.

Across the street, an elderly Mrs. Cummings rocked in her chair, gazing out at the fading day. The aging lady had lived on Pienan Place since birth, seeing Her daily, subconsciously growing as She marked her milestones, a shadow of a sister, a mirror of a life.

Mrs. Cummings looked on now, each leaf a fixture of her memory, each bough, a self portrait in her face, wrinkles matching one another and private smiles holding tight their bond. But as the lady gazed in fond recollection of a long life lived, she noticed that a few of Her leaves blushed, just a pale red at their fingertips.

That's odd, she thought absently, they usually go yellow.

The next day, Mr. Rodson, of the house next to Her, awoke to find his car, windshield smashed and hood badly dented. To Mr. Rodson who had no children nor a wife, his car was of great value to him. But though in its wake he spent hours cleaning through the glass and cursing of vandals and windstorms and insurance or lack thereof, never did he notice the single flushed leaf, crouching where no wind could have blown it.

That night She mourned for a failed child.

Two days later and it was cool and crisp, though glossed in Autumn sunlight, the kind of day where dogs roam free as children toss in piles of leaves. One such dog, a beloved neighbourhood mutt, romped gallantly up the street, rejoicing in the mosaic of scent and sound. As did the car which sped down and around the crescent, not so fast that it would not have seen the dog had the sun not shifted to a strange shadow of the overhanging tree, blocking the view, causing the collision.

In a smear of blood and yelp the dog was brought away, children's eyes were covered, sobs were choked with questions.

But She was still ignored.

Mrs. Cummings watched with sympathy and horror then looked up to Her again.

You really do look dashing in red my dear, she mused.

A week passed without incident. The dog had recovered with only a broken bone but he was still in much pain.

On the other hand, She was flourishing now more than ever before. She liked company. Very much.

Midweek came and the day fast approached. The neighbours spoke of it of course, but only in passing, only with that empty and passive sentiment where memories are flung about for conversation, brief recollections laden in colour. But such were only admired with fondness before dismissed again in resignation, their minds trapped in apathy and submission. After all paper is white, and ink is black. There is no room for colour in the real world.

All of that had to be dutifully tucked away, back to its places, out of *their* sight. It would do only harm to have such colours sprawled upon the floor, what an untidy place *their* world might be, how easily one might trip. People had their own lives to take care of after all and agendas could cross if only for a moment.

Alexa Reynolds was climbing. Up and up she went, up Her strong knotted trunk and carefully placed branches as done so many times before. All the children had, all of them knew Her nearly as well as their own homes. They had all done this so often that rarely did they even acknowledge Her any more, rarely did they even thank Her for the simple gifts of joy She gave them daily. That was just what She did. That was just what was expected.

Except today Alexa mustn't have been thinking, mustn't have remembered because her foot, ploughing forward on autopilot, in memory of so many other times, missed a branch.

And she fell.

The dull thud of impact would be but a whimper in the roar to follow.

After, long after, after the ambulance and the screaming and the declaration of permanent brain damage, Alexa Reynolds might have returned to Her.

If it had still been there, she might have encircled Her trunk, have coaxed a childhood of memories from her nodules. Perhaps she would have even climbed again, reliving the past with the shield of new wisdom. But if she had, if she had ever dared, Alexa Reynolds would have seen that that miss footed branch had been there all along.

Mrs. Cummings just sat and looked at Her leaves, stained a deep, dark red.

A week later and it was the dreaded day. The men came with their trucks and their machines and people of the street watched, a much more solemn group now. They did have their own agendas, but for one brief moment, there could be a crossing.

In Her final hour She stood, silent, screaming. They sobbed quietly, looking at Her, loving Her, recognising Her. And for the slightest of seconds, they listened to Her.

But only because she would soon be no more. Never had they listened in Her prime, in Her health. Their passive ears had heard only wrong notes. And never had they measured the water in this well made of wood.

So when the signal was given and the blaze of machinery tore through with a heartless force that could jab the soul of mountains, She gave a final, helpless moan of anguish-She had spoken and no one had answered. Their faces as mirrors could never be enough. And it was that which stung more deeply than the coup de grace to come.

And then the roots ripped from the ground, gems flying, blood peering. For a fraction of an instant, another world opening its eyes, but one that would only be closed forever in the blinding of a human sun. Torn from Her home, She wavered in a formless detachment, nowhere to go but back to their arms.

And so She fell to them, to be caught in their embrace as she had so long held them, to hear in their whispers, mimics of the soothing words she had entrusted with them for such time.

But alas, their collective babble was too great, their individual arms, too weak.

But there was *one*. One who stood in silence, a quiet musing kind of silence which beckoned so much more than a thoughtless drone.

So in a craze of noise She fell to that *one*, hitting the ground in the arms of Her sister, holding her now in a final embrace.

Two lie dead, but once again the people saw only what they could hear, screamed and mourned only for what absence they could see.

And there was no one left to notice the flurry of blood red leaves which fluttered to the ground, like tears, falling silently down a face.

~Laura Rhiannon Howells